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# Sceptical Strategies in Simone Luzzatto's Presentation of the Kabbalists in his *Discorso*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In the sixteenth consideration of his *Discorso circa il stato degli Hebrei* ('Discourse on the State of the Jews')<sup>2</sup> entitled *Circa l'applicazione de studii, e varie classi di dottori appresso gli Hebrei* ('Regarding the Jews' Application to Their Studies and the Various Classes of Sages'), the Venetian Rabbi Simone Luzzatto (?1583–1663) included a rather long section focusing on the kabbalists as the third group of Jewish sages. The other two groups presented in the sixteenth consideration are the rabbis or talmudists and the philosophising theologians.<sup>3</sup> According to Luzzatto's view, these three groups were literarily active 'during the long period of the Nation's captivity, when not every spark (of knowledge) was completely extinguished.'<sup>4</sup> While the kabbalists are characterised more specifically as those who 'profess mysteries,'<sup>5</sup> they, together with the other two groups, also belong to the realm of literature and knowledge. However, only the other two groups are explicitly acknowledged from a

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1 I would like to thank the staff and fellows of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies at the University of Hamburg, especially Michela Torbidoni, Guido Bartolucci, Felix Papenhagen, Stephan Schmid, and Giuseppe Veltri, for the many inspiring discussions we have had concerning Simone Luzzatto.

2 Simone Luzzatto, *Discorso circa il stato degli Hebrei et in particolare dimoranti nell'inclita Città di Venetia* (Venice: Giovanni Calleoni, 1638). This text is included in the recently published edition of Luzzatto's two main Italian works; see Simone Luzzatto, *Scritti politici e filosofici di un ebreo scettico nella Venezia del Seicento*, ed. Giuseppe Veltri (Milan: Bompiani, 2013): 3–106. An English translation of the *Discorso* will be published by Giuseppe Veltri and Anna Lissa (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018). All translations from the *Discorso* quoted in this article are theirs. I am very grateful to them for providing me with the results of their work in advance.

3 The source for Luzzatto's typology is very likely Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Opera omnia* (Basel, 1557), 180 (*Apologia*). Pico in turn relied on Abraham Abulafia; cf. Saverio Campanini, "Talmud, Philosophy, and Kabbalah. A Passage from Pico della Mirandola's *Apologia* and its Source," in *"The Words of a Wise Man's Mouth are Gracious" (Qoh 10,12): Festschrift for Günter Stemberger on the Occasion of his 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, ed. Mauro Perani (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2005): 435 and 440–443. According to Bonfil, this typology was introduced by Profiat Duran in the early fifteenth century; cf. Robert Bonfil, "A Cultural Profile," in *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*, eds. Robert C. Davis and Benjamin Ravid (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001): 170–172. However, Luzzatto in fact adds another, fourth, group: the Karaites; see his *Discorso*, 84r–85r.

4 Cf. Luzzatto, *Discorso*, 75v.

5 *Ibidem*; cf. *ibidem*, 80v: The kabbalists 'were given mysterious expositions of the Scripture.'

Jewish perspective. Concerning the first group, the passage describing them ends as follows:

To these sages, all the Jews in every place and at all times assented, strictly following their instruction as to the fulfilment of rites and precepts, and especially ceremonials. [...] In fact, the Jews believe the rabbis to be the trustworthy and sincere reporters of the rites and ceremonies executed in ancient times.<sup>6</sup>

The passage on the second group, the philosophising theologians, ends with:

The Jews are respectful to the above-mentioned [learned men] as far as opinions and dogmas pertaining to the articles of their religion are concerned. [They also rely on them] as far as morality and ways of conversing and behaving in society and civil life, with whatever people or nation, are concerned.<sup>7</sup>

I would like to emphasise that the third group, the kabbalists, is, in contrast, excluded from this kind of appreciation at the end of the passage which describes them. Thus, from the very beginning, Luzzatto degrades the rank of the kabbalists. The subsequent passage concerning them was brought back to scholarly attention by François Secret, who produced an edition of the Italian text with some annotations.<sup>8</sup> However, it has only been analysed by Giuseppe Veltri.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to the few lines on Simone Luzzatto written by Moshe Idel, where he came to the conclusion that Luzzatto 'is not to be considered either as a Kabbalist or as an opponent of this lore,'<sup>10</sup> I would like to emphasise in the following that Luzzatto was indeed an opponent of the Kabbalah—certainly less strikingly than, e.g., his Venetian colleague Rabbi Leon Modena (1571–1648),<sup>11</sup> but in a more elegant and subtle manner.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, 77v.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, 79v.

<sup>8</sup> François Secret, "Un texte mal connu de Simon Luzzatto sur la kabbale," *Revue des études juives* 118 (1959–1960): 121–128. By mistake, Secret dated the first edition of the *Discorso* to 1629; cf. *ibidem*, 121. For earlier presentations of the *Discorso* before Secret's article, cf. the Latin translation of the sixteenth to eighteenth considerations by Johann Christoph Wolf, *Bibliotheca Hebraea*, vol. 4 (Hamburg: Theodor Christoph Felginer, 1733): 1115–1135; the complete Hebrew translation of the *Discorso* prepared by Dan Lattes and published together with a biography of Luzzatto written by Moshe A. Shulvass and an introduction by Riccardo B. Bachi, see Simone Luzzatto, *Ma'amar 'al Yehudei Venesia* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1950); and the excerpts from the *Discorso* translated into English by Felix Giovanelli, including the sixteenth consideration, see idem, "Learning Among the Hebrews. A 17th-Century Report. Simone Ben Isaac Luzzatto," *Commentary* 13 (1952): 589–593.

<sup>9</sup> Giuseppe Veltri, *Renaissance Philosophy in Jewish Garb: Foundations and Challenges in Judaism on the Eve of Modernity* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009): 33–36 and 213–214; cf. also the summary in Cristiana Facchini, "The City, the Ghetto and Two Books. Venice and Jewish Early Modernity," *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC* 2 (2011): 38–40.

<sup>10</sup> Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah. New Perspectives* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1988): 5.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Yaacob Dweck, *The Scandal of Kabbalah. Leon Modena, Jewish Mysticism, Early Modern Venice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

This can be seen in Luzzatto's use of what I call sceptical strategies in the passage on the kabbalists, which I want to present and discuss in the following.

In contrast to ancient scepticism, topics such as knowledge, certainty, and doubt are essential in early modern scepticism.<sup>13</sup> In particular, questioning the certainty of traditional sources of knowledge and doubting the established authorities became more and more common in early modern times, even in discourses outside the philosophical school tradition. In this non-philosophical context, the posing of questions of certainty and the casting of doubt on authorities were realised by means of sceptical strategies in a broader sense, as will be defined now. In short, sceptical strategies are a set of literary or rhetorical means intended to induce doubts, questions, and intellectual uneasiness. Eventually, when successful, the use of these sceptical strategies will result in undermining the reliability or trustworthiness of (any) authority as a source of knowledge. In contrast to argumentation based mainly on formal logic, these strategies are more content-related insofar the foundations and presuppositions of various claims are questioned. Hence, the application of sceptical strategies, as understood here, has to be distinguished from the ancient philosophical tradition of scepticism in the strict sense of the term—either in the Pyrrhonian or in the Academic school—and we can call it 'subversive scepticism.' Of course, philosophical scepticism uses these (and other)<sup>14</sup> sceptical strategies as well, but it goes, at least in Pyrrhonian scepticism, one step further, finally leading to equipollence (*isostheneia*) concerning the validity of different and contradicting statements and

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12 Cf. Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, vol. 5: *From the Chmielnicki Persecution of the Jews in Poland (1648 C.E.) to the Period of Emancipation in Central Europe (c. 1870 C.E.)* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1895): 81: 'Simone Luzzatto did not suffer himself to be ensnared by Kabbalistic delusions,' and *ibidem*, 84: 'One of his disciples relates of him that he ridiculed the Kabbalists.' In line with this, cf. Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Ševi: The Mystical Messiah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973): 77; Bernard Septimus, "Biblical Religion and Political Rationality in Simone Luzzatto, Maimonides and Spinoza," in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, eds. Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987): 416, n. 76; and David B. Ruderman, "Science and Skepticism. Simone Luzzatto on Perceiving the Natural World," in *idem*, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995): 159–160. It is now evident that Luzzatto was indeed involved in a discussion with Count Charles de Valliquerville, a libertine visiting the Ghetto of Venice in 1646, on theological speculations including Kabbalah and in selling Hebrew books to him, but, nevertheless, this is no proof of any alleged sympathy in Luzzatto towards Kabbalah; cf. Evelien Chayes, "Visitatori libertini del Ghetto: Ismaël Boulliau e Charles de Valliquerville," in *Oltre le mura del Ghetto. Accademie, scetticismo e tolleranza nella Venezia barocca*, eds. Giuseppe Veltri and Evelien Chayes (Palermo: New Digital Press, 2016): 133–136.

13 Cf. Katja Vogt, "Ancient Skepticism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/skepticism-ancient>: 'The core concepts of ancient skepticism are belief, suspension of judgment, criterion of truth, appearances, and investigation. Important notions of modern skepticism such as knowledge, certainty, justified belief, and doubt play no or almost no role.'

14 Obviously, the tropes are most relevant in this respect; see Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I:13–17.

therefore to suspension of judgement (*epoché*) and possibly even tranquillity (*ataraxia*). Sceptical strategies, in the sense defined here, are especially fruitful when the participants do not share the same discourse and/or logic of argumentation and proofs, as is expressed in the Latin maxim *contra principia negantem non est disputandum*. In the present case, the argumentation against certain claims is less important than the strategy of undermining the certainty, authority, or legitimacy of a text, person, or institution as a source of knowledge. In this way, there is at least a chance that a certain person approached by sceptical strategies will lose their certainty and confidence, cast doubts in the future, and not continue to follow their teachers or leaders and the claims they make.<sup>15</sup>

Simone Luzzatto employs these sceptical strategies—in the sense defined above—in the framework of his general philosophical scepticism, which aims at questioning authority (*auctoritas*) on two levels. Firstly, on an epistemological level, he targets our confidence in sources of knowledge (e.g. reason or revelation); secondly, on a social level, Luzzatto's doubts address people (e.g. prophets or sages). Both levels of his scepticism have already been dealt with elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> In the case of the *Discorso*, it is rather difficult to detect Luzzatto's personal position, because the book is primarily addressed—at least apparently—to a Christian audience and, even more importantly, because it is an apologetic text.<sup>17</sup> However, his general philosophical scepticism is obvious throughout his writings. So, e.g., in the passage on kabbalists, Luz-

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<sup>15</sup> My definition of sceptical strategies owes much the popular but nevertheless intriguing book on subversive thinking written by the Austrian philosopher Hubert Schleichert, *Wie man mit Fundamentalisten diskutiert, ohne den Verstand zu verlieren. Anleitung zum subversiven Denken* (Munich: Beck, 1999). A more elaborated presentation of my definition of sceptical strategies will be published separately in the near future.

<sup>16</sup> In this regard, Luzzatto's other Italian book, *Socrate overo dell'humano sapere* (Venice: Tomasini, 1651), is especially decisive. This work was also included in the recently published edition of Luzzatto's works; see Luzzatto, *Scritti politici e filosofici*, 107–400. An English translation of the *Socrate* will be published by Giuseppe Veltri and Michela Torbidoni (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018). On Luzzatto's scepticism, cf. Ruderman, "Science and Skepticism," 153–184; Ariel Viterbo, "Socrate nel ghetto: lo scetticismo mascherato di Simone Luzzatto," *Studi Veneziani* 38 (1999): 79–128; Giuseppe Veltri, "Principles of Jewish Sceptical Thought, The Case of Judah Moscato and Simone Luzzatto," in *Rabbi Judah Moscato and the Jewish Intellectual World of Mantua in the 16th-17th Centuries*, eds. Giuseppe Veltri and Gianfranco Miletto (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012): 17–19 and 27–35; Giuseppe Veltri and Michela Torbidoni, "Alcune considerazioni sulla sospensione del giudizio e il silenzio nella tradizione ebraica scettica," in *Seconda navigazione, Omaggio a Giovanni Reale*, eds. Roberto Radice and Glauco Tiengo (Milan: Bompiani, 2015): 753–756; Michela Torbidoni, "Il metodo del dubbio nel Socrate," in *Filosofo e Rabbino nella Venezia del Seicento. Studi su Simone Luzzatto con documenti inediti dall'Archivio di Stato di Venezia*, ed. Giuseppe Veltri (Ariccia: Aracne, 2015): 183–245; and Giuseppe Veltri, "Un accademico scettico: Simone Luzzatto," in *Oltre le mura del Ghetto. Accademie, scetticismo e tolleranza nella Venezia barocca* eds. Giuseppe Veltri and Evelien Chayes (Palermo: New Digital Press, 2016): 147–173; see also the article by Michela Torbidoni in this volume.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Ruderman, "Science and Skepticism," 154.

zatto explicitly acknowledges the epistemological scepticism of Sextus Empiricus (c. 160 – c. 210):

This is what Sextus Empiricus demonstrated, i.e. that every phenomenon and object is mixed and involved in five kinds of relations. Proceeding in his examination, he even demonstrated that it is almost impossible to grasp anything about objects other than their relation.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, I would like to stress the point that a text is not only read by its addressees, but also by readers not explicitly envisaged by its author. Therefore, these sceptical strategies sometimes only deploy their effectiveness in their later reception history.

In this article, I want to present and discuss five particular sceptical strategies used by Luzzatto in the passage concerning the kabbalists. These strategies are, to a certain degree, intertwined, and include 1) relativisation, 2) objectification, 3) historicisation, 4) indictment of heresy, and finally, 5) delegitimation.

## 1 Relativisation

Relativisation as a sceptical strategy refutes the claim of the uniqueness and essential importance of a certain statement or idea in contrast to others. Through this strategy, the claim will become only one among others, thus losing its original entitlement.<sup>19</sup> Another case would be the marginalisation of a claim formerly acknowledged as central. Here, the strategy of relativisation is interpreted only in a synchronic perspective, in contrast to the diachronic perspective of the strategy of historicisation presented below. In fact, relativity constitutes the highest category in the tropes described by Sextus Empiricus in his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, a specific result of this strategy would be the well-known sceptical state of equipollence in the face of contradicting statements. However, the Pyrrhonian trope of relativity is not used by Luzzatto in this passage, but only relativisation, as described in the following examples.

According to Luzzatto's first sentence in the present passage, the Kabbalah was only approved by some Jews, especially Jews from the Levant and Poland.<sup>21</sup> It is very likely that Luzzatto is alluding here to Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain and to Ashkenazic Jews stemming from Polish centres such as Cracow and Lublin. Thus, he suggests that Kabbalah is not only a minor phenomenon, but also one that is

<sup>18</sup> Luzzatto, *Discorso*, 82r; cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I:15 ('The Five Tropes').

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Schleichert, *Wie man mit Fundamentalisten diskutiert*, 30–32 and 147–150.

<sup>20</sup> See Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I:14.39.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Scholem, *Sabbatai Ševi*, 77, n. 113: 'A similar statement was made in 1624 by the kabbalist Aaron Berakhya Modena in his *'Ashmoreth ha-Boqer* (Mantua, 1624), fol. 247b.'

somewhat foreign or even alien from an Italian perspective.<sup>22</sup> Regarding the dissemination of Kabbalah in Italy, especially as a centre for printing kabbalistic books, and its deep influence on the thinking of numerous Italian Jews (and also non-Jews), this suggestion can easily be disproved from a historical perspective.<sup>23</sup> This is important insofar as Luzzatto wrote his *Discorso* in Italian addressing first and foremost a non-Jewish readership but probably not intending to exclude Jewish readers at all.<sup>24</sup> However, the borderline he defines at this point is not between Jews and non-Jews, but between Italians and non-Italians, in terms of linguistic abilities. Furthermore, Luzzatto does not acknowledge Kabbalah as a central and essential concept or system of Jewish tradition or even as a secret Jewish lore at all. In line with this strategy of relativisation and marginalisation, he emphasises that the acceptance of Kabbalah is not mandatory for Jews.

## 2 Objectification

The sceptical strategy of objectification consists in objectifying a certain phenomenon that is originally related to insiders, that is, believers, adepts, or followers—as marking their identity—but not to scholars. That is, in our case, Kabbalah is not presented as an auratic tradition of which the author is a part, but as the usual topic of a scholarly endeavour from a distant outsider perspective. In short, kabbalists depict their own statements in the literary mode of scriptural exegesis or as a narration, e.g., a Midrash or a vision, referring to scriptural verses as proofs. In contrast, the strategy of objectification presents kabbalistic claims in a purely descriptive way,

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<sup>22</sup> Luzzatto's presentation of the Karaites sounds very similar; see Luzzatto, *Discorso*, 84v-85r.

<sup>23</sup> Concerning the history, characteristics, and varieties of the Kabbalah in Italy until the time of Simone Luzzatto, cf. above all the seminal studies by Moshe Idel, e.g., idem, *Kabbalah in Italy 1280–1510: A Survey* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011); idem, "Italy in Safed, Safed in Italy: Toward an Interactive History of Sixteenth-Century Kabbalah," in *Cultural Intermediaries: Jewish Intellectuals in Early Modern Italy*, eds. David B. Ruderman and Giuseppe Veltri (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004): 239–269; idem, "Kabbalah in Italy in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century: Some New Perspectives," *Materia giudaica* 15–16 (2010–11): 309–317; idem, "Major Currents in Italian Kabbalah between 1560 and 1660," in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. David B. Ruderman (New York and London: New York University Press, 1992): 345–368; and idem, "Differing Conceptions of Kabbalah in the Early Seventeenth Century," in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, eds. Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987): 137–200.

<sup>24</sup> In this case, he would exclude those Jews who were not able to read Italian, such as, ironically, many Jews from the Levant and Poland living in Venice in his time. Concerning the question of Italian literacy among the Venetian Jews in this time, cf. Ruderman, "Science and Skepticism," 155. Regarding the addressed readership of non-Jews as well as Jews, cf. Bonfil, "A Cultural Profile," 170 and Ariella Lang, "The Double Edge of Irony in Simone Luzzatto's *Discorso*," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 15 (2009): 116. Concerning the latter, I am not totally convinced that Lang's 'ironic' reading of the *Discorso* is plausible throughout this book.

without rhetorical embellishment or Scriptural reasoning.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the change in the mode of presentation and the outsider perspective as given by the strategy of objectification can already lead to sceptical questions concerning the validity and certainty of kabbalistic truth claims.

This strategy describes Luzzatto's general approach throughout his treatise very well, and in the following I would like to present various examples of it. He begins his presentation of the Kabbalah with a rather modern scientific approach that discusses terminology and etymology. Thus, he reduces the widespread fascination of this phenomenon to the literal meaning of the term 'Kabbalah' which is simply 'reception' in the sense of a tradition which the student receives from his master. Regarding the 'secrets' alleged by many, not only followers but also enthusiasts, to belong to the Kabbalah, the sceptical strategy of objectification also results in demystifying the phenomenon because it focuses only on the reduced essence of pure statements. However, in the early stage of the scholarly discussion of Kabbalah presented by Luzzatto, the kabbalistic use of a symbolic language that tries to express what is beyond the sphere of expression was not acknowledged as such.

After his terminological clarifications, Luzzatto gives a systematic description of Kabbalah: the well-established division of Kabbalah into two parts, the first practical and the second theoretical and scientific, i.e. the theosophical Kabbalah.<sup>26</sup> The practical Kabbalah, i.e. *qabbalah ma'asit* in Hebrew, he characterises as follows:

It deals with some odd combinations of letters, calculations of numbers and certain forms of the Hebrew characters. For even the crown of a letter is considered by them with wonderful explanation. They mainly devote themselves to the names of God.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, the afore-mentioned hermeneutical techniques were already present in rabbinic literature in Late Antiquity. However, in medieval Judaism, these techniques were used obsessively and became a hallmark of various mystical and magical trends, e.g., in the writings of the German Pietists (*Ḥasidei Ashkenaz*) and of the ec-

<sup>25</sup> On the change of rhetorical genre in the sixteenth consideration, as can be seen in the descriptive manner in which Luzzatto presents Judaism, cf. Veltri, *Renaissance Philosophy in Jewish Garb*, 213.

<sup>26</sup> See already e.g., Abraham Abulafia, *We-zot li-Yehudah*, in idem, *Ḥayye ha-'Olam ha-Ba* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Amnon Gross, 1999): 25 or Pico della Mirandola, *Opera omnia*, 107–108 (*Conclusiones*); cf. Gershom Scholem, "Zur Geschichte der Anfänge der christlichen Kabbala," in *Essays Presented to Leo Baeck on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday*, eds. Norman Bentwich et al. (London: East and West Library, 1954): 164, n. 1; Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah. New Perspectives*, XI–XII; idem, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance," in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Bernard D. Cooperman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983): 197; and Campanini, "Talmud, Philosophy, and Kabbalah," 438–440.

<sup>27</sup> Luzzatto, *Discorso*, 80v.



static kabbalist Abraham Abulafia (1240 – after 1291) as well as in the Jewish magical traditions.<sup>28</sup>

Luzzatto introduces the theoretical Kabbalah by showing that he was quite familiar with its basic kabbalistic concepts and ideas. Besides the kabbalistic adaptation of the Neoplatonic concept of emanation, Luzzatto deals especially with the kabbalistic concept of the ten Sefirot, but without mentioning this specific term. He defines the Sefirot as ‘ten fundamental principles,’<sup>29</sup> adopting the typical kabbalistic images of the Sefirot as described in classical kabbalistic texts,<sup>30</sup> when he writes:

It [i. e. the theoretical Kabbalah] considers the dependence of this corporeal world on the spiritual one, disembodied and archetypal. They [i. e. the kabbalists] believe that there are some principles and origins that are the seeds of all perceptual things. They are like ever-flowing fountains, which, like aqueducts and canals, can receive the influx of divine power and energy directed at this corporeal world of ours.<sup>31</sup>

This passage continues as follows:

They [i. e. the kabbalists] count ten fundamental principles assigned to the performance of this task—like also the Pythagoreans happened to set the number ten when they had to decide on the number of their own principles—but [according to the kabbalists], they [i. e. the principles] are to be duplicated according to the distinguishing principle of good and evil.<sup>32</sup>

Due to the ambiguous syntactical structure used by Luzzatto here, it is difficult to understand the real intention of this passage. In particular, it is unclear whether the Pythagoreans or the kabbalists duplicate the ten principles with regard to the distinction between good and evil.<sup>33</sup> In fact, the Italian used here allows both interpretations in terms of the language. According to Aristotle,<sup>34</sup> the Pythagoreans are ascribed a ‘table of ten opposites’ including ten pairs such as odd/even, right/left, male/female, light/darkness, good/evil, and others.<sup>35</sup> However, this kind of doubling of the ten principles does not follow an overall partition between good and evil as Luzzatto describes it. Therefore, the English translation presented here instead prefers the

28 Cf. Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition. A Study in Folk Religion* (New York: Behrman's Jewish Book House, 1939; reprinted Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004): 78–103; Moshe Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989): 82–124; and Daniel Abrams, “From Germany to Spain: Numerology as a Mystical Technique,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 47 (1996): 43–63.

29 Luzzatto, *Discorso*, 81r.

30 Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1988): 116.

31 Luzzatto, *Discorso*, 80v–81r.

32 *Ibidem*, 81r.

33 In contrast to my view, Dan Lattes remarks in his Hebrew translation of the *Discorso* that Luzzatto does not refer to the ten Sefirot of the *Siṭra Ḥṭra*; cf. Luzzatto, *Ma'amar*, 171, n. 194.

34 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I:5 (986a22–26).

35 Cf. Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972): 51.



other possible interpretation<sup>36</sup> that Luzzatto is very likely alluding to the specific kabbalistic doctrine that indeed duplicates the system of ten Sefirot when it comes to the question of the existence of evil. This doctrine can already be found in the *Sefer ha-Zohar*, where the evil side is called *Siṭra Aḥra* in Aramaic.<sup>37</sup> The Christian kabbalist Johannes Reuchlin (1455–1522) generally identified Kabbalah with Pythagoreanism in his *magnum opus De arte cabalistica* (Hagenau, 1517), and he considered himself a *Pythagoras redivivus*.<sup>38</sup> However, Luzzatto's comparison of kabbalistic concepts with those of the Pythagoreans also refers at the same moment to the sceptical strategy of historicisation, as will be discussed below.

Another kabbalistic concept is described as follows:

But the kabbalists [...] observed that all mundane things share a close and proximate gradation of short, distinct intervals. [...] All the other things are differentiated subordinately without admitting peculiar lapses. Instead, they are linked and joined together in a very gradual manner. In the same way, in the transition from the infinite, the One, immutable and incorporeal, to the finite, composite, mutable, and corporeal, we should similarly interpose some other essences. These essences are supposed to have a partial correspondence with the eminent infinity of God by means of their spirituality and excellence, and [on the other hand] they are also supposed to bear similarity and sympathy with mundane creatures because of their being dependent and created.<sup>39</sup>

This concept is based on Plato's doctrine of the necessary plenitude of the world as well as on the Aristotelian principle of continuity or infinitesimal gradation in nature. Both ideas were combined in Neoplatonism and reinterpreted as the conception of the universe as a 'Great Chain of Being' throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance until the eighteenth century.<sup>40</sup> The Neoplatonic idea of emanation from the

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**36** The difficulty is to which 'principii' the verb 'erano duplicati' refers—to the principles of the Pythagoreans, or to those of the kabbalists? Actually, the Italian used here allows both interpretations. In my interpretation, it refers to the principles of the kabbalists, because the duplication of the ten Sefirot with regard to the good and the evil side is known from kabbalists but not from Pythagoreans. Thus, the parenthesis concerning the Pythagoreans begins with 'como anco' and ends with 'li loro principii.' The following 'ma erano duplicati' refers back to the 'a tale fontione applicati,' which in addition is marked by the two rhyming verbs.

**37** Cf. Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991): 56–87; idem, *Kabbalah*, 123.

**38** Johann Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah. De arte cabalistica*, trans. Martin and Sarah Goodman (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993); cf. Moshe Idel, "Introduction to the Bison Book Edition," in *ibidem*, XI–XVI; Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, *Geschichte der christlichen Kabbala*, vol. 1: 15. und 16. Jahrhundert (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2012): 164–207.

**39** Luzzatto, *Discorso*, 82v–83r.

**40** Cf. the classic study by Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966). Concerning the Jewish tradition, cf. David Blumenthal, "Lovejoy's Great Chain of Being and Medieval Jewish Tradition," in *Jacob's Ladder and the Tree of Life: Concepts of Hierarchy and the Great Chain of Being*, eds. Marion L. Kuntz and Paul G. Kuntz (New York: Peter Lang, 1987): 179–190.

divine sphere down to earthly matters was also accepted by many Jewish and Christian kabbalists.<sup>41</sup>

In the following passage, Luzzatto again shows his detailed knowledge of the kabbalistic system of the Sefirot:

Some of them adhere to the severity of justice, others to mercy, and others to a tempered clemency. They differ from the angels, whose function is to contemplate and carry out the voluntary commandments of God, sometimes by assuming corporeal form in order to appear to men.<sup>42</sup>

In this sentence, Luzzatto is apparently referring to the fourth to sixth Sefirot, *hesed* ('mercy'), *din* ('judgment'), and *raḥamim* ('compassion'). Furthermore, he emphasizes the fundamental difference between the Sefirot and the angels. In the continuation, Luzzatto mentions another kabbalistic concept:

[The kabbalists] believe that these ideas exist in four distinct ways: the worthiest are emanated or inspired, the second created, the third shaped, the fourth and last made and completed. Each is subordinate to the other in a regulated hierarchy.<sup>43</sup>

In this passage, Luzzatto summarizes a kabbalistic concept known as early as the *Tiqunei Zohar* or the writings of Isaac of Acre in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, namely, the concept of four worlds: *ašilut* ('emanation'), *beri'ah* ('creation'), *yeširah* ('formation'), and *'ašiyah* ('making'). From the sixteenth century onwards, this fourfold concept became quite widespread in the kabbalistic tradition.<sup>44</sup>

To quote one last example in this line, Luzzatto writes:

Moreover, the kabbalists placed an essence between the soul and the body, by means of which the soul becomes capable of passions and sentiments, and this they supposed to be the spirit of a most subtle body, similar to the vehicles asserted by Platonists. They maintain that it accompanies the soul after its departure from the body, by means of which it suffers tormenting punishments on account of the sins committed.<sup>45</sup>

In this passage, Luzzatto is very likely alluding to the Neoplatonic and kabbalistic concept of an astral body that was identified with the divine image (*šelem* in Hebrew) in some kabbalistic texts such as the *Sefer ha-Zohar*.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 96–105.

<sup>42</sup> Luzzatto, *Discorso*, 83r.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 118–119; Moshe Hallamish, *An Introduction to the Kabbalah* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999): 194–195.

<sup>45</sup> Luzzatto, *Discorso*, 83v.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 262.

### 3 Historicisation

Historicisation is deeply interwoven with the afore-mentioned sceptical strategies of relativisation and objectification. On the one hand, historicisation as a sceptical strategy refutes the claim of the uniqueness and essential importance of a certain statement or institution, and on the other, it presents the typical scholarly manner of objectifying a certain phenomenon. In a more specific sense, the sceptical strategy of historicisation focuses diachronically on terms denoting time in reconstructing the genealogy and interdependence of certain ideas and concepts, thus dismantling categories such as revelation or secret wisdom.<sup>47</sup> To historicise a phenomenon means to explain it by reconstructing its development from its origin throughout history. This results in simultaneously dissolving mythical and theological categories such as 'divine creation', 'history of decay' or 'Last Judgment'. In general, the temporal concept of historicisation does not make any ontological difference between past, present, and future.<sup>48</sup> Thus, with regard to the acceptance of sources of knowledge, categories such as 'ancient revelation' or 'old secret wisdom' are denounced as simply metaphysical by this strategy.

Historicisation is probably the most effective of Luzzatto's sceptical strategies in the passage dealing with the kabbalists. After the systematic presentation of the two different types of Kabbalah, Luzzatto focuses on the broader historical context of kabbalistic concepts and ideas, including Greek, Latin, and Arabic authors. It is very striking that Luzzatto devotes two-thirds of the passage on kabbalists to the presentation of non-Jewish philosophers and their ideas. By doing this, he not only compares Kabbalah with the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, Sextus Empiricus, Philo, Avicenna, Dante, and others, but he also places it as one of the many extant ideas in the history of philosophy. Therein Luzzatto mirrors the characteristics of Italian Kabbalah, which generally shows a positive attitude towards philosophy, including various syntheses of both traditions.<sup>49</sup> It is worth mentioning that the promulgator of Lurianic Kabbalah, Israel Saruq,<sup>50</sup> who was active in Venice in the years after 1590, also interpreted Kabbalah as a kind of philosophy for his Italian audience.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Schleichert, *Wie man mit Fundamentalisten diskutiert*, 42–43.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Glenn W. Most, "Preface," in *Historicization – Historisierung*, ed. Glenn W. Most (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001): VIII.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Idel, "Major Currents in Italian Kabbalah," 345–349; idem, "Italy in Safed, Safed in Italy," 243; idem, "Differing Conception of Kabbalah," 155–157; and idem, "Kabbalah in Italy in the Sixteenth Century," 316.

<sup>50</sup> According to his own signature in Ms Oxford, Bodleian Library, Neubauer 1624, fol. 35, this is the correct spelling and not the formerly known Sarug; see Ronit Meroz, "Contrasting Opinions among the Founders of R. Israel Saruq's school," in *Expérience et écriture mystiques dans les religions du livre*, eds. Paul B. Fenton and Roland Goetschel (Leiden: Brill, 2000): 191, n. 1.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Leon Modena, *Ari Nohem*, ed. Nehemiah S. Libowitz (Jerusalem: Darom, 1929): 53 [= (Jerusalem, 2012), 88]: 'And I have also heard from the mouth of the kabbalist R. Israel Saruq, a distinguish-

However, Christian kabbalists such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94) or Francesco Giorgio Veneto (also known as Zorzi, 1466–1540) also depicted Kabbalah in a philosophical way.<sup>52</sup> By presenting Kabbalah as philosophy, the often-alleged mystical and visionary aspect of it would be neglected. Very similarly to Leon Modena,<sup>53</sup> Luzzatto goes an important step further when he implicitly suggests by his strategy of historicisation that Kabbalah has no Jewish origin. Thus, historicisation is related to the sceptical strategies of indictment of heresy and delegitimation which will be discussed below.

In the same way, he mentions the Pythagoreans again—see above—when dealing with the topic of transmigration of the soul:

The said kabbalists believed in the Pythagorean transmigration [of the soul], which the talmudists did not.<sup>54</sup>

Again, according to Luzzatto, the kabbalists follow non-Jewish sources, such as the Pythagoreans, and not the presupposed genuine Jewish tradition as alluded to by the talmudists. Probably the first Jewish scholar to explicitly connect Pythagoras with kabbalists with regard to the transmigration of the soul (*metempsychosis*) was the Aristotelian philosopher Moses ben Samuel ha-Cohen Ashkenazi (second half of the fifteenth century).<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, Luzzatto's colleague Leon Modena also attributed this idea to Pythagoras.<sup>56</sup> Both Venetian rabbis were involved in the debate on this topic in Amsterdam in 1635–6, where Modena's former student, Rabbi Saul Levi Morteira (1596–1660), preached against the concept of the transmigration of the soul (and the Kabbalah as well).<sup>57</sup>

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ed student of Luria, blessed be his memory, who said that there is nothing between Kabbalah and philosophy.'

52 Cf., e.g., Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1989); Francesco Zorzi, *L'Armonia del Mondo*, ed. Saverio Campanini (Milan: Bompiani, 2010); and Schmidt-Biggemann, *Geschichte der christlichen Kabbala*, vol. 1, 70–130 and 384–449.

53 Cf. Idel, "Major Currents in Italian Kabbalah," 360.

54 Luzzatto, *Discorso*, 84v.

55 On the genealogy of this topos, cf. the summary presented by Brian Ogren, *Renaissance and Rebirth. Reincarnation in Early Modern Italian Kabbalah* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009): 270–297.

56 Cf. Howard E. Adelman, *Success and Failure in the Seventeenth Century Ghetto of Venice: The Life and Thought of Leon Modena, 1571–1648* (PhD dissertation, Brandeis University, 1985): 480; Dweck, *Scandal of Kabbalah*, 140; and Idel, "Differing Conceptions of Kabbalah," 158–162. Concerning Modena's general approach of historicisation, cf. Bezalel Safran, "Leone da Modena's Historical Thinking," in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, eds. Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987): 381–398.

57 Cf. Adelman, *Success and Failure*, 727.

## 4 Indictment of heresy

The strategy of indicting an idea or concept as heretical is well known, especially in polemics. Luzzatto uses indictment of heresy as a sceptical strategy in a way that is embedded in the broader framework of his sceptical strategy of historicisation. The evidence of Jewish kabbalistic texts which were already translated into Latin by Christian kabbalists—he mentions Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and his main work in this regard, the *Conclusiones*,<sup>58</sup> in the beginning of the passage dealing with Kabbalah<sup>59</sup>—is, for Luzzatto, of double importance. Firstly, it is directed to his Christian audience and their supposed familiarity with this topic, especially when they are also sceptical towards Kabbalah. Secondly, it is an admonition regarding the dangers to Jewish people inherent in this fact, even when they are kabbalists themselves. Indeed, the very existence of Christian Kabbalah evoked a heavy discussion among Jewish scholars at that time.<sup>60</sup> In general, Luzzatto tends to play down the differences between Christians and Jews throughout his *Discorso*, where he presents both of them as equally useful citizens of the *Serenissima*.

By relating kabbalists to ‘the Valentinians and the gnostics and other ancient heretics’,<sup>61</sup> Luzzatto decries the former and also indicts Kabbalah as heresy. Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim (1486–1535) was probably the first to emphasise the gnostics’ assumed dependence on Kabbalah.<sup>62</sup> However, Luzzatto was seemingly influenced by Sixtus of Siena (also known as Senensis, 1520–69), who also wrote about this relationship in his *Bibliotheca sancta*.<sup>63</sup>

However, gnosticism was not only a topic of Late Antiquity, but also a contemporary phenomenon in Luzzatto’s time in some trends of the Kabbalah. Regarding gnostic features in Kabbalah, one may acknowledge the dissemination of Lurianic Kabbalah in Italy by Israel Saruq in the last decades of the sixteenth century as a probable evoking factor, because many mythical and gnostic elements can be detect-

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58 See the *editio princeps* Pico della Mirandola, *Conclusiones nongentae* (Rome, 1486). Actually, the *Conclusiones* by Pico include two sets of kabbalistic theses but no translations of kabbalistic texts into Latin; cf. Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola’s Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*, 19–52 and 133–200. However, a whole library of kabbalistic texts was indeed translated for Pico by the convert Flavius Mithridates; cf. Giulio Busi, ed., *The Kabbalistic Library of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 5 vols. (Turin: Nino Aragno, 2004–2012).

59 Cf. Luzzatto, *Discorso*, 80v.

60 Cf. Moshe Idel, “Jewish thinkers versus Christian Kabbalah,” in *Christliche Kabbala*, ed. Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke, 2003): 49–65; Dweck, *Scandal of Kabbalah*, 154–169.

61 Luzzatto, *Discorso*, 83r.

62 See Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum liber* (Frankfurt am Main, 1693): 178–185 (chapter 47: De Cabala).

63 Sixtus of Siena, *Bibliotheca sancta* (Venice, 1566): 227; cf. Secret, “Un texte mal connu de Simon Luzzatto sur la kabbale,” 125, n. 1.

ed in Isaac Luria's (1534–72) cosmogony.<sup>64</sup> However, Luzzatto's silence concerning Luria's ideas is striking here because they were accepted by several Italian kabbalists in his lifetime, especially by the most important one: Rabbi Menahem Azariah da Fano (1548–1620).<sup>65</sup> However, selectivity and neglect are in fact rhetorical strategies, but not stringently sceptical strategies as defined here.<sup>66</sup>

## 5 Delegitimation

As we have already seen above, Luzzatto denounces the Kabbalah by suggesting its non-Jewish origin and heretical character. The sceptical strategies presented so far culminate in the one that I would like to call 'delegitimation.' This strategy is extremely important in the case of refuting kabbalistic statements because the Kabbalah first and foremost consists of a tradition that relies on genealogy, filiation, and authority. Thus, the legitimacy of Kabbalah will be undermined by arguing that the chain of genealogy is broken somewhere and that the venerated authorities are somehow not trustworthy. Accordingly, Luzzatto clearly emphasised the pseudographic character of the alleged authorship of the *Sefer ha-Zohar* by calling it an attribution: he did not explicitly mention the name of the fictitious author, Shimon bar Yoḥai, and therefore did not acknowledge him, but instead marginalised him by use of the phrase 'one of the ancient rabbis.'<sup>67</sup> Despite the fact that the *Sefer ha-Zohar* was printed for the first time in Italy, the Italian kabbalists themselves were quite indifferent to this central text of the Spanish trend of theosophical Kabbalah.<sup>68</sup> In contrast, Christian kabbalists were much more interested in the *Zohar*, as can be seen by the efforts made by Guillaume Postel (1510–81) to translate large portions of it into Latin.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946; reprinted, New York: Schocken Books, 1995): 260–280; Isaiah Tishby, "Gnostic Doctrines in Sixteenth-Century Jewish Mysticism," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 6 (1955): 146–152; Idel, "Italy in Safed, Safed in Italy," 252–256; and Dweck, *Scandal of Kabbalah*, 127–147.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Idel, "Major Currents in Italian Kabbalah," 356–357 and Robert Bonfil, "Halakhah, Kabbalah, and Society: Some Insights into Rabbi Menahem Azariah da Fano's Inner World," in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, eds. Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987): 39–61.

<sup>66</sup> The rhetorical strategies of selectivity and neglect will be elaborated elsewhere.

<sup>67</sup> Luzzatto, *Discorso*, 84v.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Idel, "Italy in Safed, Safed in Italy," 253.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Schmidt-Biggemann, *Geschichte der christlichen Kabbala*, vol. 1, 597–616 and 638–657; Judith Weiss, "Guillaume Postel's Introduction to His First Latin Translation and Commentary on the Book of Zohar" [in Hebrew], in *And This Is for Yehuda: Studies Presented to Our Friend, Professor Yehuda Liebes*, eds. Maren R. Niehoff, Ronit Meroz, and Jonathan Garb (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 2012): 254–280; Idel, "Kabbalah in Italy in the Sixteenth Century," 315; and Boaz Huss, "Translations of the Zohar: Historical Contexts and Ideological Frameworks," *Correspondences* 4 (2016): 87.

Luzzatto includes another reference to the printed edition of the *Sefer ha-Zohar* ('The Book of Splendour') when he writes that there is an 'extremely large volume on the five books of Moses called the *Splendour*.'<sup>70</sup> The designation of this book as an 'extremely large volume' very probably refers<sup>71</sup> to the edition published in one large-format volume by Christians and converted Jews in Cremona in 1558–60, whereas the almost contemporaneous Mantua edition was printed by several Jews in a smaller format in three volumes.<sup>72</sup> Accordingly, only those parts of the multipartite *Sefer ha-Zohar* are referred to here, i.e. those parts which were arranged in the Cremona edition within the literary framework of a commentary on the weekly portions of the Torah. Thus, other parts of zoharic literature, including the *Tiqqunei Zohar* (*editio princeps* Mantua, 1558) and the *Zohar Ḥadash* (*editio princeps* Salonica, 1597), are not considered by Luzzatto despite the fact that they were already easily accessible in printed editions.

However, Luzzatto does not use the sceptical strategy of delegitimation concerning all relevant matters. For instance, he did not explicitly reject the alleged old age of the *Sefer ha-Zohar* as others had done before him.<sup>73</sup> In addition, Luzzatto acknowledges the Hebrew *Sefer Yeṣirah* ('Book of Creation') as the most important kabbalistic book.<sup>74</sup> Thus, he apparently shared the self-image of the kabbalistic tradition regarding this text. In fact, and despite the pre-kabbalistic origin of this book, many basic features and terms, such as the Sefirot and the concept of the creation of the world through God's use of the Hebrew letters, are provided for the development of Kabbalah. Furthermore, there are dozens of kabbalistic commentaries on the *Sefer Yeṣirah*. This work was printed for the first time in two versions together with four commentaries (Mantua, 1562).<sup>75</sup> The first Latin translation, prepared by Guillaume Postel, had

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70 Luzzatto, *Discorso*, 84v: '[...] un altro volume grandissimo sopra li cinque libri de Moise nominato Il Splendore.'

71 Though the only other edition of the *Zohar* published prior to the time Luzzatto wrote his *Discorso* is that printed in Lublin in 1623–1624, which indeed follows the *Vorlage* of the Cremona edition, it is in my view more likely that Luzzatto knew the former.

72 Cf. Boaz Huss, *The Zohar. Reception and Impact* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2016): 99–106 and Daniel Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory: Methodologies of Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practice in the Study of Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press and Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2010): 232–245.

73 Among the philosophers who criticised the Kabbalah, cf., e.g., Samuel ibn Seneh Zarza, *Sefer Meqor Ḥayyim* (Mantua 1559), fol. 118b (*Parashat Ki Teṣe*) or Elijah Delmedigo in his *Sefer Beḥinat ha-Dat*, see the edition prepared by Giovanni Licata, *La via della ragione. Elia del Medigo e l'averroismo di Spinoza* (Macerata: Edizioni Università di Macerata, 2013): 324–325 (§28); cf. Kalman P. Bland, "Elijah del Medigo's Averroist Response to the Kabbalah of Fifteenth-Century Jewry and Pico della Mirandola," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 1.1 (1991): 43. Concerning criticism on the *Sefer ha-Zohar*, cf. also Huss, *The Zohar*, 239–255 and Dweck, *Scandal of Kabbalah*, 59–100.

74 Luzzatto, *Discorso*, 84v.

75 Cf. Saverio Campanini, "On Abraham's Neck. The Editio Princeps of the *Sefer Yetzirah* (Mantua 1562) and Its Context," in *Rabbi Judah Moscato and the Jewish Intellectual World of Mantua in the*



already been printed ten years earlier (Paris, 1552), later followed by two other Latin translations, one by Johannes Pistorius (Basle, 1587) and one by Johann Stephan Rittangel (Amsterdam, 1642).<sup>76</sup> Thus, when Luzzatto wrote his *Discorso*, the *Sefer Yeşirah* was already well known and studied by Jewish and Christian audiences. Since Luzzatto mentions the title as *De Creatione*, he is very likely referring to Pistorius' Latin edition of it included in his collection *Ars Cabalistica* from 1587.

The only kabbalist Luzzatto mentions by name is Moses Gerondi, i.e. Naḥmanides (1197–1270), to whom he attributes a 'very sharp mind.'<sup>77</sup> The reason why Luzzatto only refers to Naḥmanides is probably because the Geronese kabbalist was widely acknowledged, especially in Italy<sup>78</sup> and also by Christians, as a halakhic and exegetical authority who restricted the dissemination of Kabbalah either to personal instruction in a small circle of students or by alluding only with caution and rather rarely to kabbalistic lore in his writings. If this was indeed the reason why Luzzatto praised Naḥmanides, then it would be an elegant critique of the rather widespread printing and reception of kabbalistic books, particularly in Italy.<sup>79</sup> Likewise, it must be emphasised that Luzzatto ignored or neglected contemporary phenomena of Kabbalah, such as, e.g., the Italian kabbalists of his time, the prevailing influence of Moses Cordovero's (1522–70) writings on kabbalists in Italy,<sup>80</sup> or, as already mentioned above, the emergence of Lurianic Kabbalah and its fiery adept Israel Saruq, who was active in Venice before 1600.

## Summary

To sum up, the main characteristic of Luzzatto's subversive scepticism in the passage on kabbalists is the perpetual inquiry into various topics in a distancing, scholarly way, striving for the final goal of undermining their authority and tradition as a source of knowledge. However, in contrast to Pyrrhonian scepticism, Luzzatto does not want to evoke equipollence of contradicting statements in order to suspend judgment and reach a state of tranquillity. He does not want to judge whether Kabbalah in general or kabbalistic statements in particular are true or not. He does not look for

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16th-17th Centuries, eds. Giuseppe Veltri and Gianfranco Miletto (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012): 253–278.

76 Cf. Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, "Das Buch Jezira in der christlichen Tradition," in *Das Buch Jezira. In der Übersetzung von Johann Friedrich von Meyer*, eds. Eveline Goodman-Thau and Christoph Schulte (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993): 45–64.

77 Luzzatto, *Discorso*, 84v.

78 Cf. Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 98–99, and see *ibidem*, 220 concerning the 'good' kabbalistic books recommended by Rabbi Yehudah Ḥayyat—who was expelled from Spain and came to Italy in the late fifteenth century—in the introduction to his *Minḥat Yehudah*: 'and the secrets of Naḥmanides should be written upon the table of your heart.'

79 Concerning the debate about the printing of the *Sefer ha-Zohar*, cf. Huss, *The Zohar*, 191–205.

80 Cf. Idel, "Kabbalah in Italy in the Sixteenth Century," 313.

counter-arguments or contradicting statements at all. Instead of this, he uses various sceptical strategies—as defined above—in order to induce doubts, questions, and intellectual uneasiness. The sceptical strategies discussed here, such as relativisation, objectification, historicisation, indictment of heresy, and, finally, delegitimation, are tightly intertwined and could eventually result in crushing the backbones of adherents of the Kabbalah. The subversive character of these sceptical strategies can be seen in the way that the reader is not immediately aware that he is attacked because Luzzatto's presentation of the Kabbalah is written in an erudite and objective way without any kind of direct attack or polemic.

Luzzatto is probably the first Jewish non-kabbalist to present the Kabbalah in this way. The innovative and likewise early modern approach of Luzzatto can be seen in the lack of either explicit polemic against the Kabbalah or sharp attack on it typical of its earlier opponents.<sup>81</sup> This becomes even more obvious if Luzzatto's presentation of Kabbalah is compared with another example written by a contemporary Jew. In 1639, only one year after the publication of the *Discorso*, his above-mentioned Venetian colleague, Leon Modena, wrote the first full-fledged critique of Kabbalah in his *Ari Nohem* ('Roaring Lion'), which is devoted exclusively to this topic.<sup>82</sup> It is very likely that Luzzatto was alluding to his colleague's work-in-progress when he ended his passage on Kabbalah with the following sentence:

At the moment, I have nothing else to say about the kabbalists, since to explain their doctrines properly would require a volume in itself.<sup>83</sup>

Modena collected and quoted all the authors and arguments against the Kabbalah with which he was familiar. While Modena's presentation of the Kabbalah is actually intended as a harsh attack against it, Luzzatto's strategy is completely different.<sup>84</sup> Instead of evaluating the Kabbalah from a personal perspective, he decided to present a rather systematic and historical survey of these pages without any explicit polemical tone. Although the style of his presentation is elegant and subtle, the effect of his

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<sup>81</sup> Cf. Bill Rebigier, "The Early Opponents of the Kabbalah and the Role of Sceptical Argumentations: An Outline," in *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies 2016*, eds. Giuseppe Veltri and Bill Rebigier (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016): 39–57. Concerning the disappearance of the Christian *theologia polemica* since the seventeenth century, cf. Ernestine van der Wall, "Ways of Polemicizing: The Power of Tradition in Christian Polemics," in *Religious Polemics in Context*, eds. Theo L. Hettema and Arie van der Kooij (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2004): 404–409.

<sup>82</sup> See Leon Modena, *Ari Nohem*; cf. Adelman, *Success and Failure*, 791–815; Moshe Idel, "Differing Conceptions of Kabbalah," 142–190; and Dweck, *Scandal of Kabbalah*; concerning Luzzatto's attitude to Kabbalah, see *ibidem*, 20–21.

<sup>83</sup> Luzzatto, *Discorso*, 84v; cf. Adelman, *Success and Failure*, 796. However, Pico della Mirandola wrote something very similar in his *Apologia* concerning a sufficient presentation of Kabbalah: 'specialem librum exigeret;' see *idem*, *Opera omnia*, 181; cf. Campanini, "Talmud, Philosophy, and Kabbalah," 436.

<sup>84</sup> A comparative study of both authors, Leon Modena and Simone Luzzatto, and their critique of Kabbalah will be published soon.

sceptical strategies in undermining a kabbalist's self-confidence is probably even more destructive.

The systematic presentation of several main topics of Kabbalah clearly shows Luzzatto's familiarity with these matters. The sources of his kabbalistic knowledge have not been completely identified thus far, but according to Secret it seems that he mainly relied on texts by Christian kabbalists. The Christian perspective can also be seen in another point. Thus, Luzzatto's presentation of Kabbalah as a kind of philosophy is in line with the view of Italian kabbalists as well as Christian kabbalists. However, the Italian kabbalists were usually quite indifferent towards the theosophical-theurgical branch of the Kabbalah as presented first and foremost by Sephardic kabbalists and their central source—the *Sefer ha-Zohar*—because of its mythical and anthropomorphic orientation. In contrast, the zoharic Kabbalah was only interpreted as a kind of philosophy by the Christian kabbalists—and Luzzatto.

The mode of Luzzatto's presentation evokes an almost scientific distance between the scholar and his topic. The strategy of soberly and systematically describing the basic features of Kabbalah results in disenchanting its fascinating character of supposed secret wisdom. According to Luzzatto, fascination is generally suspect because it plays with emotions, passions, and illusions, but not with reason.<sup>85</sup> The printing of kabbalistic books provided every potential reader with kabbalistic claims even when he or she was otherwise without any access to kabbalistic teachers and circles. In other words, Kabbalah no longer correlates with its etymological meaning as a 'tradition' or 'reception.' Instead of being an esoteric lore taught only to close disciples, in this way Kabbalah could become a rather accessible topic of scholarly study. Thus, Kabbalah is only one set of ideas among many others without any superiority or uniqueness.

Luzzatto's main aim in employing the sceptical strategy of historicising the Kabbalah is twofold: on the one hand, he seeks to avoid a debate about the truth and certainty of kabbalistic claims, and, on the other, he aims at disenchanting the fascination of the Kabbalah as a genuine revealed wisdom by presenting the genealogy of certain kabbalistic ideas and their subsumption into learned Christian and non-Christian (Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Hellenistic etc.) traditions. Thus, against the kabbalistic self-confidence, he denounces Kabbalah as non-Jewish in its very origin. In contrast to the kabbalistic concept of eternal and absolute truths—similar to the Renaissance and Baroque concepts of a *prisca theologia* or a *philosophia perennis*<sup>86</sup>—which are revealed only to dignified adepts, the historicisation of Kabbalah emphasises the dynamics and innovations of claims and ideas throughout history and their

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<sup>85</sup> Cf. Luzzatto, *Socrate*, 276 and 290 (I owe many thanks to Michela Torbidoni who provided me with these references).

<sup>86</sup> Cf., e.g., Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia perennis: Historical Outlines of Western Spirituality in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2004).

entanglement with other intellectual trends.<sup>87</sup> For the Christian audience, Luzzatto emphasises the heretical implications of the kabbalistic tradition with regard to gnosticism. Historicisation of the Kabbalah by means of asserting a dependency on already disqualified historical phenomena such as gnosticism can serve as a subversive strategy of undermining the legitimacy and credibility of kabbalistic authorities and sources. Eventually, this leads to a devastating delegitimation of kabbalistic claims, at least in later generations. However, the reception history of Luzzatto's passage on kabbalists in his *Discorso* is still a scholarly *desideratum*.

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<sup>87</sup> Cf. Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, "Die Historisierung der 'Philosophia Hebraeorum' im frühen 18. Jahrhundert. Eine philosophisch-philologische Demontage," in *Historicization – Historisierung*, ed. Glenn W. Most (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001): 103–128.

