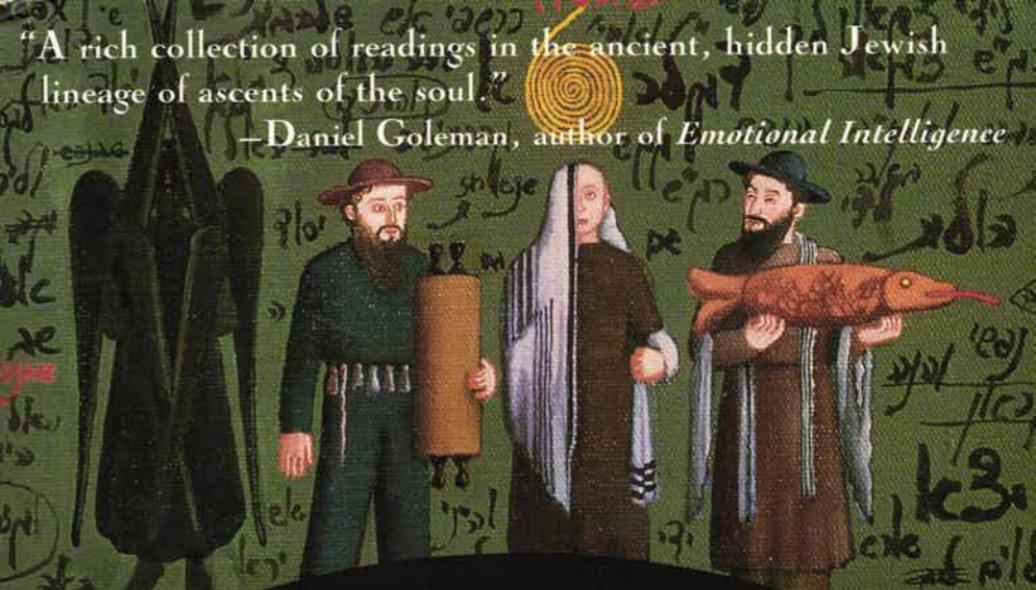


"A rich collection of readings in the ancient, hidden Jewish lineage of ascents of the soul."

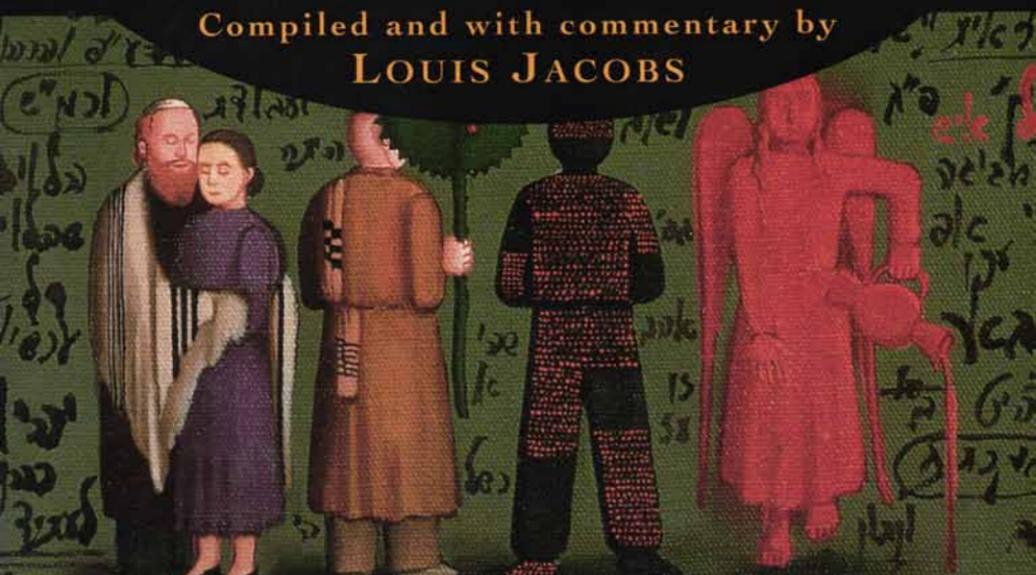
—Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*



THE SCHOCKEN BOOK OF
**JEWISH
MYSTICAL TESTIMONIES**

A unique and inspiring collection of accounts by people who have encountered God, from Biblical times to the present

Compiled and with commentary by
LOUIS JACOBS



Foreword by **Karen Armstrong**



THE SCHOCKEN BOOK OF
JEWISH MYSTICAL TESTIMONIES



THE SCHOCKEN BOOK OF

Jewish



Mystical



Testimonies



Compiled and with commentary by

LOUIS JACOBS

Foreword by Karen Armstrong

SCHOCKEN BOOKS

NEW YORK

Foreword copyright © 1996 by Karen Armstrong

Copyright © 1976 by Keter Publishing House, Jerusalem Ltd.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Schocken Books Inc., New York. Distributed by Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York. Originally published in Israel by Keter Publishing House, Jerusalem Ltd. in 1976. First published by Schocken Books in 1977 as *Jewish Mystical Testimonies*.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following for permission to reprint previously published material:

The Clarendon Press: Excerpts from *Joseph Karo, Lawyer and Mystic* by R.J.Z. Werblowsky. Copyright © 1962 by Oxford University Press. Reprinted by permission of The Clarendon Press, Oxford, England. • *Derek Orlans Collections*: Chapter head vignettes from *Or ha-Hammah* by Abraham Azulai, Prezmysl 1896; *Brit Menuhah* by Abraham Granada, Warsaw 1880; *Pardes Rimmonim* by Moses Cordovero, Munkacz 1806(?); *Ez Haim* by Hayyim Vital, Jerusalem, 1810. Reprinted by permission of Derek Orlans Collection, Jerusalem. • *Schocken Books Inc.*: Excerpts from *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* by Gershom G. Scholem. Copyright © 1941 by Schocken Publishing House, copyright 1946, 1954 by Schocken Books Inc. Reprinted by permission of Schocken Books Inc. • *The University of Chicago Press*: Excerpts from *Guide of the Perplexed* by S. Pines. Copyright © by The University of Chicago Press. Reprinted by permission of The University of Chicago Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jewish mystical testimonies.

The Schocken book of Jewish mystical testimonies / compiled and with commentary by Louis Jacobs ; [new] foreword by Karen Armstrong.

p. cm.

Previously published: Jewish mystical testimonies. New York : Schocken Books, 1977.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8052-1091-1

1. Mysticism—Judaism—History—Sources. I. Jacobs, Louis.

II. Title.

BM723.J48 1997

296.7'12—dc20

96-24189

CIP

Random House Web Address: <http://www.randomhouse.com/>

Book design by Maura Fadden Rosenthal

Printed in the United States of America

First Schocken Books edition published in 1977

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

Contents



Foreword by Karen Armstrong	xi
Introduction	3
1. Ezekiel's Vision of the Heavenly Throne	21
2. The Four Who Entered the King's Orchard	29
3. The Riders of the Chariot and Those Who Entered the Heavenly Halls	35
4. Maimonides on Being with God	45
5. The Mystical Piety of Rabbi Eleazar of Worms	61
6. The Prophetic Mysticism of Abraham Abulafia	71

7. Responsa from Heaven	92
8. The Zohar on the High Priest's Ecstasy	100
9. The Visions and Mystical Meditations of Abraham of Granada	109
10. The Communications of the Heavenly Mentor to Rabbi Joseph Karo	122
11. The Visions of Rabbi Ḥayyim Vital	152
12. The <i>Maggid</i> of Rabbi Moses Ḥayyim Luzzatto	167
13. The Mystical Epistle of the Ba'al Shem Tov	182
14. The Mystical Meditations of Shalom Sharabi and the Kabbalists of Bet El	192
15. The Mystical Experiences of the Gaon of Vilna	208
16. The Prayer Meditations of Alexander Susskind of Grodno	216
17. Two Epistles in Praise of the Ḥasidic <i>Zaddikim</i>	240
18. The Mystical Accounts of Kalonymus Kalman Epstein of Cracow	265
19. The <i>Tract on Ecstasy</i> by Rabbi Dov Baer of Lubavich	274

20. The Secret Diary of Rabbi Isaac Eizik of Komarno	292
21. Aaron Roth's Essay, "Agitation of the Soul"	299
Bibliography	317
Abbreviations	322
Glossary	323
Acknowledgments	328

For my granddaughter
ZIVA

Foreword

by Karen Armstrong



Anyone leading a religious life confronts the task of creating a link between mundane experience and the divine which transcends it utterly. This has been a major problem and a central preoccupation for members of all the great faiths. Whenever they have contemplated the tragic, beautiful world in which they live, men and women have discovered a mysterious dimension that they find difficult to describe or conceptualize adequately but which gives significant meaning and substance to their lives. This kind of transcendence has been experienced in many ways: it has filled people with dread, awe, joy, sweetness, and light. As Rudolf Otto explained in his classic book *The Idea of the Holy*, it is felt to be wholly "other" and yet exerts an irresistible attraction. The religious quest has, in all cultures, been an attempt to give this sacred mystery a local habitation and a name while finding ways in which human beings can apprehend it. One of these ways has been the mystical journey.

Precisely because the divine is ineffable and other, it has always, historians of religion tell us, been experienced in something other than itself. We have created symbols that express—however imperfectly—our sense of connection with God. Earthly realities themselves become numinous, redolent of a Reality which, paradoxically, lies essentially beyond them. A symbol can never be the end of the quest. If it is, it becomes an idol. All it can do is introduce us to the divine. Thus God has been experienced in a place, a temple, a sacred text, a law code, or a human being.

Most people are satisfied with the common symbols and observances of their tradition. But in all cultures there are men and women who have the spiritual stamina and talent to discover the divine presence in the depths of their own being. Using techniques that are remarkably similar all the world over, these individuals make an interior journey that is also an ascent to a more exalted dimension of existence. These are the people we know as the mystics and they have surfaced in all cultures and religions, even in the three monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which are primarily more active than contemplative, more preoccupied, one might think, with the duty of implementing God's will in the external world than with cultivating exotic states of consciousness. But the mystical vocation is irresistible, even if it is not for everybody. The Talmudic tale of the four sages who attempt to enter the orchard (*pardes*) shows this clearly. For those who are not so gifted, mysticism is dangerous to body and spirit. But those who are able to embark on this heroic journey will do so, with or without the blessing of the establishment.

There has often been conflict between the mystics and their more conventional co-religionists. In the Roman Catholic Church, mystics of the stature of the sixteenth-century Spanish Carmelite Teresa of Avila were frequently in trouble with the Inquisition. At a time when the Church

was stressing the importance of its authority, the Inquisitors looked askance at men and women who bypassed the hierarchical channels that were supposed to take them to God. In rather the same way, the Sufis, who were often free-thinkers, could fall foul of the Muslim clergy. There was tension, too, between Jewish mystics and the rabbinical schools. None of the mystics concerned thought themselves to be heterodox: they were simply exploring the more interior aspects of the Bible and the Koran, reproducing, as it were, the immediacy of the prophetic or Christological experience that lay at the heart of the faith. Mystics would appropriate the symbols of their own tradition, mine their treasures, and prove their vitality by finding a whole new world of significance in the images of Scripture. Their journeys were shaped by the unique symbolism of their own faith and this inevitably affected their course. This would give Jewish mysticism, for example, its special character. Throne mystics and Kabbalists would find their path to the divine through imagery that was different from that encountered by a Christian or a Sufi. And yet they would often have experiences or wrestle with difficulties that are endemic to the mystical way in all traditions. Mystics will very often have more in common with their counterparts in other faiths than with their nonmystical co-religionists.

This fact makes it particularly rewarding and important to look at the mystical testimonies of different traditions, and is one of the reasons why this anthology is so valuable. As Louis Jacobs has pointed out, Jewish mystics are more reticent about their experiences than, for example, Christian or Muslim mystics, so it is helpful to have these writings, which *do* attempt to chart the Jewish ascent to God, made so readily accessible. Besides being an inspiration for Jewish readers, this volume has much to teach people who are versed in the mysticism of other traditions. Where Christian mystics find inspiration in the person of Christ, and

Muslims take as their starting point the ascension of the prophet Muhammad to heaven from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, Jewish mystics have started their quest by contemplating the Throne Vision of Ezekiel, which itself looks back—as Jacobs points out—to the theophany of Sinai. All these great religious symbols speak eloquently of a dramatic eruption of the divine into our world or of a place where the divine and the human meet. Mystics in all three faiths have attempted to experience these far-off events in their own lives. As Christians try to unite themselves to the person of Jesus, in whom God was mysteriously enshrined, the Jewish mystic “becomes a chariot” like the one which Ezekiel saw bearing the divine presence (p. 21). In much the same way, Sufis hoped to re-create within themselves that perfect *islām*, or “surrender,” which made it possible for Muhammad to hear God’s word and to pass beyond the limits of human perception through the Seven Heavens to the presence of God. The stories of Muhammad’s ascension to the Divine Throne are uncannily similar to the accounts we find in the *Heikhalot*-literature.

For Jews, the Temple was the place where God had dwelt with human beings, though they realized that there was an incongruity in the very idea of the divine living in an earthly shrine. “Will God really live with men on earth?” Solomon mused incredulously during the Dedication. “Why, the heavens and their own heavens cannot contain you. How much less this house that I have built!” (I Kings 8:26–27). Solomon’s cry expresses the central paradox of the religious experience in all faiths: When one considers the utter holiness of the sacred, any symbol that professes to contain it is bound to be inadequate, whether that symbol is a human being like Jesus or a man-made building such as a temple. The miracle is that God can be experienced and revealed at all. Yet the imagination—surely the chief religious faculty—is able to look beyond the mundane image to the

Reality itself. As this anthology shows so movingly, long after the Temple had been destroyed it still continued to shape Jewish spirituality. We see this in the Throne mystics' gradual progress through the halls of the Heavenly Palace (so reminiscent of the graded holiness of the Temple Courts) and in the Zohar's depiction of the ecstasy of the High Priest. Indeed, the very notion of the ascent (*aliyah*) to God attempted by the Jewish mystics looked back to the *aliyah* of the pilgrims and psalmists when they climbed up the Temple Mount and entered the place where God was. The mystics were aware that any *aliyah* was, as it were, an "ascent inwards." It was, as the Ba'al Shem Tov explained, a return to the Source of being, a state symbolized in the Bible in the imagery of Solomon's Temple and the Garden of Eden.

As Gershom Scholem has pointed out, mystics do not relegate religious events to the past. Certainly they believe in the historicity of Moses, Jesus, or Muhammad. But they also see the inner reality of salvation history as contemporaneous and timeless. It can be appropriated and experienced anew, centuries after the original happening. The Temple might be destroyed, but the kabbalist could still feel what the High Priest experienced when he entered the dark, inaccessible void of the *Devir*. Even though most Jews regarded the era of prophecy as over, Maimonides and Abraham Abulafia believed that it was possible to attain the rank of prophethood through the mystical disciplines. Sufis, who believe that Muhammad was the Seal of the Prophets, also believe that they can experience his prophetic receptivity to the Divine Word, just as Christians, who regard Christ as God's Last Word to humankind, believe that Christhood is the true destiny of all men and women. By means of their spiritual exercises, therefore, mystics try to become themselves at one with the bridge that originally spanned the gulf between the divine and this mortal world.

Alongside the symbol of the Temple, some Jews (known as the Hasidim) cultivated a devotion to leaders, or *zaddikim*, who, in some sense, enshrined the divine mystery and acted as a conduit for divine blessing. They seemed so imbued with heavenly power that their own persons became for their disciples a link with God. Many critics of the Hasidim objected that the quasi-divine status of the *zaddikim* was unacceptable. Muslims, who find the Christian doctrine of the incarnation as difficult to accept as Jews do, developed rather similar beliefs, especially in the Shiah. The prophet Muhammad was held to be the Perfect Man and a link with heaven: the Shiite Imams, his descendants, were also thought by their contemporaries to enshrine the divine truth. The Oriental religions also see men and women as avatars of the ultimate mystery. This tendency seems to represent a common yearning to see God as somehow expressed in human form. Clearly it is a devotion that has its dangers. Christians sometimes give the impression that Jesus is God *tout court*, forgetting that he said that he was the Way, not the Terminus of the religious quest. Thus they may well feel that they are in familiar territory when they read of these Jewish mystics' daring attempts to experience anew the biblical doctrine that humanity was created in the image of God.

There are many other comparisons to be made with the various religious traditions throughout this book. Jacobs rightly notes that, unlike Christians or Sufis, Jewish mystics do not claim to have become one with God. Their sense of the divine otherness is too strong for that. But all mysticism does seek to attain a sense of wholeness—the completion of which is felt to have been the proper state of men and women. This longing for a harmony that was believed to be the original condition of humanity is expressed in the near-universal myth of the lost paradise. We recall that when the four sages attempted to enter God's presence, they went

into the *pardes*, the orchard or pleasure garden that reminds us of the biblical Eden. The search for the primal harmony is also seen in these pages in the emphasis on the process of "unification," whereby human souls are united to God—a union which reunites the whole spectrum of reality to its Source. This is an aspiration similar to the imperative of *tawhid* ("making one") which is so central to the Muslim vocation.

Closely linked to this idea is the common concern with charity, loving-kindness, and the felt need to overcome that egotism which can destroy human harmony. All the great world faiths insist that the sole test of any spirituality is that it lead to practical compassion. As the Buddha explained: After achieving Enlightenment, a man must come down from the mountaintop, return to the marketplace, and there practice compassion for all beings. Some of the mystics in this volume do not live up to this belief and I have to confess that I have problems with them. I may not be reading him correctly, but Rabbi Joseph Karo (or, rather, his *maggid*) sometimes sounds as though he is more concerned with affirming and exalting Karo's ego than with helping him transcend it. Similarly, I find it difficult to feel wholly enthusiastic about Rabbi Hayyim Vital's somewhat complacent account of the stream of visitors who beat a path to his door to tell him how wonderful he was. All the more appealing, then, is the emphasis on healing, harmony, peace, and love in the Bet-El community, the Ba'al Shem Tov's manifest humility, and the selflessness of the Gaon of Vilna that we also encounter in these pages.

Yet, despite many similarities, the various religious and mystical traditions are not identical. Each has its particular genius, its special emphases. Formed as I was in the Christian tradition, I find both the reticence and the stress on the utter holiness or otherness of God to be liberating and challenging. There have been important Christian mystics who

have shared this sense of transcendence, of course. One need only mention Denys the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, or the anonymous English author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. But more common—at least in Western Christianity—is an emphasis on the symbol of Jesus that can make God seem all too human and accessible. From an early age, Christians are taught to talk freely and spontaneously to him and, helpful as this can be, it can also diminish the sense of silence, awe, and mystery which is an important part of the numinous experience. It is too easy to make Jesus or God into a reflection of our own selves, making them fit our needs and neuroses. This has often been the case with women mystics. The seventeenth-century contemplative Margaret Mary Alacoque, for example, made Jesus into a rather puling, self-pitying creature—very different from the bracing figure in the Gospels. Others took the bridal imagery, so often used by mystics in all faiths, too literally and transformed Jesus into a lover in a most unhealthy manner. Some women fell into so-called ecstatic states that have more in common with hysteria than with genuine mysticism. Catherine of Siena, a fourteenth-century Dominican saint, once fell into the fire when she succumbed to an ecstatic trance while cooking the dinner. Such “freaking out” has nothing in common with the ecstatic states described by the great spiritual masters. Mysticism, practiced correctly, should make one more alert and aware. Indeed, one great test of a valid mystical experience is that it be healthily integrated with normal, waking life.

It has not, of course, escaped my notice that there are no women mystics in this volume. One of the peculiarities of Jewish mysticism is that it has long been closed to women. This is not simply because women were debarred from the study of Torah and Talmud; Christian women were also denied the opportunity to study. It seems that from the outset kabbalistic symbolism associated woman not with tender-

ness but with the demonic realm—this, in spite of the fact that the image of the *Shekhinah*, the divine presence on earth, suggested that there was a female element in God. Jewish women today, at least in Reform Judaism, are now permitted to engage in the study of the Torah and are admitted to the Rabbinate. Like Christian and Muslim women, they are gradually throwing off the aura of inferiority imposed upon them over the centuries. Christian women were also associated with the demonic; they were regarded as more easily prone to sin than men and blamed for the fall of humanity. Had not Eve been the first to pluck the forbidden fruit? The negative view of womankind in the Kabbalah meant that Jewish mysticism remained exclusively male. Perhaps Jewish women will soon persuade their menfolk that their demonization in Kabbalah was an unhealthy accretion and that they too are as well equipped as men for the mystical quest. The moving mythology of the *Shekhinah*, which we encounter in these pages, provides us with a much more positive image of the female and would be an excellent place to begin this process of reclamation. Jewish women should not be deterred from the mystical path by the failings of the Christian women mystics I have mentioned. As the great Teresa of Avila was well aware, women got into difficulties not because of an essential flaw in the female psyche but because they were deprived of education and often lacked adequate spiritual direction. There is no reason for any woman to labor under such difficulties today.

Mysticism is not a “do-it-yourself” discipline. It can be successfully undertaken only with expert guidance. This was well understood by the Jewish mystics. Kabbalah is an esoteric tradition, a closed book to the uninitiated. Nor is mysticism suitable for everybody. Some people—male as well as female—are just not capable of this type of spirituality. The apparent accessibility of Christ sometimes encour-

ages people to think that anybody can embark on the mystical journey and that any Christian worthy of the name is capable of experiencing divine rapture. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy. For years as a child and, later, as a young nun, I felt a constant failure because I never came within shouting distance of the mystical heights achieved with such apparent lack of effort by the saints. I was convinced that there must be something wrong with me. It would have been a great relief if some kind person had read me the story of the four sages who entered the *pardes*, explained that I was not mystical material, and should try to find a form of spirituality more suited to my temperament.

The fearful and unimaginable vision of Ezekiel is a valuable reminder that the reality we call God is never easily attainable or fitted snugly into our human frames of reference. So, too, are the dizzy distances imagined by the Riders of the Chariot. Yet Jewish mystics never forgot that the transcendent God of monotheism is, in some sense, a God who speaks and who has, as it were, come to meet us. The wonder, awe, and insight experienced by those who have—however tenuously—sensed this Presence are memorably expressed in this book.

JULY 1996