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 **Ask No Questions: Gershom Scholem and The Study of  
Contemporary Jewish Mysticism**

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**Ask No Questions:**

Gershom Scholem and the Study of Contemporary Jewish  
Mysticism

# Boaz Huss

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By way of introduction, let me recount something that happened to a young acquaintance of mine in 1924. The fellow came to Jerusalem, unpretentiously bearing his training in philology and modern history, and sought to get in touch with a circle of latter-day kabbalists who had preserved, for over 200 years, the traditional mystical teachings of the Jews of eastern lands. Eventually, he met a kabbalist who told him: "I am prepared to teach you Kabbalah, but on one condition that I'm not sure you'll be able to fulfill." Some of my readers may not guess that condition: "Ask no questions."<sup>1</sup>

Gershom Scholem used this mythical tale to open his lecture "Kabbalah and Myth" at the Eranos Conference in Ascona, Switzerland, in 1949—the first time he lectured at that conference. In a 1974 interview with Muki Zur, Scholem disclosed that he himself was the young man in the story, a fact that had no doubt been clear to his audience at Eranos. He went on to tell of his reaction to the condition imposed by R. Gershon Vilner, the aged Ashkenazi kabbalist from the "Bet-El" yeshiva, a reaction that was likewise unsurprising: "I told him I wanted to consider it. And then I told him I couldn't do it."<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically enough, by his negative response Scholem effectively accepted the condition proposed by the kabbalist, for he chose not to ask questions about—and not to study—Kabbalah as a living, contemporary phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

In his partial autobiography *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, Scholem mentions several more encounters with kabbalists and mystics, but he presents these meetings anecdotally, never raising the possibility that these mystics might be the subjects of study or research.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Scholem's meeting with contemporary kabbalists left no impression whatsoever on his vast corpus of scholarly work. He labored to examine the most out-of-the-way kabbalistic manuscripts he could find, but he devoted not a single study to the Bet-El kabbalists or any other kabbalistic stream of his own time. The kabbalistic yeshivas that functioned in Jerusalem during Scholem's time ("Bet-El," "Rehovot ha-Nahar," and "Sha'ar ha-Shamayim") and prominent kabbalists, most of them likewise [End Page 141] in Jerusalem during Scholem's period, such as R. Saul ha-Kohen Dwilck, R. Judah Petaiah, R. Solomon Eliashov, and R. Judah Ashlag, go nearly unmentioned in Scholem's studies. That is the case as well with respect to the few mystics of his generation for whom Scholem expressed esteem—Rabbi Kook, R. Meناهם Mendel Schneerson, and R. Ahrele Roth.<sup>5</sup>

Gershom Scholem was trained as a philologist and engaged primarily in historical study, and his inattention to contemporary Kabbalah might be attributed to that historical-philological orientation. But Scholem did not merely forgo ethnographic study of contemporary kabbalists; he paid no scholarly attention even to kabbalistic texts that were written and published in his time. Moreover, Scholem sought to use philological and historical methods to get to the metaphysical and mystical basis of the Kabbalah and to describe comprehensively the Jewish mystical phenomenon. In his recent book on three great twentieth-century students of religion, Steven Wasserstrom distinguished Gershom Scholem, who rejected the possibility of learning from kabbalists themselves, from Mircea Eliade, who learned from and received the approval of Indian gurus, and Henry Corbin, who engaged in profound discussions with Sufi sheikhs.<sup>6</sup> Note worthy as well is the distinction between Scholem and his friend Solomon Dov Goitein; the latter also underwent philological and historical training in Germany but, after immigrating to the Land of Israel (sailing on the same ship as Scholem), turned to ethnographic study of Yemenite Jews.<sup>7</sup>

Gershom Scholem refrained from studying the Jewish mysticism of his own time not because he was a historian and philologist but because he denied its significance and value. In his monumental *Major Trends in...*

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