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## Introduction

“NONSENSE IS NONSENSE, but the history of nonsense is science.” Thus Saul Lieberman, the great Talmudist of the twentieth century, introduced Gershom Scholem to his colleagues at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. Lieberman’s apocryphal and oft-quoted remark testifies to the modern Jewish ambivalence toward Kabbalah, successfully overcome only by Scholem’s scientific scholarship. No one did more to perpetuate the narrative of Scholem’s rescue of Jewish mysticism from the condescension of his scholarly predecessors than Scholem himself. Enlightened scholars of the Jewish past had persisted in casting Kabbalah as primitive, antimodern, and irrational. In a word, nonsense. The demands of responsible scholarship required careful and considered criticism of Kabbalah, a task Scholem identified with the trajectory of his own career. In the preface to the first edition of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, he reflected: “More than twenty years have passed since I began to devote my life to the study of Jewish mysticism and especially of Kabbalism. It was a beginning in more than one sense, for the task which confronted me necessitated a vast amount of spade work in a field strewn with ruins and by no means ripe as yet for the constructive labours of the builder of a system.”<sup>1</sup> For all its sarcasm, Lieberman’s quip only reinforced Scholem’s carefully cultivated posture as the heroic founder of historical scholarship on Kabbalah.

This book explores the substance and subsequent history of Leon Modena’s critique of Kabbalah in seventeenth-century Venice as a challenge to Scholem’s foundational narrative. A rabbi and a preacher in the Venetian ghetto, Modena witnessed the transformation of Jewish society, culture, and institutions through the spread of Kabbalah. In 1639 he took the unprecedented and dangerous step of subjecting this newly dominant spirituality of early modern Judaism to meticulous analysis. Part religious polemic, part cultural criticism, and part epistolary treatise, Modena’s Hebrew exposition entitled *Ari Nobem* (The Roaring Lion) addressed a society saturated with Kabbalah, a condition that he sought desperately, and with utter futility, to change. Modena argued against the antiquity of Kabbalah by subjecting the origins of kabbalistic texts to rigorous analysis. He

<sup>1</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1941), vii. On Lieberman’s remark and its variants, see Abe Socher, “The History of Nonsense,” *AJS Perspectives* (Fall 2006): 32–33.

indicted the growing cults of personality that had formed around prominent kabbalists, and he objected to the proliferation of kabbalistic practices in the synagogue and in the study house. This book tells the story of Modena's *Ari Nobem*, its composition in the ghetto of Venice and its criticism of Venetian Jewish culture, its circulation in manuscript in the ensuing centuries and its appearance in print in the early nineteenth century. In this story, the critical history of Kabbalah emerged and developed alongside the spread of mystical belief and mystical praxis. Modena's counterhistory formed an integral part of the history of Kabbalah in the very period it was coming to dominate Jewish life.<sup>2</sup>

### THE SPREAD OF MEDIEVAL KABBALAH: AN EARLY MODERN CULTURAL REVOLUTION

In the centuries before Modena subjected it to withering criticism, Kabbalah carried a range of meanings for Jews and Gentiles. A Hebrew term one can render as "tradition" or "reception," Kabbalah referred to a mode of reading, a library of texts, a series of concepts, and a range of practices. As a mode of reading, Kabbalah encompassed a set of interpretive assumptions adopted by an initiate in the course of approaching a sacred text. Kabbalists assiduously applied these methods of exegesis to the most sacred of texts, the Bible, and relied on mystical symbolism to uncover its theological content.<sup>3</sup> In the thirteenth century the Jewish biblical exegete Moses ben Nahman (Nahmanides) repeatedly used the phrase "by way of truth" in his biblical commentary to indicate the kabbalistic interpretation of a particular passage.<sup>4</sup> Two centuries later and to very different effect, the most celebrated Christian kabbalist of the Renaissance, Pico della Mirandola, repeatedly drew on kabbalistic modes of exegesis in arriving at his theological theses.<sup>5</sup> Although they maintained opposing esoteric truths, Pico and Nahmanides both employed kabbalistic hermeneutics to arrive at them. Kabbalistic exegesis was most frequently applied to the Bible and

<sup>2</sup> For revisions to Scholem's portrait of prior scholarship, see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 1–10; Daniel Abrams, "Defining Modern Academic Scholarship: Gershom Scholem and the Establishment of a New (?) Discipline," *JJTP* 9 (2000): 267–302; David N. Myers, "Philosophy and Kabbalah in Wissenschaft des Judentums: Rethinking the Narrative of Neglect," *Studia Judaica* 16 (2008): 56–71.

<sup>3</sup> Moshe Idel, "PaRDeS: Some Reflections on Kabbalistic Hermeneutics," in *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*, ed. John J. Collins and Michael Fishbane, 249–68 (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Elliot R. Wolfson, "By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides' Kabbalistic Hermeneutic," *AJS Review* 14 (1989): 103–78.

<sup>5</sup> Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

particularly the Pentateuch, but a range of medieval and early modern thinkers used Kabbalah to interpret later authoritative texts such as the Talmud and other classics of rabbinic literature. Some went so far as to engage in kabbalistic readings of more recent works, such as Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*.<sup>6</sup>

The term Kabbalah was also used to refer to the objects of religious study. Medieval and early modern readers designated a range of texts such as *Sefer ha-Bahir* (The Book of Illumination), *Sefer Yetzirah* (The Book of Creation), and *Pardes Rimmonim* (The Pomegranate Orchard) as kabbalistic works even if these books or their authors did not always use the term Kabbalah to describe them. By far the most celebrated work of Kabbalah was the *Zohar* (The Book of Splendor). Rather than a single book, the *Zohar* comprised a corpus of texts, most of which consisted of a running commentary on the Pentateuch. Written in the thirteenth century in a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic, it combined exegesis of individual verses with parables, homilies, and stories. Much of this commentary recounted the wondrous deeds of Simeon bar Yohai and his colleagues and purported to describe Jewish life in Roman Palestine of the second century. Rabbinic authorities attributed the *Zohar*, like *Sefer Yetzirah* and *Sefer ha-Bahir*, to an ancient author and assumed that its kabbalistic content represented age-old Jewish esoteric traditions.<sup>7</sup>

Both as a mode of exegesis and a library of texts, Kabbalah reverted to a set of ideas and motifs. For example, some kabbalists used the concept of the *sefirot*, or the spheres, to refer to a division of the Godhead into multiple entities or emanations.<sup>8</sup> Others employed the notion of *gilgul*, or the transmigration of souls, to explain what happened to a person's soul after death.<sup>9</sup> Another important concept was *devekut*, which described the initiate's special relationship to knowledge of the divine.<sup>10</sup> Kabbalists disagreed, often passionately, over the precise meaning of these and other seminal concepts. Not all kabbalists employed the notion of the *sefirot* to refer to the Godhead, and many of those who did argued about their nature, division, and order. Important as these disagreements were, Kabbalah had

<sup>6</sup> Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Idel, "Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Kabbalah," *Jewish History* 18 (2004): 197–226.

<sup>7</sup> Boaz Huss, *Ke-zohar ba-rakia: perakim be-bitkablut ha-Zohar uve-havnayat erko ha-simli* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik and Ben-Zvi Institute, 2008); Daniel Abrams, "The Invention of the *Zohar* as a Book: On the Assumptions and Expectations of the Kabbalists and Modern Scholars," *Kabbalah* 19 (2009): 7–142.

<sup>8</sup> Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, chap. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Gershom Scholem, "Gilgul: The Transmigration of Souls," in *On The Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, 197–250 (New York: Schocken Books, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Gershom Scholem, "Devekut, or Communion with God," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, 203–27 (New York: Schocken Books, 1995).

emerged as a distinct theosophical system at the end of the Middle Ages, and its antiquity was consistently taken for granted by almost all of its adherents.<sup>11</sup>

The term Kabbalah also encompassed a series of ritual practices. One of the primary channels through which Kabbalah spread in the early modern period was by means of new religious practices. For instance, kabbalists composed new prayers and introduced them into the liturgy of various Jewish communities; they undertook pilgrimages to the actual or reputed gravesites of the virtuous dead in order to commune with the recently departed or with ancestral spirits. Kabbalists also adapted and transformed traditional Jewish practices. By endowing prayer with theurgic significance, they reconfigured the function as well as symbolic meaning of a crucial element of Jewish life. The rites of charity, penitence, and sexual abstinence were all imbued with new theological import. Torah study became a sacred rite with cosmic ramifications. In a centuries-long outburst of religious creativity, kabbalists manufactured a new Jewish discourse rich with symbols, myths, and rituals. They were the ultimate meaning makers. They sought to infuse nearly every aspect of Jewish life with theological importance and cosmic significance. And their success was astonishing.<sup>12</sup>

For the religious adept, however, Kabbalah also referred to something beyond these rituals of practice, modes of exegesis, bodies of literature, and new theological concepts. Throughout the medieval and early modern periods the term Kabbalah referred to a putative tradition of esotericism, to secrets that God had revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai. Kabbalists maintained that these secrets had been transmitted orally from one generation to the next or rediscovered by means of personal divine revelation in the Middle Ages.<sup>13</sup> The term Kabbalah encompassed both the actual content of these secrets and the process of their transmission.<sup>14</sup> Kabbalistic knowledge required initiation into an esotericist elite, and to use the term Kabbalah

<sup>11</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Philadelphia and Princeton: JPS and Princeton University Press, 1987); Haviva Pedaya, *Ha-She'ar ve'ha-mikdash be-mishnat R. Yitsbak sagi nehor: iyun mashev be-kitve rishone ha-mekubalim* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Gershom Scholem, "Tradition and New Creation in the Ritual of the Kabbalists," in *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 118–57 (New York: Schocken, 1996); Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), chaps. 6–8.

<sup>13</sup> Rivka Shatz, "Kabbalah: Tradition or Innovation" (Hebrew), in *Masuot: mekharim be-sifrut ha-Kabbalah uve-mahshevet Yisrael mukdashim le-zikbro shel Prof. Efrayim Gotlib*, ed. Michal Oron and Amos Goldreich, 447–58 (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Elliot R. Wolfson, "Beyond the Spoken Word: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Medieval Jewish Mysticism," in *Transmitting Jewish Traditions: Orality, Textuality, and Cultural Diffusion*, ed. Yaakov Elman and Israel Gershoni, 166–224 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Eitan P. Fishbane, *As Light before Dawn: The Inner World of a Medieval Kabbalist* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), chap. 3.

indicated that one had received its secrets from a source whose authority was beyond reproach. Repeatedly medieval and early modern kabbalists emphasized the authenticity of their sources, whether oral or written, in making theological claims about the nature of God or in designating a given idea as esoteric. The secrets God gave to Moses at Sinai were said to have been transmitted by master to disciple for a given period of time until the fear that they would be forgotten led a particular figure to transcribe them, the way Simeon bar Yohai recorded the *Zohar*, Akiva *Sefer Yetzirah*, or Nehuniah ben ha-Kaneh *Sefer ha-Bahir*. Kabbalists insisted that the mysteries transmitted in these books were not peripheral but essential to the theological core of Judaism.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout the medieval period, Kabbalah remained the preserve of a select group of learned individuals. With the possible exception of the prophetic Kabbalah espoused by Abraham Abulafia in the late thirteenth century, medieval kabbalists tended to restrict their teachings to other initiates and did not seek to propagate their theology or their writings beyond a limited circle.<sup>16</sup> And then something happened. Beginning in the second half of the fifteenth century, a confluence of factors—the reconfiguration of Jewish populations, the development of a new technology of textual reproduction, the rise of a new cultural center, and the intense interest of non-Jewish intellectuals in Jewish knowledge—transformed Kabbalah from an esoteric set of texts and practices into a feature of public religious life. For the Jews, this constituted nothing less than a cultural revolution.

In the late fifteenth century the Spanish and Portuguese crowns expelled or forcibly converted the Jews within their realms, effectively dissolving two of the largest Jewish communities in Europe in less than a decade. In the early sixteenth century many cities in western and central Europe expelled their Jews, leading to their exodus from large parts of the Holy Roman Empire. These expulsions resulted in mass migration and resettlement in two areas that were to become major Jewish centers for the next several centuries: the Ottoman Empire and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.<sup>17</sup> As the axes of Jewish life shifted from western Europe to

<sup>15</sup> Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and Its Philosophical Implications* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), chaps. 9–12.

<sup>16</sup> Moshe Idel, “We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition on This,” in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky, 51–73 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983). On Abulafia, see Moshe Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989); Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia—Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000); Harvey J. Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob’s Ladder: Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans, and Joachimism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan I. Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism 1550–1750* (London: Littman Library, 1998), 4–28; David B. Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 23–55.

eastern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean, and as the terms “Sephard” and “Ashkenaz” were sundered from their geographic referents of Iberia and Franco-Germany and began to refer to the new communities of the Ottoman Empire and Poland-Lithuania, medieval Kabbalah was radically refashioned. The large-scale resettlement of Jewish populations led to the increased circulation of kabbalistic texts, ideas, and thinkers.

In the sixteenth century northern Italy remained one of the only regions of western Europe with continuous if somewhat precarious Jewish settlement. Although the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Ottoman Empire contained considerably larger Jewish populations, Italy remained crucially significant for the makings of early modern Jewish culture. In places such as Mantua, Ferrara, and Ancona, conversos fleeing the Iberian Peninsula, Ashkenazi migrants from central Europe, Sephardic merchants from the Ottoman Empire, and native Italian Jews lived in close proximity and brought their competing customs to bear upon one another. Like other cities in Italy, Venice served as a meeting point for different Jewries.<sup>18</sup> Situated at the crossroads between western Europe and the Ottoman Empire, a maritime power with considerable territorial holdings on the peninsula and a republic with vexed relations with nearly every European power, Venice also possessed a variegated and contentious Jewish community.<sup>19</sup> In Venice native strands of Italian Kabbalah mixed with Iberian and Ottoman traditions as well as Ashkenazi variants from Poland and Lithuania.<sup>20</sup>

One of the central points of convergence involved the production and dissemination of printed Hebrew books.<sup>21</sup> Jewish religious elites had quickly embraced the new technology of printing in the late fifteenth century, but they tended not to print kabbalistic books. At the turn of the sixteenth century a mere handful of kabbalistic works had appeared in print, and those

<sup>18</sup> On Rome, see Kenneth Stow, *Theater of Acculturation: The Roman Ghetto in the Sixteenth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 22–29; Stow, *Jewish Life in Early Modern Rome* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), chaps. 9–11. On Florence, see Stefanie B. Siegmund, *The Medici State and the Ghetto of Florence: The Construction of an Early Modern Jewish Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 61–66.

<sup>19</sup> Brian Pullan, *The Jews of Europe and the Inquisition of Venice, 1550–1670* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1983); Gaetano Cozzi, ed., *Gli Ebrei e Venezia: secoli XIV–XVIII* (Milan: Edizioni Comunità, 1987); David Malkiel, *A Separate Republic: The Mechanics and Dynamics of Venetian Jewish Self-Government, 1607–1624* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991); Robert C. Davis and Benjamin Ravid, eds., *The Jews of Early Modern Venice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Benjamin Ravid, *Studies on the Jews of Venice, 1382–1797* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Moshe Idel, “Italy in Safed, Safed in Italy: Toward an Interactive History of Sixteenth-Century Kabbalah,” in *Cultural Intermediaries: Jewish Intellectuals in Early Modern Italy*, ed. David B. Ruderman and Giuseppe Veltri, 239–69 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Jean Baumgarten, *Le peuple des livres: Les ouvrages populaires dans la société ashkénaze XVIe–XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2010), 223–61.

emerged largely due to the initiatives of interested Christians. Only in the second half of the century did Kabbalah appear in print with consistency and frequency.<sup>22</sup> In the years immediately following the 1553 ecclesiastical ban on the printing of the Talmud, the dynamics of Hebrew print changed dramatically, and entire genres of Jewish literature that had hitherto circulated largely in manuscript form began to be printed.<sup>23</sup> With the significant exception of *Sefer ha-Bahir*, which was not printed as an individual book until the seventeenth century, nearly every major work of medieval Kabbalah appeared in print at Hebrew presses in northern Italy, and many of them in multiple editions. In the decades that followed the publication of medieval classics such as the *Zohar*, *Sefer Yetzirah*, and *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohub*, contemporary Kabbalah in the form of sermons, custom manuals, exegetical anthologies, and legal treatises began to feature regularly as part of a culture of Jewish print. This combination of medieval masterpieces with contemporary commentary vastly expanded the number and range of kabbalistic books available at the turn of the seventeenth century.

Coincident with this embrace of a relatively new technology, an innovation in Jewish theology proved to have profound consequences for the spread of Kabbalah. In the second half of the sixteenth century, Safed, a small town in northern Palestine, rapidly became an important, if not the most important, center of Jewish culture.<sup>24</sup> The explosion of creativity in Safed took many forms—liturgy, poetry, exegesis, and homiletics—but it was Kabbalah and Jewish law that were at the core of this short-lived but widely repercussive cultural renaissance. Isaac Luria, the most important kabbalist in Safed, generated a new kabbalistic theology that endowed the devotion of the individual with enormous religious power. Central to Luria's theology was the concept of exile, specifically the exile of the *shekinah*, or the in-dwelling of the divine presence. Luria's kabbalistic teaching placed human beings at the center of the cosmos and imbued human action, particularly the performance of the commandments, with cosmic significance.<sup>25</sup> If an individual performed the commandments with the proper intention, the *shekinah* would be restored from its exile and reunited with

<sup>22</sup> Isaiah Tishby, "The Controversy over the Book of the *Zohar* in the Sixteenth Century in Italy" (Hebrew), in *Hikre Kabalah u-sheluboteha* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982), 1:79–130.

<sup>23</sup> Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, *The Censor, the Editor, and the Text: The Catholic Church and the Shaping of the Jewish Canon in the Sixteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Solomon Schechter, "Safed in the Sixteenth Century: A City of Legists and Mystics," in *Studies in Judaism: Second Series*, 202–85 (Philadelphia: JPS, 1908).

<sup>25</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, seventh lecture; Ronit Meroz, "The Teachings of Redemption in Lurianic Kabbalah" (Hebrew), Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 1988; Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos*; Shaul Magid, *From Metaphysics to Midrash: Myth, History, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Lurianic Kabbala* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Joseph Avivi, *Kabalat ha-Ari* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2008).

God. Luria's reputation did not rest solely on this innovative theology of exile that he developed in Palestine. After his death in 1572, Luria acquired a reputation as a miracle worker and pious ascetic that greatly enhanced his mystique. One of his elder colleagues in Safed, Joseph Karo, repackaged a summary of the Jewish legal tradition in his law code the *Shulhan Arukh* and drew on kabbalistic literature, particularly the *Zohar*, in the formulation of countless rulings.<sup>26</sup> His law code served as a standard reference work for rabbis and for students of Jewish law; through legal digests, customs books, and an extensive commentary tradition, Karo's mystically charged legal code entered into the fabric of Jewish religious life.

As the spread of Lurianism and the diffusion of the *Shulhan Arukh* demonstrate, the kabbalistic culture of Safed was anything but local. Even as the city's economic and cultural fortunes declined at the end of the sixteenth century, Luria's theology and Karo's law code took over the Jewish world. Karo's *Shulhan Arukh*, the first Hebrew book to be reprinted in the lifetime of its author, appeared no fewer than seventeen times in the sixteenth century. Lurianic Kabbalah traveled to Italy and from there went further north to Prague and to the Jewish communities of Poland-Lithuania, particularly via new vernacular treatises on proper Jewish conduct.<sup>27</sup> The direct influence of Lurianic Kabbalah, and, in particular, its relationship to the messianism of Sabbetai Zevi, remains the subject of vigorous debate.<sup>28</sup> By most accounts, however, the writings of Luria, Karo, and their students remained at the center of Jewish life long after Safed had returned to its former state as a cultural backwater.

By the end of the Middle Ages, then, Kabbalah was no longer the exclusive province of an elite. It was also no longer the religious property of the Jews. A range of celebrated Christian intellectuals in Europe expressed a strong interest in Kabbalah.<sup>29</sup> Beginning in Italy in the late fifteenth century

<sup>26</sup> Israel M. Ta-Shma, *Ha-Nigleh she-ba nistar: le-beker shekie ha-balakbab be-Sefer ba-Zohar* (Tel Aviv: Ha Kibutz Ha-Meuhad, 2001), 88–104. See the review of the first edition by Yehuda Liebes, "The *Zohar* as a Halakhic Book" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 64 (1995): 581–605; R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo: Lawyer and Mystic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

<sup>27</sup> Idel, "Italy in Safed, Safed in Italy"; Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, "From Safed to Venice: The *Shulhan Arukh* and the Censor," in *Tradition, Heterodoxy, and Religious Culture: Judaism and Christianity in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Chanita Goodblatt and Howard Kreisel, 91–115 (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); Zeev Gries, *Sifrut ha-babagot: toldoteha u-mekomah be-baye baside R. Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1989); Moshe Idel, "'One from a Town, Two from a Clan,' The Diffusion of Lurianic Kabbala and Sabbateanism: A Re-Examination," *Jewish History* 7 (1993): 79–104.

<sup>29</sup> François Secret, *Les Kabbalistes Chrétiens de la Renaissance* (Paris: Dunod, 1964); Joseph Dan, ed., *The Christian Kabbalah: Jewish Mystical Books and Their Christian Interpreters* (Cambridge: Harvard College Library, 1997); Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, ed., *Christliche Kabbala* (Ostfildern: Thorbecke, 2003).



and continuing through the early eighteenth century in northern Europe, Christians on both sides of the confessional divide interpreted kabbalistic texts in the interest of Christianity and used kabbalistic methodologies in support of Christian dogma. The efforts of these intellectuals has been retrospectively termed Christian Kabbalah, a catch-all term used to describe a range of opinions and uses of Kabbalah frequently at odds with one another. The most celebrated Christian thinker to become a devotee of Kabbalah was Pico della Mirandola, a Florentine aristocrat who lived in the second half of the fifteenth century and drew on Kabbalah as a component of his ancient theology. For Pico a single truth united all periods and cultures, and a harmony of religious insight existed among ancient Pagan, Jewish, and Christian writings. Kabbalah was ostensibly the Jewish domain of this ancient theology. For him kabbalistic texts were thus as important and as ancient as the Hermetic Corpus and the oldest Sibylline Oracles.

Pico was only the most prominent in a long line of non-Jewish intellectuals who studied Kabbalah, including Johannes Reuchlin, Pietro Galatino, and many others. As producers and consumers, Catholics and Protestants in western Europe played a crucial role in the publication and dissemination of Kabbalah beyond the Jewish elite. For centuries they initiated and oversaw the printing of kabbalistic texts in Hebrew, translated kabbalistic texts into Latin, and drew on Kabbalah when preaching to potential Jewish converts. Over and above the growing body of kabbalistic literature available in Latin, a flood of dictionaries and grammars of Hebrew and Aramaic offered a curious reader a range of tools with which to study newly printed texts.<sup>30</sup> The appropriation of Kabbalah that began in earnest with Pico and continued for the next several centuries was hardly a disinterested intellectual exchange between Christians—Catholic or Protestant—and Jews. These encounters fraught with conversionary pressures and uneven power relations had important consequences for the history of Jewish knowledge. After the initial phase when they served as teachers to interested Christians, Jews were no longer necessary intermediaries in the acquisition of esoteric Jewish learning.

The confluence of these factors—the reconfiguration of Jewish populations, the rise of a new center in Safed, the appearance of kabbalistic texts in print, and the interest of Christians in the esoteric wisdom of the Jews—had important consequences for the place of Kabbalah in early modern Judaism. By the turn of the seventeenth century, Kabbalah as a set of ideas, texts, and practices was no longer a secret. Printed works of Kabbalah, both medieval classics as well as more recent ones, were available for purchase. Kabbalistic rituals and doctrines had spread from Safed to much of

<sup>30</sup> Stephen G. Burnett, *From Christian Hebraism to Jewish Studies: Johannes Buxtorf (1564–1629) and Hebrew Learning in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

the Jewish world. Preachers in Italy, both Jewish and Christian, quoted Kabbalah in their sermons.<sup>31</sup> Organizations of confraternal piety drew on Kabbalah in their elaboration of new rituals and in the formulation of new liturgical rites.<sup>32</sup> The spread of Kabbalah posed an enormous challenge to other forms of Judaism. Both a social force and an innovative Jewish theology, Kabbalah conquered or co-opted Maimonidean rationalism, Talmudic legalism, and ascetic pietism. According to Robert Bonfil, the spread of Kabbalah effectively served the elevation of private religious experience, a development that strikingly prefigured certain aspects of modernity.<sup>33</sup>

### LEON'S ROAR

Leon Modena's world was inundated with Kabbalah. His greatest student, Joseph Hamiz, his beloved son-in-law, Jacob Levi, his cousin, Aaron Berekhya of Modena, and his aged mentor, Menahem Azariah da Fano, were all passionate devotees. With his Venetian colleagues and with foreign visitors, with his rivals and inside his own family, Modena encountered Kabbalah at every turn. Whether reading in the cacophony of his overcrowded home or celebrating a circumcision, Modena confronted Kabbalah as a vital force in Jewish life. At the age of sixty-eight, plagued by a range of illnesses and beset by mounting debt, stricken by grief and estranged from his loved ones, Modena penned his indictment of Venetian Jewish culture. Written in elegant Hebrew, Modena's *Ari Nobem* heaved with emotion as deep as it was self-consciously restrained. Modena criticized Kabbalah to diminish its status, not to destroy it. He paid kabbalists the devastating compliment of taking their arguments seriously and refuting them one by one. To the claim that Kabbalah represented an ancient esoteric tradition dating back to Moses at Sinai, Modena responded with a systematic analysis of the historical origins of kabbalistic texts. He sought to distinguish between Kabbalah and the Oral Torah, a concept that he maintained did have its origins in revelation. Kabbalah and its core documents, he demonstrated, had emerged only in the late Middle Ages.

Modena rejected the notion that only kabbalists possessed the hermeneutic keys to uncover the secrets of the Bible, but he never characterized their modes of exegesis as inherently worthless. To the contrary, he

<sup>31</sup> David B. Ruderman, ed., *Preachers of the Italian Ghetto* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>32</sup> Elliott S. Horowitz, "Jewish Confraternities in Seventeenth-Century Verona: A Study in the Social History of Piety," Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1982.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Bonfil, "Change in the Cultural Patterns of a Jewish Society in Crisis: Italian Jewry at the Close of the Sixteenth Century," in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. David B. Ruderman (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 405.

repeatedly extolled the virtues of the *Zohar* as a reservoir of homiletic insight. At the same time, he resisted the attempt to designate Kabbalah as a distinctive form of knowledge or wisdom. For Modena, knowledge could be the product only of reason and understanding, and whatever was beyond reason, as kabbalists repeatedly described Kabbalah, could not be knowledge. Kabbalists maintained that belief in the sefirot constituted a crucial element of Jewish faith and branded as heretics anyone who denied their centrality to Judaism. Modena repudiated this claim and leveled a severe countercharge of his own: after an examination of the sefirot as a concept, he concluded that it pointed to a plurality within God similar to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. To a range of thinkers who had characterized Kabbalah as the entirety of God's revelation and the totality of the Jewish tradition, Modena responded with a work of cultural criticism that reduced Kabbalah to scale.<sup>34</sup>

*Ari Nobem* thus represents an instance of what Amos Funkenstein called a counterhistory.<sup>35</sup> Like authors of counterhistories in antiquity and the Middle Ages, Modena systematically exploited the sources of his opponents; in his case, the very works that kabbalists adduced to prove the antiquity of Kabbalah and its centrality within Judaism. He mined the sixteenth-century editions of the *Zohar* as well as medieval and early modern Jewish chronicles to formulate a coherent account of the origins of the *Zohar* that denied its antiquity and identified it as the pseudepigraphic creation of Moses de Leon and his circle. He examined the hagiographic legends about Isaac Luria and concluded that Luria was incapable of the magical feats attributed to him by his disciples. He fought strenuously against the kabbalistic appropriation of Maimonides and sought to restore the study of the *Guide of the Perplexed* to the pursuit of philosophical wisdom. Modena's counterhistory audaciously and, as time would prove, accurately presented Kabbalah as a recent innovation within Jewish theology rather than an ancient preserve of Sinaitic secrets; it sought to separate the homiletic and exegetical elements within Kabbalah from the totalizing claims about Kabbalah as the entirety of Judaism, and it argued for a clear distinction between normative sources of the law—codes, commentaries, and rabbinic responsa—and works of Kabbalah.

<sup>34</sup> On *Ari Nobem*, see Luc Desplanches, "Le monde de la Kabbale dans l'Italie du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle Léon de Modène: Ari Nohem," Thèse de Doctorat, Université des Sciences Humaines de Strasbourg, 1985; Moshe Idel, "Differing Conceptions of Kabbalah in the Early 17th Century," in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus, 137–200 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

<sup>35</sup> Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 36. On later Jewish counterhistories, see David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

But *Ari Nobem* was hardly a detached quest for truth. Much as it was a counterhistory, it was also a countertheology. Modena explicitly addressed his epistolary treatise to his student Hamiz, a kabbalist and philosopher who had studied medicine at the University of Padua and had been Modena's disciple for many years.<sup>36</sup> He attempted to persuade Hamiz, whom he loved like a son, to abandon his assiduous devotion to Kabbalah and to return to the *Guide of the Perplexed*. But Hamiz was hardly the only intended reader of *Ari Nobem*. Modena wanted to convince the Jews of Venice to abandon their embrace of a newfangled and irrational form of Jewish polytheism and return to the Judaism of Maimonides. Modena's appeal to reason, represented by Maimonides' *Guide*, had an important spiritual function for him: it was both a constitutive part of Jewish tradition that he valued for its own sake and a battering ram he used to demolish parallel claims to authenticity on the part of kabbalists. He pointed to the historical irony entailed in the popularization of esotericism and issued a clarion call to return to the fundamentals of Maimonidean rationalism. And in an effort to support his argument, he put together a range of medieval sources that introduced a tradition of antikabbalism into premodern Judaism. *Ari Nobem* was, in this respect, an astonishingly ambitious work, and a formidable challenge to the cultural revolution of Kabbalah.

Modena went to great lengths to invent an intellectual genealogy for his criticism of Kabbalah. He pointed to critical statements about Kabbalah in the work of medieval jurists and exegetes. He collated oppositional statements to the public teaching of Jewish esotericism in the writings of Moses Isserles and Solomon Luria, sixteenth-century rabbinic authorities in Poland, into a systematic rejection of Kabbalah. Repeatedly he pointed to Elijah Delmedigo, a fifteenth-century philosopher from Crete and tutor to Pico della Mirandola, as an important precedent for his own work.<sup>37</sup> But Modena's intense search for intellectual antecedents should not obscure the genuine innovation of his own work. While some may have uttered critical statements about Kabbalah and others may have opposed its dissemination, no one had ever written a sustained and comprehensive critique. In contrast to his predecessors—those he mentioned as well as those he neglected—Modena cast his own polemical net over a much wider area.<sup>38</sup> In terms of the range of issues it addresses and the critical approach

<sup>36</sup> On Hamiz as Modena's prized student, see *Letters*, 346; Nehemiah S. Libowitz, *Seridim mi-kitve ha-filosof ha-rofe veba-mekubal Yosef Hamits* (Jerusalem: Darom, 1937).

<sup>37</sup> Elijah Delmedigo, *Sefer Bebinat ha-Dat*, ed. Jacob J. Ross (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1984).

<sup>38</sup> Modena did not mention Isaac Polgar, Elijah Levita, or Judah Messer Leon. See Carlos del Valle, "La critique de la Qabbale chez Isaac ibn Polgar," in *Expérience et écriture mystique dans les religions du livre*, ed. Paul B. Fenton and Roland Goetschel, 131–141 (Leiden: Brill, 2000); Jordan S. Penkower, "A Renewed Inquiry into the *Sefer Masoret ha-Masoret* of Elijah

it adopts, *Ari Nobem* far outstrips the few disparaging comments in Elijah Delmedigo's *Behinat ha-Dat* or the passing remarks about the popularization of esotericism by Moses Isserles and Solomon Luria. To a certain degree, one can find precedent for many of Modena's criticisms in medieval and early modern Jewish thought. And Modena himself ransacked the rabbinic bookshelf to find as many such precedents as he could. But no single work before *Ari Nobem* offered a compelling alternative theory of the origins of the *Zohar*, a response to the appropriation of Kabbalah by non-Jews, a defense of Maimonides as a rationalist philosopher, and an attack on Safed Kabbalah. Furthermore, the range of sources Modena employed to make his case—kabbalistic texts as well as chronicles, letters, legal codes, and philosophical tracts—displayed a level of critical engagement with Kabbalah that was entirely new. The counterrevolutionary had closely studied the revolution.

#### JEWISH MYSTICISM AND JEWISH MODERNITY

In this book I attempt to reconstruct Modena's criticism of Kabbalah as a product of seventeenth-century Venice. I seek to answer a basic question in the study of early modern Jewish history: what did it mean to oppose Kabbalah in the very period when it had come to dominate Jewish life? To do so, I position the history of ideas within the study of written texts as material objects. I examine Modena's substantive criticism of Kabbalah, his analysis of the *Zohar*, its authorship and its reception, his rejection of the myth of Isaac Luria, his objection to the appropriation of Kabbalah by leading Christian theologians, and his attempt to resurrect Maimonides as a cultural hero and intellectual model. At the same time, I place Modena's criticism in its bibliographic context. Drawing on a historical model developed by Ann Blair, I reconstruct the "total history" of a single text in order to study Modena as a reader and as read.<sup>39</sup> I integrate Modena's annotation of printed books and manuscripts, as well as his reading extracts in his notebooks and letters, into an analysis of his ideas about Kabbalah. I pay careful attention to the medium in which Modena's ideas circulated in his lifetime and in the years after his death. As with the case of Jean Bodin's *Theater of all of Nature* studied by Blair, the production and consumption of

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Bahur" (Hebrew), *Italia* 8 (1989): 7–73; Simha Assaf, "From the Storehouses of the Library in Jerusalem" (Hebrew), in *Minhah le-David: Sefer ha-Yovel le-David Yelen*, 226–28 (Jerusalem: Weiss, 1935).

<sup>39</sup> Ann Blair, *The Theater of Nature: Jean Bodin and Renaissance Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 9. See also James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of "Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

Modena's *Ari Nobem* were tied so closely together that attempts to separate them analytically inevitably break down; however, in contrast to Bodin's book, which was printed in the late sixteenth century, Modena's *Ari Nobem* did not appear in print in an early modern edition, a fact that had enormous consequences for the book's history. *Ari Nobem* continued to circulate in manuscript both during Modena's lifetime and after his death until its first appearance in print in the nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup> In the very period that Kabbalah had shifted from closed to open knowledge, criticism of Kabbalah had become esoteric.

This book argues that Modena and later readers of *Ari Nobem* used what has been characterized as a fundamentally medieval medium—the manuscript—to promote a precociously modern position—historical and philosophical skepticism about the origins and religious significance of Kabbalah. Using the history of *Ari Nobem* as a case study, this book seeks to challenge a series of scholarly orthodoxies about the nature of modern Judaism and the critical study of Kabbalah; at the same time, it seeks to intervene in current historiographic debates about the relationship between print and manuscript and the cultural life of seventeenth-century Venice.

Inevitably these concerns bring up a still larger question: the origins of Jewish modernity.<sup>41</sup> Scholars have pointed to the eighteenth-century Jewish Enlightenment (Heb. *Haskalah*) as the beginning of a self-conscious and critical Jewish modernity.<sup>42</sup> Alternatively they have discovered a sharp break in attitudes toward the Jewish past among nineteenth-century practitioners of the Science of Judaism (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*).<sup>43</sup> In particular, they point to the use of philology and history to reflect upon the nature of the past as a fundamental break from prior attitudes. Whether

<sup>40</sup> Leon Modena, *Ari Nobem*, ed. Julius Fürst (Leipzig: K. Tauchnitz, 1840). A second edition appeared as *Ari Nobem*, ed. Nehemiah S. Libowitz (Jerusalem: Darom, 1929).

<sup>41</sup> Salo W. Baron, "Ghetto and Emancipation: Shall We Revise the Traditional View?" *Menorah Journal* 14 (1928); Michael A. Meyer, "Where Does the Modern Period of Jewish History Begin?" *Judaism* 24 (1975): 329–38; Jacob Katz, ed. *Toward Modernity: The European Jewish Model* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1987); Gershon David Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century: A Genealogy of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Moshe Rosman, *How Jewish Is Jewish History?* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2007), chap. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Michael A. Meyer, *The Origins of the Modern Jew: Jewish Identity and European Culture in Germany, 1749–1824* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967); Jonathan M. Hess, *Germans, Jews and the Claims of Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Shmuel Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> Leon Wieseltier, "Etwas über die jüdische Historik: Leopold Zunz and the Inception of Modern Jewish Historiography," *History and Theory* 20 (1981): 135–49; Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 81–103; Ismar Schorsch, *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1994); Michael Brenner, *Propnets of the Past: Interpreters of Jewish History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

one points to the eighteenth-century *Haskalah* or nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums* as the point of origin for modern Judaism, a critical stance toward Kabbalah marks a common feature.<sup>44</sup> This rejection of Kabbalah often goes hand in hand with the resurrection of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*.<sup>45</sup>

Jewish intellectuals at the turn of the nineteenth century used new literary forms—the essay, the monograph, and the periodical—to make their arguments; furthermore, they celebrated the new and trumpeted their own novelty, offering satirical portraits of their predecessors and railing against the obscurantism of the rabbinic elite. In their works, their own forerunners in prior centuries appear either as intellectual outliers or as isolated precursors of the enlightened modernity that they themselves ushered in with such great fanfare. Modern scholars have tended to mirror the claims of their sources: the insistence upon a radical break with the past that participants in the Jewish Enlightenment claimed for themselves has been accepted as historically accurate. One scholar has gone so far as to compare the impact of the Jewish Enlightenment on the Jews with that of the French Revolution on Europe.<sup>46</sup> In short, modern Judaism begins with a fundamental discontinuity with the past.

This book challenges this scholarly emphasis on rupture as characteristic of the turn toward the modern. Several of the elements that ostensibly constitute modern Judaism are clearly present in Modena's treatment of Kabbalah in the early seventeenth century: a critical attitude toward sacred texts and their origins, a skepticism about received wisdom and doctrine, and an acute awareness of the difference between the Jewish past and the Jewish present. Modena's desacralization of Kabbalah, his historicization of the *Zohar* as a text written in the Middle Ages, his rejection of Isaac Luria as a mythmaker and miracle worker, and his turn to Maimonides' *Guide*

<sup>44</sup> On Moses Mendelssohn's attitude toward Kabbalah, see Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1973), 11–12; Altmann, introduction to Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or, on Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1983), 22. For a revisionist view, see Rivka Horwitz, "Kabbalah in the Writings of Mendelssohn and the Berlin Circle of Maskilim," *LBIYB* 45 (2000): 3–24. On Kabbalah among nineteenth-century scholars, see Gershom Scholem, "Reflections on Modern Jewish Studies (1944)," in *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time and Other Essays*, ed. Avraham Shapira, 51–71 (Philadelphia: JPS, 1997).

<sup>45</sup> James H. Lehmann, "Maimonides, Mendelssohn, and the Me'asfim: Philosophy and the Biographical Imagination in the Early Haskalah," in *LBIYB* 20 (1975): 87–108; Jay Harris, "The Image of Maimonides in the Nineteenth-Century Jewish Historiography," *PAAR* 54 (1987): 117–39; Allan Nadler, "The 'Rambam Revival' in Early Modern Jewish Thought: Maskilim, Mitnagdim, and Hasidim on Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*," in *Maimonides after 800 Years: Essays on Maimonides and His Influence*, ed. Jay M. Harris, 231–56 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>46</sup> Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment*, 1.

prefigure some of the most significant developments of modern Jewish intellectual history.

In highlighting these factors, I do not wish to argue that modern Judaism originated in the ghetto of Venice or to cast Modena as the first modern Jew. Rather I seek to contest a historiographic focus on rupture that has resulted in a caricature of early modern Jewish intellectuals. Like other figures in the early seventeenth century, Modena subjected the received wisdom of his day to careful scrutiny. His precariously situated critical sensibility had far-reaching consequences. *Ari Nobem* offers a telling and distinctly Jewish example of the marriage between textual criticism and religious dissent that characterized so much of European intellectual life in the early seventeenth century. Whether or not one relies on a historical model of crisis for this period, European intellectuals in the decades before and after Modena wrote *Ari Nobem* subjected almost all certitudes—religious, theological, scientific—to sustained skepticism.<sup>47</sup> The products of their thought were electrifying. By the time Modena composed *Ari Nobem*, his slightly elder contemporary Isaac Casaubon (1559–1614) had demolished the antiquity of much of Renaissance ancient theology. Casaubon proved that the Sibylline oracles and the Hermetic corpus were late antique forgeries rather than works contemporary to the Bible.<sup>48</sup> Modena's *Ari Nobem* did much the same for the core texts of Kabbalah, the Jewish component of ancient theology. When viewed cumulatively, Casaubon's and Modena's work stripped many of the core texts that had constituted ancient theology in the Renaissance of their pretensions to antiquity. Modena's contemporary in Venice, Paolo Sarpi, also challenged a series of received ideas about the history of the Catholic Church and the institution of the papacy. Sarpi dissented from traditions and practices that had become canonical, and he did so in the form historical accounts and reflections on religion.<sup>49</sup> Modena, who may have known Sarpi, and who excerpted his *History of the Council of Trent* in his notebooks, turned to a historical account of Kabbalah as a means of opposing the dominant and newly accepted traditions of Venetian Jews. Modena's skepticism had genuine limits. For all his sophistication as a reader and for all the intellectual archeology he performed on

<sup>47</sup> On crisis and the seventeenth century, see "AHR Forum: The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century Revisited," *American Historical Review* 113 (2008); and "The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century: Interdisciplinary Perspectives," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40 (2009). On early modern skepticism, see Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>48</sup> Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450–1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), chaps. 5 and 6.

<sup>49</sup> Gaetano Cozzi, *Paolo Sarpi tra Venezia e l'Europa* (Turin: G. Einaudi, 1978); David Wootton, *Paolo Sarpi: Between Renaissance and Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).



Kabbalah, he never submitted the Bible to the same scrutiny as he did the *Zohar*. *Ari Nobem* was many things, but it was not Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*.

In positing *Ari Nobem* as a Jewish exemplar of early modern skepticism, I follow contemporary scholarship on early modern history that rejects a view of modernity as single moment of rupture.<sup>50</sup> Modena did not seek to argue for something new or to celebrate secularization. He thought of himself as a defender of tradition, a tradition he identified with the spiritualized rationalism of Maimonides and the *Guide of the Perplexed*. In fact, his argument was fundamentally conservative insofar as he saw in Kabbalah a late development and an excrescence that tainted the original state of philosophical excellence exemplified by the *Guide*. He desperately hoped to preserve the patterns of knowledge transmission that had been eroded by the spread of Kabbalah and by the printing of Jewish law infected with kabbalistic teachings. But the arguments made in *Ari Nobem* about the origins of Kabbalah were repeatedly reconfigured in the ensuing three and a half centuries. Modena and later readers of his work who criticized Kabbalah did so in traditional literary forms—polemics, letters, and rabbinic responsa—rather than in monographs or essays, the genres that would come to dominate critical scholarship. Here again, comparison with Casaubon and Sarpi proves instructive. For all of the intellectual innovation of his criticism, Casaubon's debunking of the Hermetic forgeries appeared in a theological tome written as part of a polemic against a Catholic cardinal. Sarpi's innovative thinking about the possibility of a secular society appeared in notebooks on religion that circulated in manuscript only among his close associates. The generic conventions that effectively constituted and contained their work and Modena's should not obscure its intellectual ingenuity. The story told here thus contrasts with most narratives about the origins of modern Judaism: it turns out to be less a story of rupture than one of reconfiguration.<sup>51</sup>

#### THE HISTORY OF THE BOOK AND THE HISTORY OF VENICE

In addition to reconsidering existing scholarly traditions on the origins of modern Judaism, my study of Modena contributes to current debates about the history of written culture in the early modern period. The history of the book, a mode of inquiry that examines the material history of written

<sup>50</sup> Grafton, *Defenders of the Text*, introduction; Jay M. Harris, *How Do We Know This? Mishnah and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), chap. 5; Guy G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1–13.

<sup>51</sup> Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 10.

culture, has transformed the study of early modern Europe.<sup>52</sup> Bibliographic analysis has been linked to contemporary concerns about the instability of texts and the mobility of meaning. Within this growing field of cultural history, scholars debate the historical impact of the invention of print. This book takes up the call by Adrian Johns to write a cultural history of print rather than a history of print culture.<sup>53</sup> Breaking with the assumption that certain properties such as dissemination, standardization, and fixity inhere in the technology of printing and constitute something called print culture, Johns argued that one should attempt to address the history of printing at a local level: to trace the histories of reading through the reconstruction of specific reading practices and the histories of individual texts. Crucially for this study, early modern historians have pointed to the persistence of manuscript production and circulation well into the so-called age of print. A localized cultural history of print must account for the composition and circulation of manuscripts at a given center of early modern printing.

Building upon these arguments, I reposition the history of *Ari Nobem* at the juncture between print and manuscript. The story of Modena's book—both its composition and its later circulation—offers a vivid example of the persistence of manuscript production well into the age of print.<sup>54</sup> It also offers important evidence about the history of printing itself. In emphasizing manuscripts for the historical reconstruction of printing, scholars have pointed to discrepancies between manuscript and printed versions of the same text or to the manuscripts used by correctors in print shops. As a work that circulated in manuscript, *Ari Nobem* offers crucial evidence about the cultural history of printing. Modena assessed the impact of printing on the transmission of Jewish culture particularly in terms of Kabbalah and Jewish law. Although his judgment was highly polemical, his argument reflected careful attention to the material form in which a given text circulated in his own time.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Robert Darnton, “‘What Is the History of Books?’ Revisited” *Modern Intellectual History* 4 (2007): 495–508; Andrew Pettegree, *The Book in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>53</sup> Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Joseph A. Dane, *The Myth of Print Culture: Essays on Evidence, Textuality, and Bibliographical Method* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

<sup>54</sup> Harold Love, *The Culture and Commerce of Texts: Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998); Brian Richardson, *Manuscript Culture in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>55</sup> Modena's contemporaries Johannes Kepler and Francis Bacon were also interested in the cultural consequences of print. On Kepler, see Nicholas Jardine, *The Birth of History and Philosophy of Science: Kepler's "A Defence of Tycho against Ursus"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). On Bacon, see Julian Martin, *Francis Bacon, the State, and the Reform of Natural Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

While Modena was keenly aware of the power of the printed word, many of his own writings, particularly his polemical works, circulated in manuscript throughout the early modern period. This phenomenon was hardly unique to Modena and constitutes a principal feature of written culture in early modern Venice.<sup>56</sup> For a number of reasons—fear of censorship, threat of persecution, desire to maintain proximity to a reader—an author might articulate a given argument in manuscript rather than in print. Modena understood print as a public medium that he could not completely control; he wanted to proclaim his arguments, but not too loudly. Had *Ari Nobem* appeared in print, Modena would almost certainly have been ostracized within the Jewish community. Modena may also have been afraid of censorship. Two years before he wrote *Ari Nobem*, his vernacular summary of Jewish rites, the *Riti Ebraici*, had appeared in Paris. When Modena learned of its publication, he submitted a manuscript of his work to the Venetian Holy Office for review. A second edition appeared in Venice the following year with several alterations. Manuscripts offered a hedge between the public embrace of a controversial position and the impossibility of silence. In this sense *Ari Nobem* provides the most elaborate example of a wider phenomenon: throughout the period under consideration here, most sustained criticism of Kabbalah circulated in manuscript rather than in print.<sup>57</sup>

Comparison between Modena and Isaac Luria on this account proves particularly revealing. Although separated by over half a century and half the Mediterranean—Modena was born in Venice the year before Luria died in Safed—both authors had remarkably similar literary profiles. Modena had one print persona—preacher, anthologist, translator, lexicographer, and apologist—and another manuscript identity—polemicist against Christianity, critic of Kabbalah, memoirist for his family, and alleged practitioner

<sup>56</sup> Marino Zorzi, “Dal manoscritto al libro,” in *Storia di Venezia*, ed. Ugo Tucci and Alberto Tenenti, 4:817–958 (Rome: Giovanni Treccani, 1996); Federico Barbierato, *Nella stanza dei circoli: Clavicula Salomonis e libri di magia a Venezia nei secoli XVII e XVIII* (Milan: S. Bonnard, 2002); Filippo de Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>57</sup> See the discrepancy between manuscript and printed versions of Joseph Solomon Delmedigo’s “Ahuz Letter.” A shorter version lacking critical comments on Kabbalah appeared in *Sefer Elim* (Amsterdam: Menasseh ben Israel, 1629). A longer version circulated in manuscript and appeared in Abraham Geiger, *Melo Chofnajim* (Berlin, 1840), 1–28, Hebrew section. For doubts on the authenticity of the longer version, see David B. Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 146–52. For confirmation, see Jordan S. Penkower, “S. D. Luzzatto, Vowels, and Accents and the date of the *Zohar*,” in *Samuel David Luzzatto: The Bi-Centennial of his Birth*, ed. Robert Bonfil, Isaac Gottlieb, and Hannah Kasher (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2004), 128. For another instance of criticism of Kabbalah in manuscript, see William Horbury, “Judah Briel and Seventeenth-Century Jewish Anti-Christian Polemic in Italy,” *JSQ* 1 (1993–1994): 171–92.

of pseudepigraphy. Luria in print, the Luria that Modena subjected to such merciless criticism in *Ari Nobem*, was a miracle worker, a healer, a divine oracle; but Luria in manuscript was a theologian of enormous intellectual reach. His students jealously guarded his theological writings and refused to allow them into circulation. Modena knew of some of these writings, as his discussion of Isaiah Horowitz and Christian Kabbalah makes clear, but he probably had not read them.

I examine print and manuscript as complementary to one other rather than in opposition; the invention of one technology did not replace an existing one. Here too, rupture fails to capture the relationship between the past and the present. The evidence surveyed in this book demonstrates that the boundaries between manuscript and print were as untidy chronologically as they were commercially, materially, and socially.<sup>58</sup> A historiographic preoccupation with the new has served to undermine and obscure long-term continuities, in this case the production and circulation of manuscripts, that can actually illuminate moments of transformation as they occurred. Manuscripts in an age of print—modern manuscripts—possess considerable significance for the historical reconstruction of how intellectuals worked, how ideas circulated, and how knowledge was produced. They offer crucial evidence for understanding the ways in which these intellectuals themselves thought about technologies they understood to be new. Only in the age of print could a manuscript take on meaningful significance as a distinct medium of communication suited to a particular set of ideas. The new hardly replaced the old: print endowed manuscripts with a cultural importance they had never had and imbued them with a sense of secrecy that retained enormous power to subvert the printed word.<sup>59</sup>

Accounts of early modern Venice usually focus on the sixteenth century as the apogee of Venetian culture and dismiss the seventeenth century as an era of slow but inevitable decline. This book draws on the cultural history of the Jews to challenge this decline-and-fall narrative.<sup>60</sup> Modena may have been the most important critic of Kabbalah in the Venetian ghetto, but he was hardly the only Venetian Jew to analyze his own society with great care. His colleague in the rabbinate Simone Luzzatto defended the political and economic privileges of Venetian Jewry in a vernacular treatise written the

<sup>58</sup> David McKitterick, *Print, Manuscript, and the Search for Order, 1450–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>59</sup> Jon R. Snyder, *Dissimulation and the Culture of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

<sup>60</sup> For recent studies that draw on other areas of Venetian culture to make a similar claim, see Barbierato, *Nella stanza dei circoli*; Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice*; and Edward Muir, *The Culture Wars of the Late Renaissance: Sceptics, Libertines, and Opera* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

year before *Ari Nobem*.<sup>61</sup> Luzzatto's *Discorso* included a profile of contemporary Jewish knowledge that recast a medieval typology of three kinds of Jewish scholars: Talmudists, philosophers, and kabbalists.<sup>62</sup> Luzzatto wrote about Kabbalah without Modena's polemical edge—hardly surprising in a printed work addressed to the Venetian Doge and Senate—but he reflected on it as a social force of considerable consequence in Venetian Jewish life. Moreover he analyzed it with critical distance, pointing to parallels between the sefirot and the Neoplatonic emanations and invoking Pico's interest in Kabbalah. For all their differences, Luzzatto and Modena were at the height of their analytical powers in the early decades of the seventeenth century, and Kabbalah was of primary importance to both of them.<sup>63</sup> The presence of these figures in Venice indicates that the decline in the cultural life of the city may not have been as precipitous or as universal as has hitherto been assumed. Historians have long pointed to a shift in creative activity away from the visual arts and toward the natural sciences and music in seventeenth-century Venice. The Jewish ghetto must be added to the opera box and the academies as a site of enduring cultural vitality.<sup>64</sup>

#### A NEW FIGURE: THE CULTURAL CRITIC

Leon Modena is hardly an obscure personality in the annals of early modern Venice or Jewish history.<sup>65</sup> One of the most articulate of early modern Jews, Modena wrote in a number of genres on a wide range of subjects.

<sup>61</sup> Simone Luzzatto, *Discorso circa il stato de gl'Hebrei et in particular dimoranti nell'inclita città di Venetia*, ed. Riccardo Bachi (Bologna: A. Forni, 1976); Luzzatto, *Ma'amar al Yebude Venetsyah*, trans. Dan Lattes (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1950); Benjamin C. I. Ravid, *Economics and Toleration in Seventeenth Century Venice: The Background and Context of the Discorso of Simone Luzzatto* (Jerusalem: American Academy of Jewish Research, 1978).

<sup>62</sup> Luzzatto, *Ma'amar al Yebude Venetsyah*, 137–48. On the typology, see Robert Bonfil, "A Cultural Profile," in Davis and Ravid, *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*, 169–90.

<sup>63</sup> See Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry*, 2–5.

<sup>64</sup> H. G. Koenigsberger, "Decadence or Shift? Changes in the Civilization of Italy and Europe in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Estates and Revolutions: Essays in Early Modern European History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971). On opera and the academies, see Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women's Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Muir, *The Culture Wars*.

<sup>65</sup> Howard Ernest Adelman, "Success and Failure in the Seventeenth Century Ghetto of Venice: The Life and Thought of Leon Modena, 1571–1648," Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1985; Talya Fishman, *Shaking the Pillars of Exile: 'Voice of a Fool,' an Early Modern Jewish Critique of Rabbinic Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Cristiana Facchini, "Una insinuante modernità: Note su Leone Modena e l'ebraismo nel seicento, Rassenga bibliografica," *Annali di storia dell'esegesi* 19 (2002): 467–97; David Malkiel, ed., *The Lion Shall Roar: Leon Modena and His World* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press and Ben-Zvi Institute, 2003).

Born in Venice in 1571, he spent much of his early life in northern Italian towns such as Ferrara, Cologna da Veneto, and Montagnana. But apart from later periods in Ferrara and Florence, Modena lived in Venice for almost the entirety of his adult life.<sup>66</sup> At the time of his wedding in 1590, he was invested by the Venetian rabbinate with the title of *haber*, the first stage on his way to rabbinic ordination, which he earned in 1609 at the ripe age of thirty-eight.<sup>67</sup> Over the next four decades, Modena served as one of several rabbis to the multiple congregations that constituted the early modern Jewish community of Venice. He also worked as secretary to the rabbinate, taught in the schools, sang as a cantor, issued legal decisions, and preached in the synagogues. In spite of the prestige he may have accrued from his apprenticeship and later participation in the institutional life of the Venetian rabbinate, Modena was quite miserable as a rabbi. Communal power among the Jews in early modern Venice lay with the wealthy merchants, not with the learned clergy. Venetian rabbis did not receive a fixed salary but were paid a fee for each of the services they performed. Modena eked out an unstable livelihood from his various rabbinic duties as well as a range of other jobs such as proofreader in print shops and private tutor. His literary works brought him some measure of fame as well as a small supplement to his income.

Upon Modena's death in 1648, his grandson Isaac Levi collected his papers and prepared several of his works for publication. Beleaguered by conflict with the leaders of the Venetian Jewish community and beset by a rapidly declining Hebrew press in Venice, Levi was unsuccessful in his attempts to print them.<sup>68</sup> Levi's organization and care of Modena's papers in the years after his death, however, played a crucial role in the preservation of Modena's literary legacy. Nearly all of Modena's polemical writings—on Christianity, the soul, Kabbalah, and rabbinic Judaism—as well his correspondence and his annotated books survived owing to Levi's efforts. The attempt by a relative, usually a son, to preserve the written remains of a deceased scholar was hardly new. The annals of Jewish history are replete with figures whose writings survive largely due to the efforts of their family. Levi's concern for Modena's legacy, however, went beyond the demands

<sup>66</sup> For an account of Modena's life, see Howard E. Adelman, "Leon Modena: The Autobiography and the Man," in *Autobiography*, 19–49. For a biography of his early life, see Ellis Rivkin, "Leon da Modena: Part I," Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1946. To the best of my knowledge, Rivkin never wrote the second half of Modena's biography as he outlined in the introduction to his thesis; for Rivkin's later work, see his "The Sermons of Leon da Modena," *HUCA* 23 (1950–1951): 295–317; *Leon da Modena and the 'Kol Sakhal'* (Cincinnati: HUC Press, 1952).

<sup>67</sup> On the early modern Italian rabbinate, see Robert Bonfil, *Rabbis and Jewish Communities in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Littman Library, 1990).

<sup>68</sup> Isaac Levi, *Medaber Tabpukhot*, ed. Daniel Carpi (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1985).

of filial piety and approached the level of contemporary European scholars and scientists who went to great lengths to establish collections and archives of their teachers and mentors.<sup>69</sup>

Scholarship on Leon Modena over the last two centuries has been dominated by the discussion of two works—his autobiography, *Hayyei Yebudah* (*The Life of Judah*), and a pseudepigraphic critique of rabbinic culture, *Kol Sakhal* (*The Voice of a Fool*). Modena's autobiographical journal, composed at discrete intervals in the final decades of his life, recounts the financial and familial tribulations he faced after the death of his eldest son Mordecai in 1617 due to injuries sustained in alchemical experiments.<sup>70</sup> Written with arresting clarity and genuine pathos, *Hayyei Yebudah* offers a rare glimpse into the interior life of an early modern Jew. The combination of Modena's literary ability and the genuine scarcity of early modern Jewish autobiographies has attracted numerous scholars to the work.<sup>71</sup> For all the lurid details it offers about Modena's gambling habits, dysfunctional marriage, and failing health, *Hayyei Yebudah* offers little if any insight into his thought. In an attempt to understand Modena's mind, scholars have repeatedly turned to *Kol Sakhal*, a pseudepigraphic criticism of rabbinic culture Modena may have written.<sup>72</sup> *Kol Sakhal* offers a scathing criticism of rabbinic power, a mocking description of the precepts of Jewish law, and a blueprint for legal reform. Much of the scholarship on *Kol Sakhal* has dwelt on the question of the text's authorship.<sup>73</sup> Although a welter of circumstantial evidence points to Modena as the author, this cannot be established with absolute certainty.

<sup>69</sup> Michael Hunter, ed., *Archives of the Scientific Revolution: The Formation and Exchange of Ideas in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 1998); Ingo Herklotz, *Cassiano dal Pozzo und die Archäologie des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 1999). See also the collected studies on the cultural history of archives in *Archival Science* 7 (2007).

<sup>70</sup> Leon Modena, *Hayyei Yebudah*, ed. Daniel Carpi (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1985); Modena, *Autobiography*.

<sup>71</sup> Some have sought to cast it as the beginnings of a Jewish autobiographical tradition, and others have cautioned against attributing such an impact to a text hardly known before the nineteenth century. See the discussion in Marcus Moseley, *Being for Myself Alone: Origins of Jewish Autobiography* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 103–47.

<sup>72</sup> The Hebrew text first appeared in Isaac S. Reggio, ed., *Bebinat ha-Kabalab: Kolel Sefer Kol Sakhal ve-Sefer Sha'agat Aryeh* (Gorizia: Joh. Bapt. Seitz, 1852). For an annotated English translation and discussion of the literature between Reggio's edition and the late twentieth century, see Fishman, *Shaking the Pillars of Exile*. For work since, see Howard Adelman, "Leon Modena, *Homo Ludens*, and *Kol Sakhal*" (Hebrew), in *The Lion Shall Roar*, ed. Malkiel, 91–105; Omero Proietti "La Voce di De Acosta [=431] sul vero autore del Qol Sakhal," *RMI* 70 (2004): 33–54; David Sorotzkin, "The Timeless Community in an Age of Change: The Emergence of Conceptions of Time and the Collective as the Basis for the Development of Jewish Orthodoxy in Early Modern and Late Modern Europe" (Hebrew), Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Fishman, *Shaking the Pillars of Exile*, 5–8.

In the event that Modena was indeed the author of *Kol Sakbal*, his criticism of Kabbalah in *Ari Nobem* poses a basic question: how could the author of a pseudepigraphic attack on rabbinic culture criticize the *Zohar* as pseudepigraphic? The attribution of a text to one Amitai bar Yedaiah ibn Raz in 1500 differs quite substantially from the attribution of a book to Simeon bar Yohai, a second-century sage who appears throughout rabbinic literature as the author of legal opinions and the subject of extraordinary stories. Furthermore, the author of *Kol Sakbal* planted a series of clues that a careful reader could use to decipher its date of composition; if Moses de Leon and his colleagues had inserted a similar set of signals to their readers when they composed the *Zohar*, these hints had been lost to all but the most discerning of readers by the seventeenth century. Modena's contemporaries treated the *Zohar* as the product of rabbinic antiquity and elevated the text into a normative source of the law. Finally, *Kol Sakbal* and the *Zohar* had radically opposed cultural trajectories in the early modern period. *Kol Sakbal* was copied by Modena and again by his grandson, but the work did not circulate widely before the nineteenth century.<sup>74</sup> By contrast, the *Zohar* had appeared in print multiple times over the course of the early modern period and became a foundational text of Jewish culture.

Within the context of Modena's life, *Ari Nobem* was a late work.<sup>75</sup> But it was not a work of late style. It represents the culmination of Modena's criticism that had been mounting for several decades to a culture dominated by Kabbalah rather than an abrupt change in his opinion.<sup>76</sup> It was hardly an accident, however, that Modena wrote *Ari Nobem* as a man of sixty-eight. Modena had an acute sense of intellectual entitlement that had not been well served by his perpetual struggles for status and money. The Venetian rabbinate had hardly been a profession that enabled him to pursue his writing in comfort. He had watched in jealous anger as kabbalists had taken

<sup>74</sup> For the possibility that Saul Berlin (1740–1794) read it in manuscript, see *ibid.*, 172–74.

<sup>75</sup> For references to *Ari Nobem* in Modena's writings, see *Autobiography*, 153. A manuscript that contains several pages of Modena's notes includes an excerpt from Elijah Delmedigo's *Bebinat ha-Dat* copied in Modena's hand. Following this excerpt appears a short note: "After this I composed a long treatise against this sect [the kabbalists], I called it *Ari Nobem*." See Milan, Ambrosiana MS Q 139 Sup, 52A; *Sefer Bebinat ha-Dat*, ed. Ross, 15. In responsum number 131 dated to 1645, Modena wrote: "For this wisdom [Kabbalah] . . . is very distant from me, as I have explained the reason at great length in a treatise that I composed which I called *Ari Nobem*." Leon Modena, *Sbe'elot u-Teshuvot Ziknei Yehudab*, ed. Shlomo Simonsohn (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1956), 177; hereafter *Ziknei Yehudab* followed by number of responsum and page number. On this responsum, see Don Harrán, "Nomina Numina: Final Thoughts of Rabbi Leon Modena on the Essence of Sacred Music," *Italia* 17 (2006): 7–63. For reference to Harrán's earlier studies on Modena and music see 8, n. 4.

<sup>76</sup> See *Ziknei Yehudab*, no. 35, 50–52; for his opposition to the discussion of Kabbalah in public sermons in a text composed in 1625, see responsum in *ibid.*, no. 55, 76–78. A substantial portion of this responsum appears in English in Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching 1200–1800: An Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 406–7.



over his community and his mantle of intellectual authority. They were the ones who had combined charisma and learning while Modena had been pushed to the margins. From these margins he took up a new position, unpaid and not very prestigious, but one that allowed his wrath to pour forth in cantankerous and controlled prose. He became a critic.

Modena's criticism and its subsequent history constituted some of the very ruins evoked by Scholem at the outset of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, ruins that Scholem himself recovered with such magnificent and ruthless efficiency in the construction of his own narrative. *Ari Nobem* and its history were profoundly inconvenient to the integrity of Scholem's story.<sup>77</sup> It undercut two of the central and contradictory claims upon which he built his scholarly edifice: the marginality of Kabbalah and its ostensible neglect as the subject of critical inquiry. Scholem was of two minds about the place of Kabbalah within Judaism: at times he insisted upon Kabbalah as a vibrant but subterranean force within Jewish history; at other times he insisted on its absolute centrality. But he was piercingly clear about its neglect as an academic subject before he wrote his doctoral dissertation on *Sefer ha-Bahir*.<sup>78</sup>

The monumentality of Scholem's achievement renders suspect any discussion of Kabbalah that does not account for the originality of his work. From the most particular details of analytic bibliography to the historical reconstruction of complex ideas, no one can treat Kabbalah without confronting Scholem. One of his rare and revealing comments about Moses Cordovero—"he had the gift of transforming everything into literature"—could easily be said of his own work.<sup>79</sup> The scope of Scholem's historiographic vision was matched and even exceeded by the power of his prose. For all the assaults on Scholem's narrative, both in his own lifetime and in

<sup>77</sup> Scholem was remarkably silent about *Ari Nobem*. He mentioned Modena in passing in his lecture, "Did Moses de Leon Compose the Book of the *Zohar*?" (Hebrew), *Madaei ha-Yabadut 2* (1925/1926): 16. He used *Ari Nobem* for evidence about a reputed student of Luria's in Venice in the late sixteenth century and acerbically referred to Modena as "this enemy of Kabbalah." See "Israel Sarug, a Student of the *Ari*?" (Hebrew), *Zion* 5 (1940): 224. And he responded to a bibliographic question posed by Nehemiah Libowitz, editor of the second edition of *Ari Nobem*. See *Ari Nobem*, ed. Libowitz, 157. Though a copious annotator of his own books, Scholem only lightly annotated his copy of Libowitz's edition of *Ari Nobem*. Most of his annotations pointed to texts Modena had read in manuscript. See *Ari Nobem*, ed. Libowitz, number 8855.3 in the Scholem Library at the JNUL. On Scholem and silence see Gary Smith, "Die Zauberberuden: Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, and other German-Jewish Esoterics between the World Wars," *JJTP* 4 (1995): 237–38.

<sup>78</sup> *Das Buch Babir* (Leipzig: W. Drugulin, 1923). On the circumstances of its appearance in print, see Lou H. Silberman, "Scholem to Eisler on the Publication of *Das Buch Babir*," *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore* 16 (1986): 5–12; as cited in Saverio Campanini, "Some Notes on Gershom Scholem and Christian Kabbalah," *Sefer zikaron le-Gershom Scholem bi-mlot esrim vehamesh shanim le-petirato*, ed. Joseph Dan, 2:15 (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 2007).

<sup>79</sup> *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 249.

the decades since his death, his work endures in no small measure because of his ability to transform Kabbalah into literature. Scholem may well have been the greatest mind to study Kabbalah, but he was hardly the first. In using the history of *Ari Nobem* to challenge Scholem's scholarly self-presentation, I wish to be clear about what I am not doing: Modena was not Scholem in Baroque Venice. In one of his late pieces, Scholem perceptively pointed to Reuchlin as his intellectual ancestor.<sup>80</sup> Scholem may not have been a kabbalist, as he repeatedly insisted, but like Reuchlin before him he was clearly sympathetic to Kabbalah. For all his insight, Modena lacked such sympathy.

This book is divided into three sections: the first examines Modena as writer; the second, Modena as reader; and the third, Modena as read.

Chapter 1 positions Modena's writing practices within the context of early modern Venice, capital of Hebrew printing and center of manuscript production. Drawing on a range of unexamined sources, this chapter points to the collaborative nature of Modena's writing. Through the reconstruction of Modena's relationship with his grandson Isaac Levi, who served as his amanuensis in the final two decades of his life, I locate the writing of *Ari Nobem* as the product of their joint efforts, a working relationship that was typical among intellectuals—Jewish and Christian—in northern Italy in the early seventeenth century.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine Modena as a reader of medieval Jewish texts, the *Zohar* and the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Chapter 2 studies Modena's historicization of the *Zohar* as the work of Moses de Leon in medieval Castile rather than Simeon bar Yohai in Roman Palestine. Modena objected to the elevation of the *Zohar* as a source of legal and cultural authority; his criticism of the ancient origins of the work was an attempt to deflate its newly acquired status rather than a wholesale rejection of its contents. If Modena sought to counter the prestige of one medieval work, the *Zohar*, he also attempted to revitalize that of another, the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Chapter 3 examines Modena's attempt to reclaim Maimonides from his kabbalistic critics and admirers. I argue that many of Modena's most important positions in *Ari Nobem*—his understanding of tradition, his rejection of kabbalistic theology, and his attack on kabbalistic hermeneutics—were informed by his reading of Maimonides.

Chapters 4 and 5 reconstruct Modena's reactions to two important phenomena in early modern Kabbalah: the renaissance in Safed and the study of Kabbalah by Christians. Chapter 4 uses *Ari Nobem* to document the

<sup>80</sup> "Die Erforschung der Kabbala von Reuchlin bis zur Gegenwart," in *Judaica III: Studien zur jüdischen Mystik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973), 247. On this passage, see Campanini, "Some Notes on Gershom Scholem and Christian Kabbalah," 2:14.

transmission of Kabbalah from Safed to Venice and examines Modena's indictment of this transfer of knowledge and practice. I trace Modena's criticism through his reaction to the growing cult of personality around Isaac Luria and his detailed response to one of the most significant theological treatises composed in Safed, Moses Cordovero's *Pardes Rimonim*. Chapter 5 examines Modena's outrage at the appropriation of Kabbalah by Christians, particularly Pico della Mirandola. It examines Modena's effort to separate Christian Kabbalah from Jewish theology and to redefine Kabbalah as a uniquely Jewish realm of thought (here, too, the anticipation of Scholem's idea of Jewish mysticism as an authentically Jewish contribution to the history of religion is striking).

Chapters 6 and 7 study Modena's work as it was read by later scholars. Chapter 6 traces the circulation of *Ari Nobem* in manuscript from its composition through its first appearance in print. The different stages in the reception of *Ari Nobem* in manuscript offer an alternative history of Kabbalah in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one that has largely been told through the histories of Sabbatianism and Hasidism. Chapter 7, by contrast, reconstructs the competing efforts of a group of scholars in the early nineteenth century, including Isaac Reggio, Solomon Rosenthal, and Julius Fürst, to print the first edition of *Ari Nobem*. It turns to the mixed reception given to the work by two nineteenth-century kabbalists, Elijah Benamozegh and Isaac Haver Wildmann. This later history of *Ari Nobem* points to the significance of Kabbalah as an issue of urgent concern to a broad range of Jewish intellectuals in the nineteenth century.