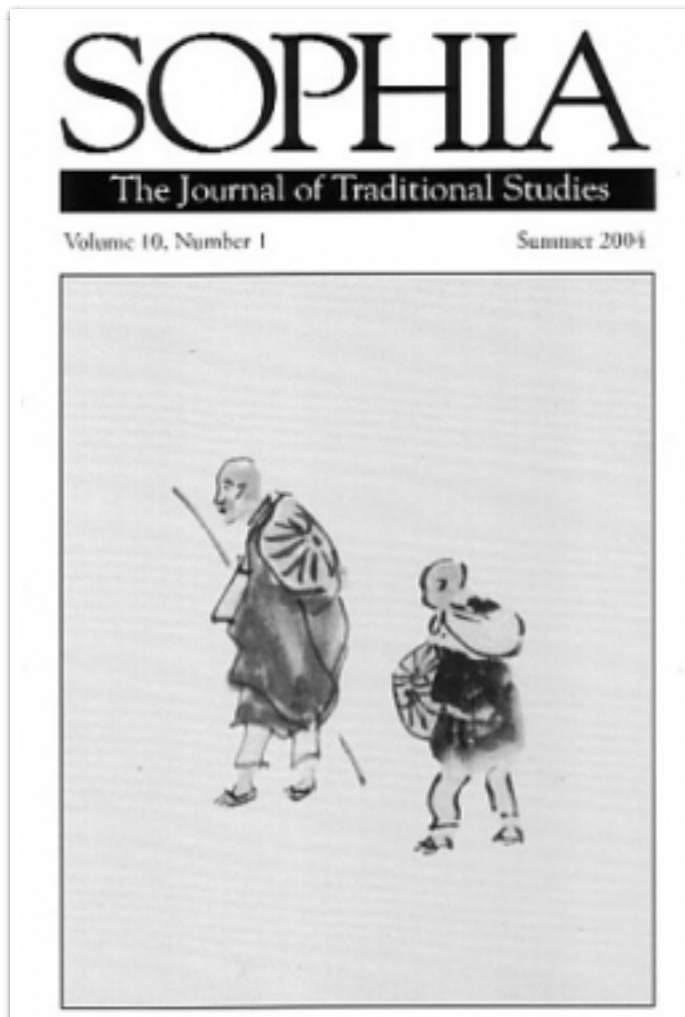


Solomon Ibn Gabirol: A Jewish/Sufi

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Perhaps no single medieval thinker so represented the interweaving of the three Abrahamic faiths, as did Solomon Ibn Gabirol (1020-1058). A Jewish mystic who was a follower of the great Sufi Muhammad Ibn Masarra (883-931), he was scorned by his own contemporary co-religionists, though Ibn Gabirol's works gained traction long after his death, and many of his works have recently been translated into English (on seven different occasions over the past couple of hundred years), German, French, Italian, Dutch, Yiddish, Latin, Persian and Arabic. Additionally, medieval Christian thinkers assiduously read him. His importance to this religion grew so strong that Guillaume d'Auvergne, the 13th-century Bishop of Paris, declared that the author of *Fons Vitae* (who was Solomon Ibn Gabirol, though this was unknown at the time) was "the most exalted of all philosophers."

In Ibn Gabirol, we find the best impulses of early medieval Sufism - a spiritual philosophy that cut across religious and geographic boundaries to bring together members of all three religions. Fusing the highest ideals of Jewish and Islamic mysticism, Ibn Gabirol's ideas permeated the development of the Jewish Kabbalah and Medieval Christian thought with strong Sufic undertones. Ultimately, Solomon Ibn Gabirol was one of the most important thinkers in bringing Sufi beliefs to both Judaism and Christianity!



A spiritual Renaissance man hundreds of years before the advent of the Renaissance, this Jewish philosopher and poet stepped outside of the narrow-minded thinking and parochial prejudices that hold down the typical human to meld mystical threads from Islam and Judaism into an enduring spiritual philosophy.

Solomon Ibn Gabirol, the person, wears much better in death than he ever did during his life. A stunted, angry man with a life-long skin condition, he skulked from town to town throughout Andalusia, Spain during his brief span, alternately wooing patrons with his pen and then turning them against him with his malodorous personality. "Arrogant, irascible and a bit of a misanthrope," [1] Ibn Gabirol so disgusted his contemporaries that his greatest philosophical work, the *Source of Life* (or "*Fons Vitae*, as it was known in Christian Europe) was consigned to obscurity during his lifetime.

Ibn Gabirol lived during a charmed time in the history of man. Medieval Spanish Jews enjoyed a very special situation - so much so that the two hundred years from about 850-1050 is known as a Jewish Golden Age. In a remarkably secular society, Jews were able to operate on almost equal footing with their hosts, the Andalusian Muslims.

Perhaps more than any other medieval Jew, Solomon Ibn Gabirol personified this surprising conviviality between Muslim and Jew. Ibn Gabirol exhibited a universalism learned from Sufism that turned away his more orthodox Jewish readers - while attracting the attention of Jewish, Muslim and even Christian mystics. And he did all of this while remaining completely faithful to the religion of his birth - believing that he was recapturing the soul of Jewish practice, as exhibited in his *Islamic* mentors!

Sufism, the spiritual soul of Islam, is an open-minded belief system positing that all the great religions and mystical traditions share the same essential truths. Sufism developed under the umbrella of Islam, bursting into prominence in the 8th-10th centuries as their Islamic brethren marched across North Africa and into southern Europe. While subsumed in the tenets of the Muslim faith, Sufis view their parent religion as no more than a vessel to hold their mysticism -- a decidedly unconventional worship that leads to a deeper understanding of the true reality of life and the world. Following an ecstatic path that often uses the language of lovers and poets instead of ascetics, Sufi masters attempt to find spiritual union with God - and then "return" to the everyday world to enlighten and help others. The *tarîqa*, or Sufi path, defines the specific methods and practices that the Sufi follows to attain enlightenment.

Known as one of the Jewish people's greatest poets, Solomon Ibn Gabirol's name and works are vital in the rites of *today's* synagogue. One of the most important of Ibn Gabirol's liturgical works, *Adon Olam*, is still chanted in Jewish prayer houses the world over during both the Friday evening and Saturday morning Sabbath services. In addition, selections from his poetry are recited as part of the Yom Kippur liturgy, which is the most important holiday for observant Jews. How many contemporary Jews realize that they spend part of this essential Jewish holiday reciting Sufi-inspired odes, as they plead with God for understanding and forgiveness? And his legacy within the Jewish community has hardly been compromised by his Sufi leanings - in fact, an important downtown Tel Aviv avenue bears his name!

While aspects of his biography are unclear, his profound indebtedness to the Sufis is not. For Ibn Gabirol, the Sufi Way was as influential as Jewish tradition itself. For instance, there are so many striking parallels between earlier Sufi texts such as the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* (*Ikhwan as-Safa*, penned in Baghdad, in the 9th century) [2] and his ideas that one is forced to presume that, after the Bible, this Muslim tract was his primary source of inspiration.

In Ibn Gabirol's work we can begin to see the earliest outline of later Kabbalistic and Hasidic doctrines. Borrowing from his Islamic mentors, Ibn Gabirol averred, for instance, that man was a microcosm for God - that man's actions *could*, at their best, help complete Godly ones. Though religious traditionalists of his day believed that these ideas bordered on pantheism - and even heresy - later Jewish mystics were captivated by the novel proposition. Additionally, many of the terms that Ibn Gabirol borrowed from his Islamic mentors became the basic building blocks of the Kabbalistic system. [3]

As scholar Peter Cole quickly limns the movement of God's energy according to Ibn Gabirol, we can see how the ideas of earlier Sufi thinkers such as Ibn Masarra, as- Suhrawardi, the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* and others were wrapped in with the first faint echoes of the Kabbalistic system and its Tree of Life:

"The conjunction of Universal Form and Matter gives rise to the simple substances, including intellect, soul and nature, and the chain of emanation extends down into the corporeal world and all its parts. The emanation of divine energy Ibn Gabirol likens to light from the sun - but not to the sun itself; or to intelligent acting in the limbs of its body, but . . . to a fountain whose flow transcends all temporal and spatial dimension. In this way the process of creation is continuous and ongoing at all levels at all times in a universal chain of transformation reaching from that pure source to the lowest point of the cosmos and back up to its unknowable origin." [4]

These ideas, new to Jewish mysticism, were presaged in the earlier Islamic thinkers.

It was through Ibn Gabirol, as well, that erotic Sufi poetic devices began to enter into Kabbalistic terminology, and medieval Jewish liturgical poetry in general. Ibn Gabirol made use of Sufi ideas of attraction between God and the universe, and man and God in glaringly erotic terms - and this love/lover imagery would have a profound effect on Kabbalistic writers. [5] While there had been precedent in the Jewish religion for this kind of erotic mysticism in King Solomon's *Song of Songs*, this theme had lain dormant for 1000 years until Ibn Gabirol reclaimed it from the Islamic mystics, breathing new life into this passionate view of the man/God relationship.

In addition to borrowing liberally from the 9th century Sufi tract, the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, Ibn Gabirol was considered one of the two great spiritual heirs of the ideas of the *Sufi* mystic Ibn Masarra, who had introduced Sufism to Spain. The other student of the Muslim mystic was the great Islamic philosopher Ibn Arabi. Ibn Gabirol and Ibn Arabi had so much in common that they have been referred to as "two lights radiating from the same center." As scholar Miguel Asin Palacios has said:

"For both, the beginning was the concept of God as an absolutely simple being, whose essence is unknowable. Both represent Him with the symbol of light. For both, the creation is an effect of the love or merciful will of the One. The same allegories of the mirror and the blowing of the divine breath are used to exemplify the production of the cosmos. Above all, the reality and concept of spiritual matter, which is the true key to the Masarrarian system, are presented in the Futuhat (Ibn Arabi) with the very same outline as that of the Source of Life (Ibn Gabirol)." [6]

In his spiritual masterpiece, the *Source of Life*, Ibn Gabirol dispensed with the medieval Jewish device of wrapping quotes from the Hebrew Bible into the text and the work took on a decidedly Sufi orientation. In looking at a few of the phrases from the book, we can see the clear Sufi influence:

"Student: What is the proof that the motion of matter and the other substances is desire and love? Master: Because it is apparent that desire and love are nothing but an effort to join the beloved and be united with it, and matter makes an effort to join form." [7]

Here we see in Jewish mysticism the first echoes of the Sufi ideal of divine union with God, more than a century before Moses Maimonides would use the Sufi term *ittihad* to describe man's approach to God during prayer. Ibn Gabirol was clearly less circumspect about this Sufi ideal than was Maimonides, and "uniting" with God became the ultimate purpose of Jewish mysticism in the centuries that followed Ibn Gabirol's acceptance of this Sufi concept - although it ran directly counter to Jewish beliefs, and even smacked of heresy.

In the *Source of Life*, he also hinted at the movement of the divine force that would come to underpin the Kabbalistic understanding of not only God, but the movement of God's force during unitive prayer, leading to later Kabbalistic and Hasidic ideas such as *ruhaniyyut* (the bringing of God's force down into the world through prayer) and *devequt* (known as *ittihad* or *wusul* to the Sufis, and representing the union of the mystic's ego with God):

"The creation of all things by the Creator, that is, the emanation of form from the first source, which is to say, the will, and its overflowing across matter resembles the upwelling of water flowing from a fountain and descending . . . except that this flow is unceasing and entirely outside of motion and time . . . And the imprinting of form in matter, when it reaches it from the will, is like the return of the form of one who is gazing in the mirror." [8]

It should also be noted that the mirror was an important Sufi image that represented the light of true understanding. For Ibn Masarra and Ibn Arabi, as well as Ibn Gabirol, "the same allegories of the mirror and the blowing of the divine breath are used to exemplify the production of the cosmos." [9]

Ibn Gabirol ingested other Arabic/Sufi writers, so much so that his writings were often unrecognizable as necessarily Jewish! His ethical treatise, *The Improvement of the Moral Qualities*, written in Arabic when the poet was 24, was modeled on Arab ethical handbooks such as Abu Bakhr al-Raazi's ninth century *Book of the Treatment of the Soul*. In his philosophical treatise *Keter Malkuth*, the spiritual levels that he outlines for humans correspond directly to the Sufi path, that the Islamic mystics followed in their quest for mystical attainment.

"In Keter Malkhut, Ibn Gabirol writes that God has established 'under the Throne of Glory a level for all who were righteous in spirit . . . a place of position and vision for souls that gaze into the mirrors of the palace's servants, before the Lord to see and be seen.' The word 'place' . . . appears to correspond to the Sufi technical term maqamat - the levels through which the Sufi progressively ascends to God through even greater identification with the divine traits." [10]

Through Gabirol, the Sufi stations and even their terms entered into the stream of Jewish mysticism, feeding into the development of the Kabbalah.

Ibn Gabirol was a tremendously far thinking philosopher, exhibiting open-mindedness unheard of in his contemporary Jewish milieu. Presaging a multi-culturalism that has become prevalent in our own times, Ibn Gabirol believed that "truth and righteousness were not the exclusive purview of the Jewish people, and that one should acknowledge and embrace words of wisdom regardless of their source." [11] Incredibly enough, this tolerance, as well, was based on the *Ikhwan as-Safa*, which showed an unprecedented tolerance towards other religions, going far beyond the limited standards of early Islam. Proposing more than just passive acceptance of other creeds, the *Ikhwan as-Safa* almost demanded a total lack of enmity towards all religious viewpoints, accepting the teachings of all philosophers and wise men, regardless of their religious provenance. [12] Ibn Gabirol based his ideas on this openness - which made him so accessible to medieval thinkers from the other Abrahamic faiths.

Much of this far-thinking Jewish thinker's poetry and mysticism heavily affected later Jewish writers and philosophers. Once the immediate, Islamic influences of his philosophy had become lost in the sands of time, the beauty of his thought and presentation easily seduced more traditional Jews.

Perhaps the strangest outcome of Ibn Gabirol's work, however, was how it served as a conduit for Sufi streams of thought to enter into medieval *Christian* mysticism. Ibn Gabirol's *Source of Life* was translated into Latin (from the original Arabic) [13] about a century after his death by the archdeacon of Segovia and distributed under the name *Fons Vitae*, written by the author "Avicbron," the name by which Ibn Gabirol was known in Christian Europe. [14] It could well be that the book's unique, open-minded point of view allowed it to slip easily into the Christian mystical stream. Gabirol's work was wholly lacking in specific Jewish content and terminology. Medieval European scholars believed it to have been produced by an Arab or, perhaps even a Spanish Christian.

The influence of this Jewish/Sufi work was not incidental. The "*Fons Vitae*" became one of the most inspirational *Christian* works in medieval Europe. In addition to the Bishop of Paris' comments, Ibn Gabirol scholar Peter Cole noted that knowledge of 13th century European philosophy is impossible without an understanding of *Fons Vitae* and its influence. [15]

The dissemination of this treatise also played an important role in the development of the thought of St. Francis of Assisi and his Franciscan order. In the early 13th century, the Franciscans got hold of "Avicbron's" *Fons Vitae* and were immediately captivated by its universal message of love and open-minded affection for God. Like so many other medieval Christians, they wrapped these "novel" ideas into their practice of Christianity, thereby suffusing the Franciscan order with a Sufi flavor -- all by the way of a long-dead Jewish mystic!

Ultimately, we must tip our cap to this medieval philosopher, who saw beyond the petty hatreds and small-mindedness that so often bedevils humans. Solomon Ibn Gabirol straddled the three great medieval mystical traditions, borrowing from the Sufis to inform his Jewish belief system - and, ultimately, becoming one of the most important 13th-century *Christian* thinkers. His is truly a surprising tale of spiritual enlightenment and entanglement from an epoch that can sometimes evoke images of Crusading wars and small-minded bloodletting in the name of an angry God.

We should take note . . .

[1] . *The Jewish Mystics of Medieval Spain*, McGaha, pg. 70

[2] . Ibid. pg. 47 As Peter Cole describes the *Ikhwan*, "(These) ecumenical, encyclopedic epistles were read throughout the Muslim world and played an important role in the rise of Sufism. In the world of the *Epistles*, the pattern of the whole is always represented in the pattern of the parts: man is microcosm and correspondences exist between astronomical, ethical and social planes." (*Selected Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol*, pg. 5)

3. *The Jewish Mystics of Medieval Spain*, McGaha, pg. 65

4. *Selected Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol*, Cole, pg. 27

[5] . *The Jewish Mystics of Medieval Spain*, McGaha, pg. 56, 61

6. *The Mystical Philosophy of Ibn Masarra and His Followers*, Asin Palacios, pg. 130

7. *Selected Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol* (intro), Cole, pg. 15

8. Ibid. 15

9. *The Mystical Philosophy of Ibn Masarra*, Palacios, pg. 131

10. *The Jewish Mystics of Medieval Spain*, McGaha, pg. 57

11. Ibid. pg. 65

12. *Muslim Neoplatonists*, Netton, pg. 7

[13] . As Peter Cole relates it: "Ibn Gabirol's work had, a century after his death, been rendered into Latin by a team of two working in Archbishop Raymond's Toledo translation center. Sitting at a table in a room with other translators, the Jewish convert Ibn David, whose Christian name was Johannes Hispanus, read from the Arabic and translated orally into Spanish and then Dominicus Gundissalinas, the Archdeacon of Segovia, translated from Hispanus' spoken Spanish into written Latin. The volume that came from that project was to play a key role in European intellectual history." *Selected Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol*, Cole (trans.), pg. 14

[14] . Actually, scholar Salomon Munk only recently discovered the link between Ibn Gabirol and *Fons Vitae*, in the 19th century. Prior to that time, "Avicbron," the author of *Fons Vitae*, was not known to be Solomon Ibn Gabirol. As Peter Cole tells it: "In 1846, the French scholar Salomon Munk discovered among the Hebrew manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris excerpts of a philosophical work by Ibn Gabirol that had been translated by the 13th century Jewish writer Shem Tob Falaquera. The work bore a suspicious resemblance to sections of *Fons Vitae* (The Fountain of Life), a Latin text by the philosopher known variously as Avicbrol, Avincebrol, Avicbron and Albenzubron - believed to have been a Muslim or a Christian -- which Munk knew from quotations in Albertus Magnus's *De Causis et Processu Universitatis*. Studying and comparing the two manuscripts, Munk was able to determine that the Falaquera translation was made up of excerpts from a (still) lost Arabic original, of which Avicbbron's Latin was a complete translation. Munk then put the remaining pieces of the puzzle together, and on 12 November of the same year he announced that the great Christian/Muslim philosopher Avicbbron was none other than the Jewish poet Solomon Ibn Gabirol, his name having undergone a Latinizing mutation." Ibid. pg. 14

[15] . Ibid. pg. 14