

# Kabbalah in America

*Ancient Lore in the New World*

*Edited by*

Brian Ogren



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# American Reform Judaism's Increasing Acceptance of Kabbalah: the Contribution of Rabbi Herbert Weiner's Spiritual Search in *g<sup>1/2</sup> Mystics*

*Dana Evan Kaplan*

## Abstract

Early generations of Reform thinkers have been portrayed as divided by many religious and theological issues, but virtually all of them were united in their commitment to a rejection of mysticism in all forms, including and perhaps in particular a rejection of Kabbalah. The trend towards pluralistic approaches to Reform spirituality accelerated in the 1960's, and it was in this context that the popular book *g<sup>1/2</sup> Mystics: The Kabbala Today* was published. Reform Rabbi Herbert Weiner's book was seen as a revolutionary work, exploring previously taboo subjects and legitimizing what had previously been regarded by nearly all within the movement as prohibited. This paper examines and analyzes the contents of the book in this cultural context.

Michael A. Meyer, the historian of the Reform movement, has portrayed the early generations of Reform thinkers as divided by many religious and theological issues, some important and some less so. This includes whether to require a gett for divorce, how much Hebrew to use in services, and even whether to move the Sabbath to Sunday.<sup>1</sup> However, he emphasizes that virtually every Reform thinker was united in their commitment to rationalism and the use of scholarship to study religion and develop a contemporary Judaism that would be spiritually relevant for each current generation.<sup>2</sup> A central assumption in this commitment to rationalism included a rejection of mysticism in all forms, including and perhaps in particular a rejection of Kabbalah.

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1 I would like to thank Professor Brian Ogren of Rice University for inviting me to the conference "Kabbalah in America" for which an early draft of this paper was presented. I would also like to thank Professor Yaakov Ariel of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill for suggesting this topic and Aaron Riedel for his superb editorial work.

2 Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

The early Reform thinkers who rejected Kabbalah were following the approach taken by many modern Jewish philosophers going back at least as far as Baruch Spinoza. In his book *Tractatus Theologico—Politicus*, published posthumously in 1677, Spinoza wrote that any event described in the Bible would have happened “according to natural laws,”<sup>3</sup> just like any other event. If there was anything described in the Tanakh that could be proved to contravene the natural order, “we must believe it to have been foisted into the sacred writings by irreligious hands.”<sup>4</sup> The reason for this stance is that “for whatsoever is contrary to nature is also contrary to reason, and whatsoever is contrary to reason is absurd, and, ipso facto, to be rejected.”<sup>5</sup> In terms of Jewish mystics, and Kabbalists in particular, he spoke bluntly and harshly. “I have read and known certain Kabbalistic triflers, whose insanity provokes my unceasing astonishment.”<sup>6</sup> Following this line of thinking, Moses Mendelssohn, the father of the Jewish enlightenment, affirmed reason as the sole path to truth.

Mendelssohn wrote to one of his students in 1771, “We have no principles which are contrary to or beyond reason ... The principles and fundamentals of religion are based upon pillars of reason and are based in every respect on analysis and speculation without any contradiction or controversy whatever.”<sup>7</sup>

Mendelssohn’s disciple, David Freeland, took this commitment to rationalism to what was seen at the time as its logical conclusion, rejecting Jewish mysticism. Freeland was particularly concerned that Jewish liturgy had been developing in non-rational directions, with medieval liturgists having created new compositions that had mystical themes not compatible with rationalistic thought. “From century to century these prayers became more and more numerous and worse and worse, the conceptions more mystical, muddled with the principles of Kabbalah which were in direct contradiction to the genuine spirit of Judaism.”<sup>8</sup> This argument—that the essence of Judaism was rationalism and that mysticism was contrary to that essence—became the consensus view of most modern Jewish philosophers. Since early Reform Judaism was based on applying rationalistic thought to Judaism, virtually all 19th century central European Reform thinkers accepted this view. As Byron L. Sherwin writes, “This attempt to equate Judaism with rationality, to expunge from

3 Benedict de Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus: A Critical Inquiry Into the History, Purpose, and Authenticity of the Hebrew Scriptures* (1883), Chapter VI, Treatise 88, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/phi/spinoza/treat/tptio.htm>.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., Chapter IX, Treatise 66.

7 Byron L. Sherwin, *Kabbalah: An Introduction to Jewish Mysticism* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 3.

8 Ibid.

Jewish theology, ethics, and liturgy all traces of Jewish mysticism, became characteristic of various liberal forms of modern Judaism, especially early Reform Judaism.”<sup>9</sup>

Heinrich Graetz, author of the eleven volume *History of the Jews*, which was published between 1853 and 1875, expressed sentiments that were typical for Jewish German rationalists, referring to Kabbalah as “a malignant growth in the body of Judaism.”<sup>10</sup> Because mysticism was irrational, Graetz argued, it was a corrosive element in Jewish history that caused immense damage to the Jewish people. Mysticism in all of its forms continued to be viewed as a threat primarily because of the ignorance of the Jewish masses. As Graetz put it, “The empty Kabbala could not fail to arouse enthusiasm in empty heads.”<sup>11</sup> The *Zohar*, the central work of medieval Jewish mysticism, was a prime example, “occasionally offering a feint of a suggestion of an idea, which in a thrice evaporates in feverish fancies or childish silliness.”<sup>12</sup> This text “blunted the sense for the simple and the true, and created a visionary world, in which the souls of those who zealously occupied themselves with it were lulled into a sort of half-sleep, and lost the faculty of distinguishing between right and wrong.”<sup>13</sup> While recent research has changed our views on how Graetz evaluated mysticism and how much attention he devoted to studying about Kabbalah, his highly-inflammatory comments dominated how his positions were understood.<sup>14</sup>

Because of this strong commitment to rationalism and the concurrent sense that mysticism was antithetical to reason, there are very few 19th century or early 20th century Reform rabbis who methodologically studied, spoke, or wrote about the topic. One of the few Reform rabbis who did do so was Abraham Jakob Adler of Worms. Meyer has argued that Adler utilized Kabbalah as a response to Hegelian thinking. “Judaism was not, as Hegel argued, to be tossed aside as excessive sublimity, a superseded stage in the dialectical progress of the Absolute Spirit; the Kabbalah was testimony to a Jewish understanding of the imminence of God’s spirit within humanity.”<sup>15</sup> Adler criticized

9 Ibid.

10 Daniel Chanan Matt (Ed.), *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1983), 13.

11 Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, Vol. 4 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1897), 482.

12 Sherwin, *Kabbalah*, 3–4.

13 Graetz, *History of the Jews*, Vol. 4, 23.

14 George Y. Kohler, “Heinrich Graetz and the Kabbalah,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts*, Vol. 40 (2017), 107–130.

15 Michael A. Meyer, “Religious Reform and Political Revolution in Mid-nineteenth Century Germany: The Case of Abraham Jakob Adler,” Christian Wiese and Martina Urban (Eds.), *German-Jewish Thought Between Religion and Politics, Festschrift in Honor of Paul Mendes-Flohr on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 77.



medieval Jewish philosophers for overemphasizing Aristotle because they had “no conception of the secrets of the mystical moments in religion,” and therefore their approach remained superficial and lacking in true religious piety. Kabbalah was more religiously satisfying, Adler explained, because it focused on the spirit encompassing the whole human being and could be a key component in unlocking the mysteries of creation. In contrast to virtually all of his contemporaries, Adler argued that Kabbalah was “a creative and formative principle”<sup>16</sup> of Judaism. He wrote, “Like a fresh spring breeze it wafts over the Jewish fields of ice, loosens frozen masses, pushes up the neficent seeds, transforms the arid steppe into a garden of God in which everyone touched by its breeze feels blissful and knows himself to have been initiated into the deepest secrets of infinity.”<sup>17</sup>

Most Reform thinkers accepted the premise that religion should be based entirely on reason and that mysticism of any type was to be avoided. This became the guiding ethos of American Reform Judaism.<sup>18</sup> There was not felt to be any need to attack mystical approaches to Judaism in the way that Heinrich Graetz had done. Rather, it was just felt best to avoid mentioning it at all. There were occasional slurs but they tended to be *ad hominem* rather than part of a sustained theological critique. For example, Abraham Zevi Idelsohn, Professor of Jewish Music at Hebrew Union College (HUC) in the 1920’s and 1930’s, takes one such shot. In his classic work *Jewish Liturgy and Its Development*, he has a chapter on the influence of Kabbalah on liturgy in which he begins with a dismissive evaluation of Jewish mysticism and the motivations of those who involve themselves with it. “[I]n its very essence, mysticism is a negation of life, an escape from its realities and hardships.”<sup>19</sup> Attitudes towards religion changed dramatically as the world changed over the course of the 20th century. By the 1930’s, there was increasing dissatisfaction in the American Reform movement with the theological principles that had been laid out in the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 and the practical religious policies that emerged from those principles. There was a splintering into several camps, each claiming to have a new approach that could enlighten Reform Jews and bring religious wisdom into the world. Reform theologians began entertaining broader and more inclu-

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16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Dana Evan Kaplan, *The New Reform Judaism: Challenges and Reflections* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2013). See also Dana Evan Kaplan, *American Reform Judaism: An Introduction* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

19 Abraham Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy and Its Development* (New York: Henry Holt, 1932), 47. Thanks to Geoffrey Dennis for bringing this reference to my attention.

sive conceptions of what might be spiritually meaningful in a Reform Jewish context. Despite this dramatic broadening of the contours of Reform Jewish religious expression, there were still few efforts to engage deeply with mystical texts or traditions. The trend towards pluralistic approaches to Reform spirituality accelerated in the 1960's as it became increasingly fashionable to tear down existing ideological structures and propose radical alternatives. Emotional resonance became more important than intellectual consistency.

It is in this context that the popular book *9½ Mystics: The Kabbala Today* was published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston in 1969.<sup>20</sup> The author was Herbert Weiner, a Reform rabbi leading Temple Israel (today called Temple Sharey Tefilo-Israel) in South Orange, New Jersey. Weiner was perhaps best known for his writings in *Commentary* magazine and had published widely in other non-scholarly but serious Jewish journals for many years. Melila Hellner-Eshed, professor of Jewish Mysticism in the Department of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, explained, "Herb realized that Jewish mysticism was such a fascinating thing that no one was looking at. I think he had a deep personal intuitive take on the things that interested him. He liked to mix it in." She grew up knowing Weiner and felt certain that Weiner did not experience any cognitive dissonance from being a Reform rabbi interested in mysticism. "I think that what was wonderful was the fact that it was a subject that was totally uninteresting to the Reform movement at that time didn't bother him at all. Because I don't think he was a very conformist kind of person. He wasn't doing 'party line Reform Judaism' Judaism."<sup>21</sup>

Weiner differed from the majority of Reform rabbis at the time in that he was a devoted Zionist who not only supported the State of Israel but had seriously thought about settling in the country. Immediately after ordination, he lived in Jerusalem for two years before taking his pulpit in New Jersey. Hellner-Eshed suggested that it was Weiner's experiences during the period 1946–1948—in Mandatory Palestine and then the nation of Israel—right after his ordination from the Jewish Institute of Religion that got him so interested in mysticism. "He was here [in Israel], he was interested in things that were happening. He understood that nobody was doing the work [of writing about mysticism for a popular audience]. He was studying kabbalah with [Gershon] Scholem. He

20 Herbert Weiner, *9½ Mystics: The Kabbala Today* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969). A revised and expanded edition was published by Collier Books in 1992 with a forward by Elie Wiesel and an afterword by Adin Steinsaltz. All citations are from the original edition unless specifically stated.

21 Melila Hellner-Eshed, interview with the author, October 3, 2018.

wanted to see what's happening, really, on the ground, and that's what got him going."<sup>22</sup>

Weiner's interest in mysticism stemmed from his overwhelming need to be able to actually experience religious encounters. He found Judaism most meaningful when he could engage with it physically, even if that encounter was not necessarily pleasing to the eye or even physically comfortable. This led him to explore more ritually observant, if somewhat quirky, traditional forms of the Jewish religion. As Hellner-Eshed explained, "I think it's because of a keen curiosity about forms of Judaism that are more practice-oriented, more mythical, more imaginative, more mystical." This was, "as opposed to [solely] thinking of Judaism as ethics, as *tikkun olam*."<sup>23</sup> As Meyer has explained, in classical Reform Judaism "education was oriented to Jewish ethics far more than to learning Jewish customs and ceremonies."<sup>24</sup> Weiner became a rabbi at a time that the Reform movement was still dominated by classical Reform, which stressed ethical universalism and downplayed and sometimes even denigrated most forms of ritual. Meyer wrote that "classical Reform clearly intended to minimize the role of symbol and ritual."<sup>25</sup> While the classical Reform temple experience could be majestic and awe-inspiring, Weiner never developed an appreciation for its aesthetics, seeing the services as sterile and vapid. Neither did he sympathize with the methodology of choosing selected practices that embodied Jewish ethical concepts. As Rabbi Samuel Stahl explained, "At one time, we dismissed many customs and rituals as superstitious. Every ritual practice had to demonstrate some sublime moral lesson, or else we would reject it."<sup>26</sup> Weiner felt a strong visceral aversion to this approach, instead feeling a strong attraction to ritual as a concrete way of expressing his desire to experience the spiritual. He expressed a distaste for people who preferred to observe religion at a distance rather than to participate. In Weiner's 'Coda: "And So?" Twenty Years Later' in the New and Expanded Edition of *g<sup>1/2</sup> Mystics*, he mentions "my own Sabbaths in Meah She'arim synagogues watching tourists observing the exotic religious Jews at prayer."<sup>27</sup> Weiner saw these visitors as willfully removing themselves from the spiritual experience, choosing to remain outside looking in. He cites an even earlier memory, one of himself

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22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 264.

25 Ibid., 280.

26 Samuel Stahl, email to the author, October 12, 2018.

27 Herbert Weiner, *g<sup>1/2</sup> Mystics: The Kabbala Today*, New and Expanded Edition (New York: Collier Books, 1992), 364.

as “a young Rabbinic student working in a Reform synagogue whose museum displayed a pair of phylacteries in a case, with a card saying ‘Do not touch!’”<sup>28</sup>

One of the attractions of the State of Israel for Weiner was the tremendous opportunities it offered to experience novel approaches to spirituality. In contrast to classical Reform, where decorum was highly valued and ritual was formalized and compartmentalized, Israel gave him an open field to explore religion and, of great importance to Weiner, to experience it personally. In 1961, Weiner published a popular book, *The Wild Goats of Ein Gedi: A Journal of Religious Encounters in the Holy Land*.<sup>29</sup> In this first-person account, Weiner chronicled his travels to Israel to seek out the meaning of the Jewish return. He had hoped to find Israelis obsessed with the religious significance of the recreation of a Jewish homeland after 2,000 years. Unfortunately, as he carried on this quest for religious substance, he came to the realization that those concerned with spirituality and holiness could best be compared to the wild goats of Ein Gedi, a tiny and threatened remnant barely tolerated by the farmers of the nearby kibbutz. The secular majority in the State of Israel had no interest in cultivating seemingly anachronistic spiritual traditions and instead was concerned primarily with technological innovation and economic development. As Ernest Stock wrote in a book review in *Commentary* magazine, “There is a strong hint in these pages that in this age religion may be better nourished by the thought of a mythical Zion than by a real one; and that the Zion of the heart shrinks away before the authenticity of the mound of earth and stone.”<sup>30</sup>

Weiner tries to soften the spiritual rejection that he observes and focuses on a handful of spiritual seekers—not just Jews, but Christians and Muslims as well—who he feels are wildly out of sync with the mentality of contemporary Israeli society. Not all of these “wild goats” are mystics, but they are all engaged in some sort of spiritual journey. Weiner’s ongoing interest in exploring new perspectives on spirituality was seen by many rabbinical students and younger rabbis as revolutionary. As a Reform rabbi who had attended Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in Cincinnati in the late 1950’s, David L. Kline eagerly read *The Wild Goats of Ein Gedi* because of its “freshness and depth and flavor.”<sup>31</sup> While it was overshadowed by the later *g<sup>1/2</sup> Mystics*, Kline noted that Weiner’s earlier offering resonated with him because “the

28 Ibid.

29 Herbert Weiner, *The Wild Goats of Ein Gedi: A Journal of Religious Encounters in the Holy Land* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1961).

30 Ernest Stock, “Religious Life in the Land of Israel,” *Commentary*, February 1, 1962, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-wild-goats-of-ein-gedi-by-herbert-weiner>.

31 David L. Kline, email to the author, October 15, 2018.

stories fit in with the free thinking and free feeling ways that began to characterize my *derech* [approach] ever since HUC[-JIR] days.”<sup>32</sup>

If *The Wild Goats of Ein Gedi* established Weiner’s reputation as an early chronicler of spiritual seekers, *9½ Mystics* made him known as the primary treasure hunter looking for the life secrets of the Jewish mystical traditions. In a brief Preface to *9½ Mystics* written in May 1969, Weiner explains that the book describes a series of encounters with those who “claim intimate acquaintance”<sup>33</sup> with the mystical tradition. Weiner writes that he challenges these individuals and groups “to relate their hidden wisdom to problems of our own day.”<sup>34</sup> With the exception of a few scholars, all of those encountered would be considered Orthodox and none had any affiliation with the Reform movement. Indeed, their spiritual concerns were far from the subject matters that had filled the curriculum at HUC, and HUC-JIR as well after the merger in 1950.

Many rabbinic students felt that the book asked the questions that they had been trying to formulate but lacked the awareness to conceptualize. As they had come of age through their high school and college years, many of these students had developed a serious interest in religion that led them to rabbinical school. They were hoping that HUC-JIR would provide them with the framework from which they could explore ideas about religiosity and various approaches to experiencing spiritual renewal. Unfortunately, many found the curriculum to be antiquated and rigid, with professors insisting on rational analysis of ancient texts that did not seem to have any contemporary spiritual significance. Rabbi Bill Blank, who met Weiner in 1971 when he was in his third year of rabbinical school at the then-optional HUC-JIR program in Israel, describes the spiritual void that he and other Reform rabbinical students with a similar spiritual orientation experienced. “No one knew from Mussar. Zalman Schachter was still in Winnipeg. Aryeh Kaplan hadn’t yet appeared. Arthur Green was still a kid ... Gershom Scholem[’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*<sup>35</sup>] was assigned in Judaism 101 classes but ... [none of the professors] at HUC[-JIR] took it any further; and he [Scholem] was all academic, not providing personal living examples of how you might proceed.”<sup>36</sup>

It was not only HUC-JIR that lacked creative approaches to Jewish spirituality. Blank explains that, “Back in the late 60’s and early 70’s, American Judaism

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32 Ibid.

33 Weiner, *9½ Mystics*, ix.

34 Ibid.

35 Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946).

36 Bill Blank, email to the author, October 11, 2018.

had pretty much lost its soul. Back then we talked about survival of Israel or Soviet Jewry or civil rights or maybe even Tikkun Olam.”<sup>37</sup> There was no inner religious substance. “Maybe we were still bruised hard from the Holocaust, but spiritual growth wasn’t even on the agenda.”<sup>38</sup> Those with spiritual inclinations had no choice but to explore other religious traditions. “If you wanted to know about spiritual growth or experiencing God you really had to look to the Far East because Jews then just didn’t talk about it. We didn’t have role models of Jews who meditated or did yoga in a Jewish context.”<sup>39</sup> That is one reason why Weiner’s book became so influential. “9½ Mystics was a first. At HUC[-JIR] in those days if you had a spiritual predilection, you read it. Many of us did. A few even went out looking for such individuals on our own.”<sup>40</sup>

The book laid out a completely new spiritual road map for most Reform Jews who read it—for lay people as well as rabbis. Much of this was due to Weiner’s having studied at the Jewish Institute of Religion (JIR) in New York City. While today the JIR is seen as part of the four-campus HUC-JIR, it was originally an independent educational institution established by Stephen Samuel Wise in 1922. Wise felt that there was a need for a pro-Zionist, Reform-oriented rabbinical school in New York City that could compete with the Jewish Theological Seminary, the rabbinical school of the Conservative movement in Morningside Heights. After serving Congregation Beth Israel in Portland, Oregon, Wise had returned to New York City in 1907 where he established the Free Synagogue which emphasized the freedom of the rabbi to speak his conscience without having to have his words approved by the congregational board of directors. Wise established the Jewish Institute of Religion in part with the hope that its graduates would go on to set up congregations similar to his Free Synagogue. The Institute was animated by the spirit of free inquiry. This was not entirely the case at HUC in Cincinnati, which expected its students to conform to the narrow confines of classical Reform Judaism. JIR also emphasized a much greater freedom of religious feeling and Jewish practice. Whereas HUC expected its students to take classical Reform pulpits, Wise encouraged his students to consider a wide range of congregations with various theological approaches and religious perspectives. Although Weiner accepted a position with a mainstream Reform congregation after graduation, his religious interests and spiritual orientations were much more cosmopolitan than many of his Reform rabbinical colleagues, especially those who had studied in Cincinnati.

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37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.



Weiner had been attracted to study at the Jewish Institute of Religion because of a talk given by JIR dean Henry Slonimsky that he had heard as an undergraduate at the University of Massachusetts. According to Weiner's son-in-law Rabbi Tom Guthertz, "Slonimsky's passion and intellect motivated him to become involved in Jewish student life, deepened his own observance, and led to his enrollment in the rabbinical program."<sup>41</sup> Weiner was inspired by Slonimsky's argument that rationalism could be marshalled for the cause of religion. Slonimsky himself was influenced by his teacher, the German-Jewish rationalist Hermann Cohen.<sup>42</sup> As Steven S. Schwarzschild put it, "On the face of it, his [Slonimsky's] concern with human needs and emotions would seem to separate him from his great teacher H. Cohen, the rationalist par excellence, but on closer consideration the latter's decisive and pervasive influence becomes clear."<sup>43</sup>

In addition to emphasizing rationalism, Weiner also found that Slonimsky encouraged his non-rational side. As the *New York Times* quoted Slonimsky in his obituary, "Teaching is not imparting information." He declared, "Teaching is a spiritual thing, an emotional thing: it is a process of kindling human souls."<sup>44</sup> Most of all, Weiner was attracted to Slonimsky's openness. "Dr. Slonimsky once defined the institute as 'a free school; free from dogmas, free from orthodoxy, free from reform, where teachers are free to teach what they think best and where students are not bound by any obligation to conform.'"<sup>45</sup> As Weiner's successor, Rabbi Bruce Block concluded, "Even on his ventures into other Jewish byways he was always anchored to that rational system of thought he had learned from Slonimsky, even when the emotional and spiritual appeal of these byways was great."<sup>46</sup>

And indeed, after his graduation from JIR in the spring of 1946, Weiner began to feel a tremendous emotional pull towards mystical experience. He does not provide any specific idea or event which stimulated him to begin his mystical quest, but he does try to explain this interest at the very beginning of

41 Obituary, American Jewish Archives (2013). Authorship confirmed by Tom Guthertz, interview with the author, September 24, 2018.

42 Henry Slonimsky, "Hermann Cohen," *Essays* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press and Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967), 97–112. Reprinted from *Historia Judaica*, Vol. IV (1942).

43 Steven S. Schwarzschild, "Slonimsky, Henry," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Second Edition, Vol. 18 (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2007), 680, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/slonimsky-henry>.

44 "Dr. Henry Slonimsky, 86, Dead; Educator Also Active in Religion," *New York Times*, November 14, 1970, <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/11/14/archives/dr-henry-slonimsky-86-dead-educator-also-active-in-religion.html>.

45 Ibid.

46 Bruce Block, email to the author, August 19, 2018.

*g*½ *Mystics*. “Even now, the motivation for the search recorded in these pages appears so pragmatic, almost crass. I seem to have been looking for a kind of supertreasure whose value would not be affected by economic, social, political, nor, indeed, by any external circumstances.”<sup>47</sup> Perhaps encouraged by the openness of his rabbinic training, Weiner was looking for a spiritual approach to life that he could feel transcended all of the worries and stress of contemporary life. This fit into the thinking of the times. Many religious thinkers were trying to find an approach that would calm nervous souls in the early post-wwii period.

Reform rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman had written a bestseller in 1946 called *Peace of Mind* in which he tried to provide psychologically-based personal answers about the universal human dilemmas that every American had to face. Weiner appeared to be searching for his own answers to some of the same questions. Liebman wrote that, “We have to grow up to learn that God ... is not a magician who changes everything in the twinkling of an eye ... Maturity in the religious realm means surrendering our childish view of God and of understanding that He, too, in building a predictable world, governed by law, voluntarily surrenders something of His sovereignty.”<sup>48</sup> Weiner certainly knew about Liebman’s book, though he does not reference it directly, and was well aware of the tremendous interest throughout American society for religious perspectives on how to live life with equanimity and passion. Yet he would not have found the answers provided in *Peace of Mind*, nor any of the other major published religious responses of the time, to have been even remotely emotionally fulfilling.

Weiner spent much of his time between 1946 and 1948 exploring mystical approaches to spirituality in Israel but he had not yet published anything, partly because he was just a brand new ordained rabbi and partly because the zeitgeist was so focused on religious perspectives that emphasized scientific progress, especially psychological insights. During that formative period, he had the opportunity to study with a range of teachers and to take courses at the Hebrew University and elsewhere as well. But once he returned to the United States and settled into his congregational duties, he inquired at the JIR to find out who could direct him to an authentic mystic who would be willing to teach him from the Zohar, the most important Kabbalistic commentary on the Torah. “I had explained what I was after, not only a scholar but a genuine Kabbalist who could explain the secrets of Jewish mysticism to an outsider.”<sup>49</sup>

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47 Weiner, *g*½ *Mystics*, 3.

48 Joshua Loth Liebman, *Peace of Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), 161.

49 Weiner, *g*½ *Mystics*, 21.



John Tepfer, his former professor of Talmud, referred him to a well-respected, if highly eccentric, scholar named ‘Shin Tzaddik’ Setzer. Tepfer told Weiner that although he did not know Setzer personally, he had heard that Setzer had some fascinating insights into Kabbalah, particularly in relation to the concept of infinity. While Tepfer does not appear to suggest that there was anything inappropriate about a Reform rabbi studying with such a teacher, he does warn Weiner that mystics generally are reluctant to teach outsiders. These mystics feel that it is necessary “to surround the mystic orchard with thorny fences.”<sup>50</sup> After some cajoling, Weiner was able to convince Setzer to teach him one evening a week in his office on East Broadway in Lower Manhattan. They began a weekly study partnership that continued for approximately two years. The account of their studies became one of Weiner’s first articles on his mystical search, published in *Commentary* magazine in November 1952.<sup>51</sup>

While Weiner continued to lead Temple Israel, his small congregation in West Orange, New Jersey, he maintained a strong connection with Israel, returning as frequently as possible. In 1962, HUC-JIR president Nelson Glueck asked Weiner to help establish a new campus in Jerusalem, so Weiner took a six month leave of absence from his congregation in order to become the first Administrator of the Biblical and Archaeological School in Jerusalem. He immediately began attending a study group that Rabbi David ha-Cohen—called “the Nazir” because of his vows to refrain from cutting his hair, drinking wine, or speaking on the Sabbath—was teaching on Abraham Isaac Kook’s *The Lights of Holiness*.<sup>52</sup> Weiner had approached ha-Cohen many years earlier because the Nazir was the editor of most of the works of Abraham Isaac Kook—also called Rav Kook—one of Weiner’s most important influences. Indeed, in the author’s photo on the back dust jacket of the original hardcover edition of *9½ Mystics*, Weiner poses with a framed photo of Rav Kook on his bookcase, clearly displayed over his left shoulder. Weiner had opened *9½ Mystics* with an explanation by Rav Kook as to why and when mystical illumination would come to assume central importance to all of humanity.

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50 Ibid.

51 Herbert Weiner, “A Mystic Philosopher on East Broadway: The Life and Studies of S.H. Setzer,” *Commentary*, November 1952, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/a-mystic-philosopher-on-east-broadwaythe-life-and-studies-of-s-h-setzer>. An updated version of the article became the chapter, “A Mystic on East Broadway” in *9½ Mystics*.

52 Herbert Weiner, “A Mission to Israel: A diary from Herbert Weiner’s stay in Israel,” *Commentary*, August 1963, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/a-mission-to-israel>. Entry comes from a journal dated July 1962.

According to Weiner, Rav Kook wrote that as long as the world moved along in a routine manner, most people could find sufficient substance in their lives by contemplating “surface events, theories, and movements of society.”<sup>53</sup> However, when “life encounters fiery forces of evil and chaos” then what has sustained people “from the surface aspects of existence” will no longer suffice.<sup>54</sup> In such a traumatic environment, people will feel “a burning thirst for that inner substance and vision which transcends the obvious surfaces of existence.”<sup>55</sup> From these inner sources people “will seek the waters of joy which can quicken the dry outer skeleton of existence.”<sup>56</sup> Weiner saw Rav Kook as a mystic “looking for a supertreasure,” just like himself.<sup>57</sup>

Weiner notes that Rav Kook’s public religious position was that “God’s in his heaven; all’s right with the world”<sup>58</sup> implies that Jews who are fulfilling the commandments of the holy Torah in the Land of Israel are fulfilling the will of God. And yet, Weiner suggests, Rav Kook “seemed to have known the argument that the kabbalists called ‘the other side,’ even in his own life, always talking and writing about blissful joy but struggling often with a ‘sadness that burdens the soul.’”<sup>59</sup> It appears that Weiner believed that he had found a kindred spirit, a person similarly obsessed with the search for spirituality while fluctuating between two different realities. Weiner’s love for the writings of Rav Kook was not only his initial motivation for wanting to delve deeply into the Kabbalah but also for building and maintaining friendships with those who likewise treasured the spiritual teachings of Rav Kook.

Although Weiner left his temporary administrative position at the conclusion of his six-month sabbatical to resume his pulpit duties in New Jersey, he returned frequently to Jerusalem. Some of his visits to Israel were brief but he was also able to come back for several extended periods during which he taught at HUC-JIR in Jerusalem. Gerry Walter, one of several HUC-JIR Cincinnati students who were spending their third year in Jerusalem, remembers taking Weiner’s Kabbalah course. “We carefully read his book and made field trips in Jerusalem to meet central figures from his book.” Walter makes a reference to the hasidim of the late Rabbi Aharon Roth—fondly known as Reb Arele—which is described in *9½ Mystics* in the chapter titled ‘Exercises in Modern Hasidism.’ “Our trip to Reb Arele’s Chasidim was one of the strangest, joining

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53 Weiner, *9½ Mystics*, 4.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Weiner, *9½ Mystics*, 265.

59 Ibid.

in with the Chasidim, dancing to the music of their band, and watching as the disciples fought over being gifted with scraps of food from the rebbe's plate. Rabbi Weiner was our guide.<sup>60</sup> Walter remembers Weiner "as a very kind and compassionate man, always accessible to his students. My interest in Kabbalah and in reading Zohar definitely came from his influence."<sup>61</sup>

In one of Weiner's summer visits to Jerusalem, he bumped into Gedaliah Fler, a young American who had become a Bratzlaver Hasid. They had previously met when Weiner had visited a group of Bratzlavers in Brooklyn where Fler had verbally attacked him quite aggressively for having "a dilettantish attitude toward religion."<sup>62</sup> Now in Israel, Fler told Weiner that "he would be glad" to act as Weiner's guide "for a more strenuous excursion into the orchard of Hasidic mysticism."<sup>63</sup> In the course of their discussion, Fler asked a question that resonated with Weiner: how could one "know the truth" of something that one has never personally experienced? More specifically, how could a person either accept or reject the divine character of the commandments without experiencing these commandments firsthand? Sensing his opportunity, Weiner then told Fler that he had long wanted to try immersing in a *mikveh*, a ritual bath. Fler offered to take him after *hisbod'dus*, a period of contemplation, which would require Weiner to wake up at 1:30 in the morning and walk to an open field that was part of a no-man's land near the Jordanian border. Weiner became concerned because he knew that in mysticism, everything depends on the preparation and there were numerous lower spiritual rungs—such as wisdom, diligence, and purity—that first needed to be mastered before *hisbod'dus*. "To skip levels was a dangerous matter which might bring on psychic and even physical damage."<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, Weiner decided to go with Fler, writing "I had no choice but to accept the challenge."<sup>65</sup>

After their contemplation, they arrived at the mikveh. Weiner reminds his readers that "all of my knowledge about the nature and importance of the ritual bath in Jewish life was secondhand."<sup>66</sup> He summarizes, "I knew that mikveh meant a gathering of waters, and these waters had to come from a primary source, like rain, a river, a spring, but not from a stored reservoir. When indoors, the volume of the ritual bath was precisely legislated by Jewish

60 Gerry Walter, email to the author, September 23, 2018.

61 Ibid.

62 Weiner, *9½ Mystics*, 216.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., 217.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid., 226.

Law—approximately two hundred gallons.”<sup>67</sup> He also knew some of the basic Orthodox traditions as they related to men and women and their practices of purity, as well as the purpose of mikveh for the ceremony of conversion. Weiner expresses puzzlement. “Like most modern Jews, I didn’t really know what inner intent a man was supposed to carry into the mikveh.”<sup>68</sup> He was told by Fleer before they immersed, “There is no ordained blessing, all you have to do is want to be purified.”<sup>69</sup>

There were two large square baths with stone steps descending into the water. He found the water of one mikveh extremely hot, actually scalding, and decided to enter the other one, which was extremely cold. Weiner walked into the cold water and immersed himself two or three times. “Whatever inner intent I tried to have in mind was forgotten at the taste of the water, which I was sure was absolutely filthy.”<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, he later reflected back on his experience as a mystically uplifting one. The year following the publication of his book, he called on the Reform movement to “consider again the ... spiritual and psychological implications of the mikveh” because “the religious soul in our day ‘craves’ more than ideas or verbal expressions. It seeks body as well as mind experiences.”<sup>71</sup> Weiner added that the fact that there were so many new psychological sensitivity groups that were promoting body experiences in water media suggested that the mikveh was a practice that could be used effectively within Reform Judaism.<sup>72</sup>

Evaluating Weiner’s thought is difficult in part because of his independent nature and refusal to adhere to normative expectations. He enjoyed straddling categories and avoiding set characterizations. The title of his book itself is seen by many as pointing to this sense of having multiple identities or alternatively of balancing between different loyalties and perspectives. Rabbi Mark Mahler, who served as a student rabbi in Weiner’s congregation, hypothesizes what the true meaning of being the “½” mystic in the title might have meant. “Remember that the ½ mystic in ‘g½ Mystics’ was Herb himself. His self-definition ‘½’ likely applied to many things in Herb’s life.” Just as Weiner “was ½ mystic, he was a Reform rabbi who was also ‘really Orthodox’, i.e. ½ and ½.

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67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., 227.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid., 228.

71 “Reform Rabbi Suggests Return To Mikveh,” *Dayton Jewish Chronicle*, December 31, 1970, 3. From ‘Herbert Weiner Nearprint Biographies,’ American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.

72 Ibid.

He was also ½ congregational rabbi and ½ author, ½ married and ½ divorced, ½ ‘here and present’ and ½ in ‘other worlds’ or ‘higher realms.’<sup>73</sup>

*9½ Mystics* became ubiquitous on the shelves of those searching for mystical entrées into Judaism and was frequently consulted by those looking to understand contemporary Judaism in light of the tremendous social upheavals of the 1960’s. Virtually every Reform rabbi bought a copy, and many used it in their temple adult education programs. Many Reform rabbis who taught part-time at colleges or universities used it as a required text because they felt it had significant religious content but at the same time had a narrative that would make it appealing to student readers. Rabbi Peter S. Knobel wrote that “*9½ Mystics* was one of the books I assigned when I taught Jewish Mysticism at Connecticut College in the early 1970’s.”<sup>74</sup>

But for many, it was far more influential than just a useful textbook. As Rabbi Bill Blank described it, “Some of us are hardwired to wish to experience something paranormal, transpersonal, non-rational. I did not realize it at the time, but that inclination within me was, to a large part, responsible for my becoming a rabbi. (Ultimately, it was what led me to leave the active rabbinate, as well.) *9½ Mystics* gave me a clue that there were similar others with that same predilection.”<sup>75</sup> Wayne Dosick, rabbi of the Elijah Minyan in San Diego, met Weiner at a Jerusalem restaurant in the summer of 2007 and was able to directly convey his appreciation for Weiner’s writing of *9½ Mystics*. “It was the first thing that started us on the spiritual quest, the spiritual journey ... It was the beginning for me—the beginning of my real search for God, my opening to the World of Spirit.”<sup>76</sup> Rabbi Mark Sameth read the book in his late teens. “Weiner’s book was the first work by which I was made alert to the Kabbalistic notion of divine masculine and feminine energy, a topic which would captivate my interest and send me off on my own decades-long investigation.”<sup>77</sup>

Many people who had not read the book had heard Weiner speak at a broad cross-section of venues. His busy speaking schedule was well known. At Weiner’s 1982 retirement ceremony, Rabbi Joachim Prinz joked that he was honoring Weiner “less for his presence than for his absences from South Orange.”<sup>78</sup> Weiner was a charismatic speaker who was able to enthrall his audiences, even those that were not terribly interested in his subject matter. When he spoke to those who did have a high level of interest, his presence was frequently

73 Mark Mahler, email to the author, September 25, 2018.

74 Peter S. Knobel, email to the author, September 23, 2018.

75 Bill Blank, email to the author, October 11, 2018.

76 Wayne Dosick, email to the author, October 10, 2018.

77 Mark Sameth, email to the author, September 23, 2018.

78 Weiner, *9½ Mystics*, New and Expanded Edition, 348.

vividly recalled decades later. In the 1980's, Weiner stopped in London—presumably on his way to Israel or coming back from there—to be a visiting lecturer at the Leo Baeck College. Either Rabbi Hugo Gryn or Rabbi Albert Friedlander invited him to teach a few classes on his specialty. One of the students, now Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild, remembers him as a lecturer “who was deeply involved with and nurtured by his subject, and that was very powerful for me.” She bought *g 1/2 Mystics* at that time and found that the book “opened my eyes to a new window into being Jewish.”<sup>79</sup>

Jeffrey Salkin, now a Reform rabbi, remembers that when Weiner spoke at the Jewish Community Center in Plainview, Long Island, in 1971, “my parents took me to hear him.”<sup>80</sup> When he heard of Weiner's death, Salkin wrote to his fellow Reform rabbis, “It was long before I moved to his former town of South Orange that I knew of Rabbi Herbert Weiner, who recently died at the age of 93. He was a tremendous influence on me at a very young age.” In the summer of 1970 or 1971 at Camp Eisner in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, “People were passing around a copy of his book *Nine and A Half Mystics*. It was the first popular treatment of Jewish Mysticism—the missing literary link between Scholem and Larry Kushner.”<sup>81</sup> Lawrence Kushner, the Reform rabbi who became known for popularized mysticism beginning with his 1977 book *Honey from the Rock: Visions of Jewish Mystical Renewal*,<sup>82</sup> wrote that “in those days, the only way to reach a potential audience for mysticism and matters kabbalistic was Weiner's autobiographical narrative—so accessible, so prescient. He intuited the doorway.”<sup>83</sup>

Weiner can be credited with creating the pathway that allowed Reform Jews and other non-Orthodox American Jews to engage in the mystical search without feeling that they had to fully embrace Orthodoxy. Just as he envisioned his original spiritual mentor Rav Kook, Weiner mediated between two different realities. In Weiner's case, he was a Reform rabbi with a strong grounding in rationalism. Inspired by his teachers at JIR, and particularly Henry Slonimsky, Weiner was a devoted member of the Reform rabbinate sufficiently trusted that Nelson Glueck appointed him as the first administrator of the new HUC-JIR campus in Jerusalem. At the same time, Weiner was an aspiring mystic who believed that Judaism could and should be much more meaningful. It just

79 Sylvia Rothschild, email to the author, October 9, 2018.

80 Jeffrey Salkin, email to the author, August 15, 2018.

81 Jeff Salkin, group email to various Reform rabbis, from ‘Herbert Weiner Near Print File,’ American Jewish Archives, 11.

82 Lawrence Kushner, *Honey and the Rock: Visions of Jewish Mystical Renewal* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977).

83 Lawrence Kushner, email to the author, August 20, 2018.

needed to be presented in a manner that brought out the spiritual nature of those attending Reform temples rather than forcing them to conform to rigid bourgeois social expectations that stifled rather than promoted spirituality. He believed that the path to discovering mystical approaches that could bring religion to life was by searching for insightful, living mystical teachers who could help one discover a type of “supertreasure” that he speaks about at the beginning of *9½ Mystics*. These mystical teachers could be found mostly among the Orthodox, and the mystical communities that formed the framework for true mystical insight were mostly among the Hasidim; so that is where Weiner situated himself. Nevertheless, Weiner remained a devoted if idiosyncratic Reform Jew, a Reform Jew determined to bring the precious insights of the Jewish mystical tradition into mainstream American Jewish culture.

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