

On Kabbalah and “Wasted Seed” in Seventeenth-Century Poland: A Chapter in the History of the Male Jewish Body*

by Avinoam J. Stillman

Abstract

This essay begins by conceptualizing a “kabbalistic masculinity” characterized by pious discipline and a presumption to cosmic influence. This ideal was embodied in the kabbalistic discourse about the sin of “wasted seed,” or improper emission of semen. Kabbalists developed theories and practices intended to prevent the wasting of seed, atone for its spiritual consequences, and neutralize its demonic effects. I then trace these themes in texts from seventeenth-century Poland, beginning with Meir Poppers’ ethical text Or Tzadiqim, which wove theoretical Lurianic kabbalah into everyday routines and embodied practices. Finally, I turn to Poppers’ relative and student Joseph b. Solomon Calahora, the darshan (preacher) of Poznań. Calahora composed and published the first Hebrew book devoted exclusively to the causes, consequences, and cures for wasted seed: Yesod Yosef (Frankfurt an der Oder, 1679). These texts and their contexts show how the kabbalistic discourse on wasted seed played out, both individually and communally, in the bodies of early modern Jewish men in East-Central Europe.

Introduction

The Lurianic Lifestyle

Sex, Study, and Salvation

Preaching Piety

Conclusion

* The research for this article was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), in the framework of the Emmy Noether project “Patterns of Knowledge Circulation: The Transmission and Reception of Jewish Esotericism in Manuscripts and Print in Early Modern East-Central Europe” (project no. 401023278).

Introduction

Jewish men have historically held disproportionate power within their communities. However, the persistence of patriarchy does not mean that all Jewish conceptions of masculinity are the same. Different historical moments have seen different ideals and realities of Jewish gendered selfhood.¹ “Being a man” meant many things in rabbinic literature.² It meant other things entirely for medieval Jewish philosophers.³ So too, the multiple forms of Jewish esoteric literature known as “kabbalah” developed specific visions of masculinity.⁴ Most (Jewish male) kabbalists imagined a gendered cosmos, what might be called a “cosmic patriarchy.”⁵ Most of the various divine forms emanated by the Infinite God were considered masculine, although some were seen as feminine. Similarly, the kabbalists addressed their thinking to Jewish men, notwithstanding occasional entreaties to Jewish women.⁶

¹ See the sources collected in Noam Sienna, ed., *A Rainbow Thread: An Anthology of Queer Jewish Texts from the First Century to 1969* (Philadelphia: Print-O-Craft, 2019).

² Ishay Rosen-Zvi, “The Rise and Fall of Rabbinic Masculinity,” *Jewish Studies Internet Journal* 12 (2013): 1-22.

³ Susan E. Shapiro, “A Matter of Discipline: Reading for Gender in Jewish Philosophy” in *Judaism Since Gender*, eds. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 158-173; Julia Schwartzmann, “Gender Concepts of Medieval Jewish Thinkers and The Book of Proverbs,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 7 (2000): 183-202; Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, ed., *Women and Gender in Jewish Philosophy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004).

⁴ Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, “Gender in Jewish Mysticism,” in *Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah: New Insights and Scholarship*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn (New York - London: New York University Press, 2011), 191-230. Daniel Abrams, “‘A Light of Her Own’: Minor Kabbalistic Traditions on the Ontology of the Divine Feminine,” *Kabbalah* 15 (2006): 7-29.

⁵ This term is inspired by the phrase “cosmic polity” coined by David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins, *On Kings* (Chicago: HAU Books, 2017), 2-4, 23-64.

⁶ In characterizing the mainstream of kabbalistic discourse as Judeo- and andro-centric, I tend towards the critical approach of Elliot R. Wolfson. Of his many studies, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Woman—The Feminine As Other in Theosophic Kabbalah: Some Philosophical Observations on the Divine Androgyne,” in *The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity*, eds. Laurence J. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994), 166-204; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 46-141; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 80-128. In contrast, Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Moshe Idel, *The Privileged Divine Feminine in Kabbalah* (Berlin - Boston: De Gruyter, 2019).

Within this gendered cosmology, Jewish men had a hefty metaphysical influence, linking heaven and earth. Pure thoughts and ritual actions could positively impact the Godhead, draw down material benefit, and bring the redemption, while misdeeds could have catastrophic effects.⁷ This “practical” emphasis on the effects of Jewish male action is particularly characteristic of the kabbalistic literature associated with Isaac Luria of Safed (d. 1572).⁸ Lurianic kabbalah, which rose to prominence in the late sixteenth-century and gradually gained unparalleled authority, charged righteous Jewish men with bringing about the redemption of the cosmos through *tiqun*, the restitution of the divine sparks which fell during the process of creation. To this end, Lurianic kabbalists developed a complex textual corpus and a body of knowledge which ranges across cosmology and theosophy, ritual and liturgy, psychology and eschatology, hagiography, and hermeneutics. Focusing on post-Lurianic texts from Poland, this essay explores what I call “kabbalistic masculinity”—that is, the condition of being a Jewish man within the cosmic patriarchy, and hence of having great power and great responsibility.

The best way to understand the discipline and the potency of kabbalistic masculinity is to consider masturbation. In *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*, Thomas W. Laqueur traces a genealogy of modern European discourse about autoeroticism. Laqueur argues that masturbation—a sexual behavior characterized by imagination, secrecy, and excess—first became a “problem” in the eighteenth century. In pre-modern Europe, “solitary sex” was almost irrelevant; sexual morality was perceived as “a deeply social phenomenon. What mattered was with whom one had sex, how, and when.”⁹ Only after modern European philosophers became fixated on the relations between individual interiority and social order did masturbation become a topic of anxieties and treatises.

⁷ Arthur Green, “The *Zaddiqas Axis Mundi* in Later Judaism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45 (1977): 327-347; Jonathan Garb, *Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005) [Hebrew].

⁸ Assaf Tamari, “Medicalizing Magic and Ethics: Rereading Lurianic Practice,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 112 (2022): 434-467.

⁹ Thomas W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 248-249. For a brief mention of kabbalah, see *Ibid.*, 112.

An analogous story is told by scholars of Jewish culture, who identify an increased preoccupation—even obsession—with “wasted seed,” or improper emissions of sexual fluids, in early modernity.¹⁰ Where Laqueur’s explanation of this shift points to the Enlightenment, historians of the Jews invoke kabbalah, that most erotic of esoteric traditions.¹¹ To be sure, rabbinic literature tends to condemn autoeroticism.¹² However, a new conception of wasted seed emerged in medieval kabbalah, especially in the *Zohar*, and was elaborated by the kabbalists of sixteenth-century Safed and their disciples across the diaspora.¹³ In particular, Lurianic kabbalah applied human anatomy, physiological development, and sexual and familial relationships to divine and earthly beings.¹⁴ The trope of wasted seed looms large in Lurianic discussions of the initial divine desire for creation, the cataclysmic “breaking of the vessels,” and biblical figures like Adam and Joseph.¹⁵ Many kabbalistic texts describe this embodied human experience, the psycho-physical mechanism of seminal emission, and the penances for inevitable mistakes.

For the kabbalists, wasting seed was not just a moral failing or a cause of impurity; rather, it was at once destructive and generative.¹⁶ In a fusion of scientific discourse, subjective experience, and mythic imagery, kabbalistic texts claim that

¹⁰ The most comprehensive treatment remains Shilo Pachter, “*Shmirat ha-Brit*” (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 2006) [Hebrew]. I use “wasted seed” to refer to emissions of sexual fluids deemed improper or forbidden by kabbalistic and rabbinic standards. This term encompasses nearly synonymous Hebrew terms such as *hashatah zer’a* (destruction of seed), *zer’a le-batalah* (seed for naught), and *qeri* (involuntary, usually nocturnal, seminal emission).

¹¹ David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 109-118; Gershon David Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century: A Genealogy of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 121-137; Roni Weinstein, *Kabbalah and Jewish Modernity* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2014), 109-111.

¹² Pachter, “*Shmirat ha-Brit*,” 36-118; Michael L. Satlow, “‘Wasted Seed,’ The History of a Rabbinic Idea,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 65 (1994): 137-175.

¹³ Patrick B. Koch, “‘Gathering the Dispersed of Israel’: The Evolution of a Kabbalistic Prayer Addendum for *Tiqqun Qeri*,” *Harvard Theological Review* 114 (2021): 241-264.

¹⁴ Assaf Tamari, *God as Patient: The Medical Discourse of Lurianic Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press - Van Leer Institute Press, 2023) [Hebrew].

¹⁵ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 182-184, 310-311; Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and his Kabbalistic Fellowship*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 137-138; Shaul Magid, *From Metaphysics to Midrash: Myth, History, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Lurianic Kabbala* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 57-59.

¹⁶ Pachter, “*Shmirat ha-Brit*,” 7.

wasting seed negatively impacts the emanated cosmos, harms one’s own body and soul, and creates demonic offspring. In kabbalistic physiology, the brain is the seat of the divine soul, connected to higher realms. “Seed,” meaning both male and female sexual fluids, originates in the brain and draws its reproductive potential from divinity before it descends, via the spinal cord, to the genitalia. Any seed that is emitted outside of the body of a permitted sexual partner—or in kabbalistic terms, any “light” that has no proper “vessel”—is considered “wasted.” Wasted seed sullies the divine mind from which it stems and the human body through which it flows. Moreover, masturbation is never “solitary sex,” as it involves sexual union with seductive demons who, in turn, give birth to destructive offspring. After kabbalah, the emission of seed was not merely a moral failing or a function of the human body. Rather, it was a process which began in the emanated divine planes, was felt within the human body, and which culminated in the physical world full of demons.

The kabbalistic concern with wasted seed was always a concern with bodies. First and foremost, wasted seed implicated the male kabbalist’s own body—and his circumcised phallus.¹⁷ The phrase *tzadiq yesod ‘olam*, or “the righteous man has an everlasting foundation” (Proverbs 10:25) became the nexus of a web of associations linking the *tzadiq*, or righteous Jewish man, with the ninth *sefirah* of *yesod*, “foundation,” itself the phallus of the anthropomorphic divine form.¹⁸ The term *shmirat ha-brit* or “guarding the covenant,” which could mean fidelity to God or Torah, came to connote guarding the covenant of circumcision from sexual impropriety. As Moses de Leon put it, “[A] man is not called righteous [*tzadiq*] unless he guards the covenant [of circumcision].”¹⁹ The control of one organ, one biological function, and one bodily fluid was now the defining trait of the ideal Jewish male body. Given the cosmic influence of each Jewish man, the question of wasted seed was inextricable from the question of human purpose on earth, from the grand drama of exile and redemption.

¹⁷ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 135; Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 87-88.

¹⁸ Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 88-139.

¹⁹ Quoted in Pachter, “*Shmirat ha-Brit*,” 130. Cf. Morris M. Faierstein, “*Sod ha-Neshamah*, Basel, 1609: A Yiddish Paraphrase of Moses de Leon’s *Nefesh ha-Hakhmah*, Basel, 1608,” *Kabbalah* 52 (2022): 137.

This esoteric symbolism was embodied in restrictive and penitential forms of kabbalistic asceticism. Although the kabbalists did not promote total celibacy, the restriction of sensual pleasures was an integral part of their ethos.²⁰ By shifting their focus from halakhic rules to the metaphysics of seed, Lurianic kabbalists forbade even legally permitted sexual acts. Any wasted seed, even during permissible relations, was condemned. Of course, seed was still wasted, and kabbalistic literature became preoccupied with penitential disciplines—in particular, intermittent fasting—for this sin.²¹ A passage from Isaiah Horowitz's influential *Shnei Luhot ha-Brit* exemplifies the uniqueness of wasted seed as a full-bodied error. Horowitz paraphrases the popular *Reishit Hokhmah* by the Safedian moralist Elijah De Vidas, which asserts that each sin must be atoned for through afflicting the part of the body which committed it. In the case of wasted seed, however, one must atone for and through the entire body. This is because seed is “the root and source of a man’s entire stature, and man comes into existence from seed.”²² The procreative power of seed implicates the entire human body, from the brain through the spinal cord to the phallus; therefore, if one sins with seed, one must repent with the whole body.

The kabbalistic concern over wasted seed also involved non-human bodies; namely, demons. Learned Jews—unlike dogmatic Christian divines—routinely assumed that demons had bodies and could have sexual intercourse with human beings.²³ Jewish folklore and law recognized the possibility of human-demon “marriages”; the sixteenth-century rabbi Meir of Lublin, for example, appears

²⁰ Lawrence Fine, “Purifying the Body in the Name of the Soul: The Problem of the Body in Sixteenth-Century Kabbalah,” in *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (Buffalo: SUNY Press, 1992), 117-142; Elliot R. Wolfson, “Asceticism, Mysticism, and Messianism: A Reappraisal of Schechter’s Portrait of Sixteenth-Century Safed,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 106 (2016): 165-177.

²¹ Patrick B. Koch, *Human Self-Perfection: A Re-Assessment of Kabbalistic Musar-Literature of Sixteenth Century Safed* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2015), 152-157; Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 171-180.

²² Isaiah Horowitz, *Shnei Luhot ha-Brit, Sha’ar ha-Otiyot, Hilkhot Biah* (Amsterdam, 1648), f.98r.

²³ Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Dyan Elliot, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999). Cf. Jeffrey H. Chajes, “Sexorcism: Sexual Dimensions of Dybbuk Possession and Exorcism,” *El Prezente: Journal for Sephardic Studies* 14-15 (2020-2021): 17-47.

unfazed by a woman who had a demonic lover.²⁴ But the kabbalists were not so sanguine; demons were the embodiment of the *sitra ahra*, the evil “Other Side.”²⁵ Wasting seed entailed two demonic threats; the act of coupling with succubi such as Lilith, and the consequent birth of “destructive children” who followed the sinner to the grave.²⁶ The generative aspect of wasting seed was particularly dire; as Luria’s prime student Hayyim Vital wrote, “of all the sins of the Torah, even the most egregious, there is none which truly births destructive demons like the wasteful emission of seed.”²⁷ Lurianic texts prescribed apotropaic rituals to protect against demons and to slay their offspring; indeed, such rituals were often cultivated alongside magical practices.²⁸ Kabbalistic masculinity involved exercising power and even violence against demonic bodies.

Wasting seed and sexual demons were also a problem for female bodies. Since antiquity, Jewish sources have attested a “dual seed theory” in which both male and female bodies contribute “seed” to the embryo.²⁹ This theory was dominant in much kabbalistic literature as well.³⁰ It followed, therefore, that Jewish women could be tempted by Samael to waste their seed, for “just as these destructive demons emerge from a man without a woman, so too the woman creates these destructive demons without a man.”³¹ Male Jewish preachers did address Jewish

²⁴ Joshua Trachtenburg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004 [1939]), 51-52.

²⁵ Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 56-87. Cf. Nathaniel Berman, *Divine and Demonic in the Poetic Mythology of the Zohar: The “Other Side” of Kabbalah* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018).

²⁶ Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 154-156.

²⁷ Hayyim Vital, *Sha‘ar ha-Tefilah* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Shalom, 2020), 311. Cf. Meir Poppers, *Torah Or* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Shalom, 2021), 135, who conflates the ritual impurity associated with semen and the demons generated by the wasting of seed.

²⁸ Agata Paluch, “Intentionality and Kabbalistic Practices in Early Modern East-Central Europe,” *Aries* 19 (2019): 83-111.

²⁹ Laura Quick, “Bitenosh’s Orgasm, Galen’s Two Seeds and Conception Theory in the Hebrew Bible,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 28, no. 1 (2021): 38-63.

³⁰ Sharon Faye Koren, “Kabbalistic Physiology: Isaac the Blind, Nahmanides, and Moses de Leon on Menstruation,” *AJS Review* 28 (2004): 317-339; Merav Carmeli, “Upper and Lower Waters: A New Appraisal of Sexual Fluids and Conception in the Zohar in Light of Medieval Medical Texts,” *Daat* 84 (2017): 83-138 [Hebrew]; Tamari, *God as Patient*, 185-213. Cf. the defense of “dual seed theory” against the Aristotelian “philosophers” in Poppers, *Torah Or*, 134.

³¹ Hayyim Vital, *Sefer ha-Kavvanot* (Venice, 1620), f. 12v-13r.

women, guiding them to prevent the wasting of seed and protect themselves from demons. However, we should be cautious about speculating about the lived experiences of Jewish women based on texts by and for Jewish men.³² The ideal of kabbalistic masculinity underpinned all discourse about wasted seed, even when it was directed towards Jewish women.

The rest of this essay focuses on two seventeenth-century Polish rabbi-kabbalists. My story begins with Meir Poppers (d. 1662), a scholar working in Palestine and Poland. His *Or Tzadiqim* wove theoretical Lurianic kabbalah into everyday routines and embodied practices. I then turn to Poppers' student Joseph b. Solomon Calahora, the *darshan* (preacher) of Poznań in the second half of the century. Calahora composed the first book devoted to the causes, effects, and cures for wasted seed: *Yesod Yosef* (Frankfurt an der Oder, 1679). *Yesod Yosef* exemplifies kabbalistic masculinity in a particular context; Calahora addresses his colleagues and community, elaborating the connections between esoteric study, erotic restraint, and redemption. The two poles of kabbalistic masculinity—pious discipline and cosmic influence—are everywhere in evidence.

The Lurianic Lifestyle

In 1649, a young kabbalist named Meir Poppers left Jerusalem, where he had been studying Lurianic kabbalah, and returned to his hometown of Kraków.³³ He brought rare manuscripts with him, including his own edition of the writings of Isaac Luria's primary student Hayyim Vital. These three volumes, entitled *Derekh 'Etz Hayyim*, *Pri 'Etz Hayyim*, and *Nof 'Etz Hayyim*, contained many texts which were unknown in East-Central Europe. Although some of the "Writings of the AR" I " had previously circulated in print and manuscript, Poppers' work transformed the distribution of Jewish esoteric knowledge. With comprehensive

³² Cf. Chava Weissler, "The Religion of Traditional Ashkenazic Women: Some Methodological Issues," *AJS Review* 12 (1987): 73-94; Chava Weissler, "Women's Studies and Women's Prayers: Reconstructing the Religious History of Ashkenazic Women," *Jewish Social Studies* 1 (1995): 28-47; Jeffrey H. Chajes, "He Said She Said: Hearing the Voices of Pneumatic Early Modern Jewish Women," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 10 (2005): 99-125.

³³ Moshe Hillel, "Yediot Hadashot le-Toldot Rabi Meir Poppers," *Min ha-Genazim* 14 (2020): 1-90.

books in hand, readers in East-Central Europe could now delve into Vital's explorations of rarefied Lurianic secrets.

While in Poland, Poppers found that his colleagues and students wanted practical advice about how to live a pious life. Around 1650, Poppers compiled a book entitled *Or Tzadiqim*, the “Light of the Righteous.” In his introduction, he describes its impetus as follows:

I heard from my colleagues: Would that we had all the customs of the holy Rabbi [Isaac Luria] of blessed saintly memory and the matters of piety in the order of positive and negative commandments. Then it would be clear to each man, according to his desire, how he falls short of what is incumbent upon him with regards to piety and asceticism. Also, [we would want] an abridgment of the deep penances [*tiqunei teshuva*]³⁴—extremely abridged—for every sin and iniquity, so that they not need to go to a sage to teach them. Then we would surely be among those who make the masses righteous.³⁴

Poppers' colleagues asked him for a compilation of Luria's personal customs (*minhagim*) arranged according to the 613 positive and negative commandments. They also asked Poppers to condense Luria's prescribed penances for specific transgressions. Poppers' students seem to have been thinking of two Lurianic texts which were extant in print; Moses Trinki's *Sefer ha-Kavvanot* (Venice, 1620), which contained a section entitled “The Customs of the Rabbi [Isaac Luria],” and the Lurianic *tiqunei teshuva*, first published in *Marpe le-Nefesh* (Venice, 1595) and later in a corrected edition by Menahem 'Azariah of Fano in *Reishit Hokhmah ha-Qatzar* (Venice, 1600). Although they knew this printed literature, Poppers' students wanted a guide which could help them to adopt Lurianic practices and spread piety among the masses.

Like a good teacher, Poppers heeded the curiosity of his students, but he also disregarded their suggestions. *Or Tzadiqim* is not organized as a list of Luria's personal customs, nor does it devote much attention to *tiqunei teshuvah*. Rather, Poppers writes that

³⁴ Meir Poppers, *Or Tzadiqim* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Shalom, 2021), [i].

I organized it according to the order of each day, like the order of *Orah Hayyim* [The “Path of Life,” the first section of Joseph Karo’s halakhic code *Shulhan Arukh*]. I included the entire order of a man’s behavior as is necessary, and in the order of repentance I arranged the *tiqun* of all the sins.³⁵

Or Tzadiqim follows the routine of a scholar: waking up in the morning, dressing and washing, praying, studying Torah, eating, more praying, and going to sleep, observing the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. By following the scheme of the *Shulhan Arukh*, Poppers presents kabbalistic *minhag* as an authoritative supplement to Halakhah.³⁶ In fact, kabbalah can even contradict prior codifications of Halakhah; as he wrote, “some of the varieties of laws [in the Lurianic writings] are opposed to what was decided in the *Shulhan Arukh*.”³⁷ For Poppers, Lurianic customs could legitimately restructure the daily life of Jewish men.

Masculine sexuality is prominent in the chapter of *Or Tzadiqim* entitled *Hilkhot Derekh Eretz*, literally “The Rules of the Way of the Earth,” which in rabbinic parlance can refer to working for one’s livelihood, manners and propriety, mundane behaviors, or sexuality.³⁸ *Hilkhot Derekh Eretz* is about comportment when one is out in the streets and involved in the world beyond the synagogue and the study hall. For example, one should greet every person with a friendly expression, avoid negative thoughts, and visit the sick. Some passages are good business advice: “If you own money to someone and cannot pay them back, better to ask them for an extension than to avoid them with daily excuses,” he says, and

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Of the many relevant studies, see Jacob Katz, “Post-Zoharic Relations between Halakhah and Kabbalah,” in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Bernard Dov Cooperman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 283-307; Jacob Katz, “Halakhah and Kabbalah as Competing Disciplines,” in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Sixteenth-Century Revival to the Present*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 34-63; Maoz Kahana and Ariel Evan Mayse, “Hasidic Halakhah: Reappraising the Interface of Spirit and Law,” *AJS Review* 41 (2017): 375-408; Andrea Gondos, *Kabbalah in Print: The Study and Popularization of Jewish Mysticism in Early Modernity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2020), 105-130.

³⁷ Poppers, *Or Tzadiqim*, [i].

³⁸ Ibid., 29-38.

“read a contract thoroughly before signing it.”³⁹ Others relate to hygiene: “Do not go into the market while drunk, and do not walk in patched shoes, and do not belch in front of another.”⁴⁰ The chapter serves as a manual to being a proper kabbalistic gentleman.

The chapter also contains advice related to male sexual modesty, which often means avoiding contact with women. Poppers instructs his male reader not to look at the face of any woman other than his wife, “for this is a sin and a great damage,” and not to listen to women singing.⁴¹ He writes that “one should stay far away from a prostitute and her four cubits, so that you not look at her and come to fantasize in your thoughts, God forbid.”⁴² Poppers also addresses the male reader’s proper relationship with his wife:

One is forbidden to speak with his wife about matters of intercourse, for he will come to fantasize and transgress with his holy covenant to emit seed for nothing, God forbid. His sin is too great to carry, and he is judged for eternal death, and his judgement is turned into evil, and his prayer is not heard for forty days, and his soul does not ascend above, and in the Palace of *Nogah* seven angels with 245 entourages excommunicate him.⁴³

The fear of wasted seed is so acute, and its punishments so ramified, that it overrides any intimate communication between husband and wife. To be fair, Poppers did have affectionate marital advice: “Be very careful about your wife’s honor, like that of your own body, and particularly regarding her jewelry, if you have the means to do her will.”⁴⁴ Yet under the threat of wasted seed, even an everyday occurrence like a Jewish man talking to his wife raised the threat of damnation, divine rebuke, and angelic punishment.

Poppers shares additional instructions for proper married sexuality in the chapter devoted to “The Laws of Procreation.” This section emphasizes the role of mind and body in sexuality; before, during, and after intercourse, “one must purify one’s

³⁹ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 35.

⁴¹ Ibid., 30.

⁴² Ibid., 34.

⁴³ Ibid., 33.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 37.

thought and speech and action.” The kabbalist must hold proper intentions, recite certain prayers, and preserve his seed for permitted relations. Self-discipline literally produces “holy seed,” for by adhering to interior and exterior expressions of piety, the kabbalist ensures that his seed originates in the divine soul within the brain:

One should greatly repent on the day before one’s wife immerses [i.e., for her menstrual period, after which sexual intercourse is halakhically permitted] to draw down holy seed. There were some lofty holy men who would also immerse when their wives immersed, lest they had fantasized during the menstrual days.⁴⁵

In kabbalistic thought, repentance or *teshuvah*, which literally means “return,” signifies a return to the *sefirah* of *binah*, the divine Mother, the supernal womb from which Jewish souls are hewn.⁴⁶ This spiritual ascent is mirrored by a physical descent into a ritual bath. Whereas Halakhah expects every Jewish wife to immerse after menstruating, only the most pious Jewish men immerse before intercourse, especially if they “had fantasized” sexually. Kabbalistic masculinity involves what Elliot R. Wolfson calls “hypernomian” behavior: going beyond the letter of the law in pursuit of saintliness.⁴⁷

Still, Poppers was aware of carnal pleasures. His wife, whose name is unknown, was the daughter of Azariah Ze’evi, a Sephardic rabbi; they were likely married before 1649, shortly after Poppers arrived in Jerusalem. Poppers probably returned to Poland alone; one wonders what he felt when he wrote that “a man is obligated to have intercourse with his wife when he leaves for a journey, because then the holy spark of the *Shekhinah* is found with him to guard him on the journey.”⁴⁸ Poppers’ *Or Shabbat*, a commentary on Isaac Luria’s Sabbath poems, also speaks

⁴⁵ Ibid., 42. Paraphrased from Moses ben Makhir, *Seder ha-Yom* (Venice, 1599), f. 42v.

⁴⁶ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Fore/giveness on the Way: Nesting in the Womb of Response,” in *Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 228-257.

⁴⁷ Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 186-285.

⁴⁸ Poppers, *Or Tzadiqim*, 42.

to his sexuality.⁴⁹ Poppers makes the following comment on Luria's poem for the third Sabbath meal:

Yesod [the sixth *sefirah*, the phallus] is enjoyable for all the 248 limbs of the male, for the entire stature of *Zeir Anpin* [the “small face,” the divine masculine] has pleasure at the moment when the efflux goes out. ‘From my flesh I shall behold the Divine,’ [Job 19:26] for it is impossible for efflux to go out without the pleasure of the whole body. For this reason [intercourse] is called ‘*biyah*’ [lit., entering], for it seems to him that his entirety has entered into the female. ‘The enjoyment is to all those above’—[meaning] the ten *sefirot* of *Zeir* [*Anpin*—‘and the enjoyment is to all those below’—[meaning] that there is also pleasure for the entire stature of *Malkhut* [the tenth *sefirah*, *Shekhinah*, the divine feminine] at the time when *Yesod* effluxes to her.⁵⁰

Poppers is describing the eroticized interactions between the two lower *partzufim* or divine “faces,” the anthropomorphic configurations of *sefirot* which populate Lurianic cosmology and theurgy. The pleasurable divine “efflux” (*shef'a*) permeates the entire array of *sefirot*, just as human orgasm is felt in the entire body. As Poppers writes elsewhere, “the drop [of semen] is drawn from the entire body.”⁵¹ Alongside the pleasure of *Zeir Anpin* and *Malkhut*, Poppers also invokes his own embodied pleasure, citing Job 19:26 to compare the Godhead and the human body.⁵² Poppers knew sexual pleasure to be full-bodied, affecting all the organs and even the surrounding world.

A final passage from *Or Tzadiqim* exemplifies how the concern over wasted seed functioned within early modern Jewish society. Poppers is describing the obligation of a father to arrange a marriage for his young son:

⁴⁹ On Luria's poems see Yehuda Liebes, “*Zemiroth le-Seudat-Shabbat she-Yasad ha-AR"l ha-Qadosh*,” *Molad* 4 (1972): 540-555.

⁵⁰ Poppers, *Or Shabbat* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Shalom, 2021), 6.

⁵¹ Poppers, *Or Bahir* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Shalom, 2021), 20.

⁵² On *Zeir Anpin* and the Lurianic practitioner, see Menachem Kallus, “The Theurgy of Prayer in the Lurianic Kabbalah” (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2003), 141-156.

‘The fear of God is pure, [this refers to] one who marries a woman and subsequently studies Torah.’ [Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yoma, 72b] Therefore, every man is required to make efforts to marry off his son while he is still a child, before he comes to the evil days, which are the days of youth, for then evil thoughts begin to overcome a man. One must pray to the Holy Blessed One to arrange a worthy wife for him, [who is] able to give birth, so that he not taint his seed with a barren women, God forbid.⁵³

Child marriage is meant to save Jewish boys from the erotic trials of puberty by giving them permitted outlets for their sexuality. Indeed, Gershon Hundert has suggested that one factor in the early modern Jewish anxieties over wasted seed was the rising age of marriage among Ashkenazi Jews. As the Jewish population grew, it became less economically viable for families to support their young married children. This led to the delay of marriages and to more sexual temptations for Jewish youth.⁵⁴ While young Jewish men faced the danger of wasted seed, the passage concludes with a challenge for young Jewish women: infertility. Still, Poppers’ explicit concern here is with the young Jewish men whose seed would be “wasted” if their prospective wives were infertile.

In the first edition of Poppers’ *Or Tzadiqim* (Hamburg, 1690), the above passage appeared at the beginning of the “Laws of Procreation,” while in the second edition, entitled *Or ha-Yashar* (Amsterdam, 1709) it appeared at the end of *Hilkhot Derekh Eretz*. This implies that the editors of these publications intuited the connection between kabbalistic sexual regimens and everyday life. By juxtaposing erotic self-control and esoteric concerns with ethics, business, and hygiene, Poppers presented his readers with a model of kabbalistic living. Far from being a private anxiety, sexual temptations were something to combat in all spheres of daily activity. The ethos of kabbalistic masculinity informed every stage of male Jewish life, from childhood and adolescence to married adulthood.

⁵³ Poppers, *Or Tzadiqim*, 40-41.

⁵⁴ Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania*, 136. Cf. Roni Weinstein, *Juvenile Sexuality, Kabbalah, and Catholic Reformation in Italy: Tiferet Bahurim by Pinhas Barukh ben Pelatiah Monselice* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

Sex, Study, and Salvation

It was one of Poppers' Polish students and relatives who composed and published the first Jewish book dedicated entirely to the causes, consequences, and cures of wasted seed. Joseph b. Solomon Calahora (1601-1696) was born in Poznań to a prominent family of Sephardic origins. His great-grandfather Solomon Calahora (d. 1597) was court doctor to Sigismund II Augustus in Kraków and himself a Torah scholar, while his father and grandfather both served as rabbis in Łęczycza.⁵⁵ Later family traditions link Calahora to several prestigious rabbis of the period and to several East-Central European communities.⁵⁶ Calahora survived the Khmelnytsky massacres of 1648 and arrived in Kraków shortly thereafter. Importantly for us, he studied with “R. Meir Poppers from the Holy Land, his relative who taught [him] most of his kabbalah, whose name is known as the father of the sages of the kabbalah in the holy community of Kraków,” receiving oral instruction and copying some of the latter's kabbalistic texts.⁵⁷

By 1659, Calahora had taken up the post of preacher (*darshan*), in Poznań, one of Europe's largest and most stratified Jewish communities.⁵⁸ As a preacher, Calahora delivered regular homilies; although he recorded many in manuscript, none were printed until recently.⁵⁹ Calahora was second in the religious hierarchy of the town to the head of the rabbinic court, Isaac b. Abraham (d. 1685), a halakhic

⁵⁵ Majer Bałaban, *A History of the Jews in Cracow and Kazimierz, 1304-1868*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2002), 122-125 [Hebrew].

⁵⁶ Shlomo Zalman Landsberg, *Toar Pnei Shlomo* (Krotoschin: B.L. Monasch, 1870), 53-57; *Mein Lebensbild im Anschluss an sieben Ahnenbilder dargestellt von Salomon Kaliphari gen. Posner*, Edward Luft Collection (AR 6957), Leo Baeck Institute, New York.

⁵⁷ Calahora, *Yesod Yosef*, 1, 8. Cf. Joseph Avivi, *Kabbala Luriana*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2007), 718-719 [Hebrew].

⁵⁸ Anna Michałowska-Mycielska, *The Jewish Community: Authority and Social Control in Poznań and Swarzędz, 1650-1793*, trans. Alicja Adamowicz (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2008). Calahora's name appears in the Poznań communal records; see the index to Dov Avron, *Pinkas ha-kesharim shel kehilat Pozna, 1621-1835* (Jerusalem: Mekitze Nirdamim, 1966).

⁵⁹ Calahora's homilies are extant in two manuscripts in the Salomon Baer Spiro Collection (AR 7055), Box 1, Folder 3, Leo Baeck Institute, New York; they were recently printed as *Sefer Yad Yosef al ha-Torah* (Brooklyn, NY; Makhon Netzah Ya'akov, 2023). Cf. Gershon Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626-1676*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 596.

authority whose expertise extended to Lurianic kabbalah.⁶⁰ In short, Calahora was an elite member of urban Polish Jewry, highly educated and well connected. Although directed outwards at listeners and readers, Calahora's message emerged from educated Jewish, from the sites where esoteric knowledge about masculinity and wasted seed was cultivated.

Calahora, with the help of his brother Isaac of Lelów, brought three short books to print in Frankfurt an der Oder in 1679. Almost pamphlets, *Tiqun Hatzot* (The Midnight Rectification), *Sadeh Bokhim* (The Vale of Tears), and *Yesod Yosef* (Joseph's Foundation) were all under 32 pages and printed in octavo format. *Tiqun Hatzot* and *Sadeh Bokhim* were both dedicated to the midnight liturgy performed in sympathetic identification with the exile of the *Shekhinah*.⁶¹ The theme of wasted seed is already present in these pamphlets; Calahora notes in *Sadeh Bokhim* that failing to arise for *Tiqun Hatzot* increases the chances of an improper seminal emission. But the main treatment of this topic is in the third pamphlet, *Yesod Yosef*. The title page begins as follows: "Joseph's Foundation, being *tiqun qeri* [the rectification of improper seminal emission]. One who guards this commandment will not know evil."⁶² Using kabbalistic wordplay, Calahora invoked his own name and the ninth *sefirah* of *yesod*, which symbolizes the phallus and the biblical Joseph, often praised as *ha-tzadiq*, the righteous, for his sexual restraint when facing Potiphar's wife. Calahora assures his readers that piety and proper sexual discipline will protect them from "evil."

Yesod Yosef is divided into three sections. Following a short introduction, the first section lists the causes of wasted seed, the second section enumerates its punishments, while the final section offers various *tiqunim* to atone for wasted seed. Almost like a doctor, Calahora was grappling with a problem of the body: he diagnosed its etiology, identified its symptoms, and prescribed its cures. *Yesod*

⁶⁰ *She'elot U-Teshuvot Rabenu Yitzhaq ha-Gadol mi-Pozna*, (Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayim, 1982), 11-19; Joseph Avivi, "Hagahot al 'Etz Hayyim," *Moriah* 13 (1984): 33-37.

⁶¹ Elliott Horowitz, "Coffee, Coffeehouses, and the Nocturnal Rituals of Early Modern Jewry," *AJS Review* 14 (1989): 17-46; Shaul Magid, "Conjugal Union, Mourning and 'Talmud Torah' in R. Isaac Luria's 'Tikkun Hazot'," *Daat* 36 (1996): xvii-xlv.

⁶² Joseph b. Solomon Calahora, *Yesod Yosef* (Frankfurt an der Oder, 1679). *Yesod Yosef* was excerpted from a longer book amounting to "approximately fifty sheets," itself anthologized from three other books by Calahora entitled *Yad Yosef Hadash*, *Ve-Yalkot Yosef*, and *Ve-Yekalkel Yosef*. Idem, *Sadeh Bokhim* (Frankfurt an der Oder, 1679), 6, notes that he devoted a "special *quntres*" to *tiqun qeri*, which he hoped to print.

Yosefis often characterized as a “popular” work, and this claim finds some support in Calahora’s own introduction to the book. Inspired by the Zohar and “the books of the pious and the books of fear [of God]”—particularly *Reishit Hokhmah* and *Shnei Luhot ha-Brit*—Calahora writes that “I decided in my mind and said in my heart, it is time to act for God [Psalms 119:126], to distribute among Jacob and disseminate among Israel that which I have researched and expounded about this sin, and what its causes are.”⁶³ Nevertheless, Calahora’s book—composed in a dense rabbinic Hebrew idiom, full of complex exegeses and learned references—would have been read mostly by educated Jewish men.

Although all young men are prone to sexual sins, Calahora believed that Torah scholars were most vulnerable to temptation.⁶⁴ Lilith “desires to sully the lofty pious ones,” who therefore must struggle hardest against wasting seed.⁶⁵ In Calahora’s world, esoteric study and sexual discipline were intertwined. Kabbalistic texts called for sexual restraint, but permission to study esoteric knowledge was itself predicated on age and marital status, both indicators of erotic self-discipline. As Poppers himself codified, “The time of the study of kabbalah: for one who is not married it is forbidden forever, and for someone who is married it is specifically [permitted] from age twenty and onwards.”⁶⁶ Even if this restriction was not enforced, it reminds us that the pursuit of masculine self-discipline was not simply a product of studying kabbalah. For many young Jewish men, the injunction to control one’s sexuality would have preceded any initiation into kabbalistic studies. Kabbalistic discourse about wasted seed circulated both on the page and between the elite Jewish males whom it most concerned. Early modern Ashkenazi rabbinic literature reflects a complex cycle of orality and textuality; printed homilies preserved traces of public speeches and provided motifs for other preachers to use.⁶⁷ Preachers both read each other’s books and met face to face; for example, Calahora mentions encountering Betzalel b.

⁶³ Calahora, *Yesod Yosef*, 2.

⁶⁴ Trachtenburg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 50 and 297 n. 3.

⁶⁵ Joseph b. Solomon Calahora, *Tiqun Hatzot* (Frankfurt an der Oder, 1679), 6.

⁶⁶ Poppers, *Or Tzadiqim*, 25. Cf. Moshe Idel, “On the History of the Interdiction against the Study of Kabbalah before the Age of Forty,” *AJS Review* 5 (1980): i-xx [Hebrew].

⁶⁷ Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching 1200-1800: An Anthology* (New Haven - London: Yale University Press, 1989); Roe Goldschmidt, *Homiletic Literature in Eastern Europe: Rhetoric, Talmudic Erudition and Social Stature* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2022) [Hebrew].

Solomon of Kobrin and the latter's book *Qorban Shabbat*.⁶⁸ Thanks to these sorts of interpersonal and literary interactions, the ethos of kabbalistic masculinity was in the air—especially for those who hoped to attain esoteric knowledge. Within this social context, several of Calahora's texts draw tight conceptual connections between esoteric study and masculine sexuality.⁶⁹ Calahora explicitly compares wasted seed with improper kabbalah study:

One cause [of wasting seed] is revealing a secret to one who is not worthy that the secret be revealed to him. For through this, his punishment is that he comes to emit seed for nothing. The reason [for this] is that the receptacle of the lofty secrets which flow forth from the righteous, who is called *yesod*, is [called] 'for those who fear him' [after Psalms 25:14], [meaning those] who are in the *Shekhinah*. When [the student] is not worthy, [the teacher] draws the light of the Torah from within and does not find a vessel in which it can reside, and [the light] goes out to the 'outsiders,' and [the teacher] finds himself 'threshing within and winnowing without.' [*coitus interruptus*, after Genesis Rabbah 85:5]⁷⁰

The careless revelation of kabbalistic secrets causes the wasting of seed, which is here termed a "punishment," but the relationship between the two behaviors is even more messy and circular. Calahora offers a three-fold analogy between kabbalistic pedagogy, divine structures, and human sexuality. The teacher of esoteric Torah is compared to the phallic *sefirah* of *yesod*. The God-fearing student is like the *Shekhinah*, the divine feminine; he learns secrets from his teacher just as the final *sefirah* of *Malkhut* receives emanation from the higher *sefirot*. An unworthy student who receives secrets is like a demonic "outsider" who misappropriates the divine flow. However, the text refrains from spelling out the

⁶⁸ Calahora, *Yesod Yosef*, 12-13.

⁶⁹ Elliot R. Wolfson, "Circumcision, Vision of God, and Textual Interpretation: From Midrashic Trope to Mystical Symbol," in *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 29-48; Elliot R. Wolfson, "Occultation of the Feminine and the Body of Secrecy in Medieval Kabbalah," in *Rending the Veil: Concealment of Revelation of Secrets in the History of Religion* (New York - London: Seven Bridges Press, 1999), 113-154.

⁷⁰ Calahora, *Yesod Yosef*, 3, based on Elijah de Vidas, *Reishit Hokhmah, Sha'ar ha-Qedushah*, Ch. 17, and Moses Cordovero, *Or Ne'erav* 3:4.

full analogy; the worthy student, homologous to the *Shekhinah*, implicitly parallels the kabbalist's wife. Perhaps we can detect some unconscious anxiety about gendering the male student as female, about the homoeroticism of the pedagogic relationship.⁷¹

In the continuation of this passage, Calahora invokes the Lurianic writings to introduce another key theme: the cycles of exile and redemption which define world and Jewish history. Again, we find a triple analogy between the cosmos, kabbalistic knowledge, and the male body:

In the holy writings of the *AR"Y* of blessed saintly memory it is said that the [meaning of] the exile of the *Shekhinah* is that in the time of exile, the secrets of the Torah are passed to the husks. This is correct, for his good intention was according to the principle which we wrote, that through this sin, which is common among us due to our many sins, we obstruct secrets of the Torah and convey them to the hand of the husks.⁷²

The exile of the *Shekhinah*, her distance from her Beloved, is linked to the loss of the secrets of the Torah during the period of Jewish exile. This lamentable situation is perpetuated by “this sin” of wasting seed. A parallel passage appears in *Tiqun Hatzot*; Calahora writes that during the midnight ritual one should place ashes on one's forehead and “focus on the burning of the Torah, which was burnt by Apostomus and made into ashes. Since then, the secrets of the Torah have been transmitted to the outsiders. This is the exile of the *Shekhinah*, as the *AR"Y* of blessed memory wrote.”⁷³ The burning of a Torah scroll by the Roman soldier Apostomus epitomizes how the persecution of the Jewish people is synonymous with the decline of esoteric knowledge. The exile of the *Shekhinah*, the Jewish diaspora, the dispersal of secrets, the wasting of seed; all of these share a common structure, namely the scattering of positive energies and their negative descent.

⁷¹ On homoeroticism and kabbalah see M.D. Georg Langer, *Die Erotik der Kabbalah*, (Prague: Verlag Dr. Josef Flesch, 1923); Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 369-75; Shaul Magid, “Constructing Women from Men: The Metaphysics of Male Homosexuality Among Lurianic Kabbalists in Sixteenth-Century Safed,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 17 (2010): 4-28.

⁷² Calahora, *Yesod Yosef*, 3.

⁷³ Calahora, *Tiqun Hatzot*, 1. Cf. *Pri 'Etz Hayyim, Sha'ar Tiqun Hatzot*, Chapter 3.

The “common” sin of wasting seed has high stakes: it inhibits knowledge of the Torah and obstructs the redemptive process. In turn, Calahora argues for the curative and redemptive properties of proper kabbalah study and sexual discipline:

Its *tiqun*: One who is a master of Torah should accustom himself to study the secrets of the Torah...When we fix this sin, then we will merit redemption, for from the power of this sin is the lengthiness of the exile, for the maidservant inherits her mistress,⁷⁴ and the fixing of this sin is through the secrets of the Torah.⁷⁵

The “secrets of the Torah” are accessible only to a “master of the Torah,” a *ba’al torah*, like Calahora himself. The approaching messianic age, however, is a time when secrets will be revealed more widely. The study of kabbalah fixes the sin of wasted seed, but sexual discipline also gives one access to esoteric truths. The two are inseparable: “One who fixes this sin [of wasted seed] merits to understand the secrets of the Torah.”⁷⁶ Beyond conveying information about wasted seed, the study of kabbalah, when paired with self-discipline, emerges as a potent *tiqun* of intimate sexual sins and the cosmos.

Preaching Piety

How did Calahora bring this ethos of kabbalistic masculinity, which linked sexual restraint, esoteric study, and the striving for redemption, to bear on his world? As a preacher in a large Polish town, addressing both Jewish men *and* Jewish women, how did he attempt to manifest his ideals in reality? *Yesod Yosef* is rife with descriptive and prescriptive passages where he records the social contexts of his preaching and suggests normative practices to his readers. Calahora’s urgent concern with wasted seed translated into a campaign to reform his community and strengthen its adherence to law and custom.

⁷⁴ This refers to Lilith usurping Eve/*Shekhinah*; cf. Nathaniel Berman, *Divine and Demonic*, 193-210. Isaac of Poznań uses the same phrase, as cited in Avivi, “*Hagahot ‘al ‘Etz Hayyim*,” 36.

⁷⁵ Calahora, *Yesod Yosef*, 15.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

Throughout his writings, Calahora often mentions the occasions where he gave his homilies, marking time by the year and the weekly Torah portion. Sometimes he even describes his preaching practices in greater detail:

I often turned my face away during my homilies, for in the large communities, on the Sabbath at the time of *minhah*, men and women stand in a multitude and look at one another, and they come, due to our many sins, to fantasies and to the emission of seed for nothing. Woe to the eyes who see this! Therefore, it is incumbent upon the sages of the generations who are in communities where there is this bad custom, to annul it, and to decree upon the *shamashim* that they should rebuke the men and women, [and tell them] that they should go to their homes and make the third meal [of the Sabbath]. For through this they also miss the time of the third meal, for when they stand on the street with one another, they cause a transgression, for they also speak gossip together, and they damage the covenant of the tongue, and the covenant of the flesh, and the covenant of the eyes.⁷⁷

On a Sabbath afternoon, probably in Poznań, Jewish men and women have gathered to hear Calahora preach. However, by standing on the street in a mixed-gender group, they fall prey to immodesty. Calahora turns his head away, shielding his eyes; as his teacher Poppers once wrote, “Nothing prevents lust like the shutting of the eyes, therefore take care not to look at a woman.”⁷⁸ In diagnosing the problem, Calahora bundles together minor offenses, such as being late to the third meal of Sabbath, with more severe sins: improper talk, improper vision, and even improper seminal emission. The Jews who attended his homily were probably expecting to be reprimanded, but they may not have expected Calahora

⁷⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁸ Poppers, *Or Tzadiqim*, 37. See also the linkage between the brain, seed and “the emission of light from the eyes” in Poppers, *Torah Or*, 70, and compare J.H. Chajes, “Re-envisioning the Evil Eye: Magic, Optical Theory, and Modern Supernaturalism in Jewish Thought,” *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 15 (2020): 13-14. On the kabbalistic association between the eyes and the phallus, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Weeping, Death, and Spiritual Ascent in Sixteenth-Century Jewish Mysticism,” in *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*, eds. John J. Collins and Michael Fishbane (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 220-230.

to call on the rabbis to mobilize the *shamashim*, the communal functionaries. He criticized his audience directly and turned to his fellow rabbis and their subordinates to enforce gender separation in public spaces.

Punitive rabbinic authority figures in other passages as well. In one piquant case, after bemoaning the fact that wasted seed prolongs the exile, Calahora protests the immodesty inherent in prevalent wedding customs:

It is incumbent on the sages of the generation to mend this brokenness and to annul the bad custom that grooms and brides sit together. The lofty *hasid*, the author of the *Shnei Luhot ha-Brit* [R. Isaiah Horowitz], was greatly angry at this and denounced it, and preached to annul this tradition. After him arose [...] our honorable teacher and rabbi, R. Isaac [of Poznań], and preached to annul this tradition, and in general even to annul this [other tradition], that men and women should not be together in one winter house at a wedding. [The women] dance for the men who sit there, and they are drunk. Their great drunkenness causes them to come to fantasize and to look at women who are married women, and they fail at night with this sin [through nocturnal seminal emissions].⁷⁹

The seating of groom and bride together, in addition to licentious celebrations and dancing, draw the ire of the preacher and the rabbi. That Polish Jews in the seventeenth century were occasionally flirtatious, or even drunk and promiscuous, should surprise no one; moreover, Ashkenazi weddings had long included mixed-gender dancing.⁸⁰ However, the ideal of kabbalistic masculinity culminated in rabbis attempting to exert social pressure and to repress mixed-gender dancing and interactions.

Calahora and Isaac of Poznań took their lead from Isaiah Horowitz, who decried premarital immodesty in a letter to a rabbinic colleague in Poland. In Horowitz's opinion, the suffering of Polish Jews, including antisemitic libels, were due to

⁷⁹ Calahora, *Yesod Yosef*, 7-8.

⁸⁰ Walter Zev Feldman, *Klezmer: Music, History, and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 175-179.

the sins which are committed by those who are to be married in your countries, that is, what they do before the *hupah* and what they do after the *hupah*. Before the *hupah*, the groom hugs and kisses the bride, even if she is old enough to menstruate. The groom also comes to have an erection and may even emit seed for naught, and his sin is too great to bear. Secondly, you perform marriages on the Sabbath eve, and the groom lays next to the bride when she is permitted to him, and the two are naked, and he does not perform the commandment of sexual intercourse. Is such a thing possible without emitting seed for naught? Even if he does nothing with his hand, in any event it occurs automatically.⁸¹

This rather explicit description is meant to strike fear in the hearts of Polish rabbis, and to encourage them to discipline their communities. The pious entreaties of kabbalists like Horowitz and others bore fruit over the next decades, as the case of Calahora shows.

Intriguingly, Calahora almost entirely eschewed the fasting and asceticism of Lurianic *tiqunei teshuva*.⁸² For him, rather, “fixing” wasted seed consisted of minor interventions into the embodied religiosity of his audience. Calahora chose to inculcate an internalized and ritualized sexual discipline rather than impose harsh punishments for sexual wrongdoing. The secret of this choice may lie with his wider historical context. There are indications that Calahora was caught up in the Sabbatian enthusiasm of 1665-1666.⁸³ However, for all Calahora’s discussions of exile and redemption, his texts are hardly crypto-Sabbatian. Like many others, even if Calahora had believed in Sabbatai Zevi, he probably abandoned this belief after the erstwhile messiah’s apostasy.⁸⁴ I would even characterize Calahora’s *Yesod Yosef* as a subtle reaction *against* Sabbatianism, which (famously and

⁸¹ Abraham David, “A Letter by R. Isaiah Horowitz (Author of *Shenei Luhot ha-Berit*) from Jerusalem, after 1622,” *Kobez Al Yad* 16 (2002), 245.

⁸² Pachter, “*Shemirat ha-Brit*,” 222-224.

⁸³ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 596.

⁸⁴ Gershom Scholem, “Regarding the Attitude of Jewish Rabbis to Sabbatianism,” *Zion* 13/14 (1948): 47-62 [Hebrew]; Elisheva Carlebach, “Two Amens That Delayed the Redemption: Jewish Messianism and Popular Spirituality in the Post-Sabbatian Century,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 82 (1992): 241-261.

paradoxically) at times endorsed both ascetic penance and antinomian licence.⁸⁵ Calahora wanted to avoid these extremes and excesses, which challenged communal stability and gendered hierarchies. His conservative rhetoric linked sexual purity to halachic practice and aimed to strengthen normative Jewish life in exile.

What pious practices did Calahora prescribe for the men of his community? Much like Poppers' *Or Tzadiqim*, *Yesod Yosef* emphasized ethical behaviors like humility and charity. Embodied recommendations include abstaining from disproportionate eating and drinking, from excessive sleep, and even from worrying too much. Calahora tells his readers to "warm up their bodies" by performing physical *mitzvot*, such as baking *matzah*. Crucially, he encouraged normative involvement in synagogue and communal life. Jewish men should, among other things, be among the first ten men of the prayer quorum, be called up to read from the Torah every month, and wear *tzitzit* and *tefillin*. Calahora encourages them to study Torah to the best of their abilities, to honor Torah scholars, and observe the Sabbath carefully. In the fight against wasted seed, Calahora enlisted standard halakhic obligations.

Calahora, like other elite Jewish men, also addressed and disciplined Jewish women.⁸⁶ For example, Calahora writes that "it is one of the rectifications of *qeri* to multiply the lighting of candles on the Sabbath eve. I heard this principle from [...] the rabbi of our community [Isaac of Poznań], in his class [*shi'ur*] which he teaches in the evening, in the name of the writings of the *AR"i*."⁸⁷ Strategically, Calahora and his colleague augmented a halakhic requirement which devolves primarily on women, namely the lighting of Sabbath candles. In another example of the messy interface between the spoken and the written word, Calahora quotes Isaac of Poznań, who cited the Lurianic corpus in one of his regular lectures.

⁸⁵ Matt Goldish, *The Sabbatean Prophets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi, 1666-1816* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011). I should note Nathan of Gaza's kabbalistic condemnation of wasting seed in his *tiqunei teshuva*; see Yehuda Liebes, "Ha-Tikkun Ha-Kelali of R. Nahman of Bratslav and Its Sabbatean Links," in *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), 143-144.

⁸⁶ Cf. Cornelia Aust, "Covering the Female Jewish Body. Dress and Dress Regulations in Early Modern Ashkenaz," *Central Europe* 17 (2019): 5-21.

⁸⁷ Calahora, *Yesod Yosef*, 9. He again quotes Isaac of Poznań on *ibid.*, 22.

Probably only Jewish men were present at these lectures, but we can imagine them bringing this esoteric advice home to their wives, enjoining them to light extra Sabbath candles to atone for their wasted seed and to assure the piety of their children.

Another example is the bedtime recitation which includes the Shema and several other texts. Intuitively, night is a time of sexual danger; across cultures, beds, sleep, darkness, and dreams bear erotic risks.⁸⁸ Lurianic texts present the bedtime liturgy as an effective apotropaic ritual against involuntary seminal emissions, capable of slaying demons and their offspring. In the words of Hayyim Vital, the recitation of the Shema “becomes a sword and kills” the demons created by wasted seed.⁸⁹ Some adepts can slay up to 1,125 demons per night, a form of mass demonic infanticide.⁹⁰ When addressing Jewish men, Calahora writes that “it is one of the *tiqunim* of *qeri* to read the recitation of the Shema of the *AR”I* of blessed memory, as it is printed in *Sha’arei Tziyon*. Fortunate is the one who merits to read it with all the secrets and the intentions [*kavvanot*] which are mentioned in the writings of the *AR”I*.”⁹¹ But Jewish women also needed protection from wasted seed. As Calahora explains: “there are types of male demons who come in the form of men and stand themselves before the women at night and cause them to fail with the emission of seed for naught.” For that reason, “I strove and preached in our community that the women be careful to recite Shema at night like the men.”⁹² Theoretically, kabbalistic practices connected to wasted seed could have been employed by both men and women; both had bodies which produced seed, and both faced demonic temptations. However, Calahora did not recommend that his female listeners engage in Lurianic prayer intentions. Rather, Calahora continues, “I preached that the women should also read the Shema which is printed in the *benshen* for they also stumble in this sin through male demons.”⁹³ The *benshen*

⁸⁸ Charles Stewart, “Erotic Dreams and Nightmares from Antiquity to the Present,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 8 (2002): 279-309.

⁸⁹ Vital, *Sha’ar ha-Tefilah*, 616.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 312.

⁹¹ Calahora, *Yesod Yosef*, 16. Calahora directs his male readers to the Lurianic prayerbook edited by Nathan Neta Hanover, *Sha’arei Tziyon* (Prague, 1662). The Lurianic bedtime rites were also published in pamphlets like *Seder ve-Tiqun Qriat Shm’a ‘al ha-Mitah* (Prague 1615) and *Tiqun Qriat Shem’a* (Prague 1668).

⁹² Calahora, *Yesod Yosef*, 10.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

were liturgical pamphlets, often with Yiddish translation, which contained the grace after meals and the bedtime Shema—but not the Lurianic *kavvanot*. Calahora did not initiate women into Lurianic secrets, but rather encouraged them to adopt a deracinated form of a “male” apotropaic practice.

How successful was Calahora’s project? It is hard to say how many Jewish men and women followed his instructions, but rabbis did read his book after its publication.⁹⁴ A tale included in Tzvi Hirsch Kaidonover’s *Kav ha-Yashar*, a kabbalistic ethical text first published in 1706, is also suggestive.⁹⁵ In a section devoted to the dangers of wasted seed, we find a tale set in Poznań around 1681 in which a house is haunted by the destructive offspring of a Jewish man and his demoness lover. With the help of Joel Ba‘al Shem, the Jews of Poznań successfully take the demons to the rabbinic court and banish them from town.⁹⁶ The same story was reported to Jacob Emden by the rabbi-kabbalist Naftali Katz, who himself lived in Poznań in those years.⁹⁷ Is the location of this story a coincidence? Or is this a reflection of Calahora’s war against sexual demons?

This story has drawn extensive scholarly attention; the common anxieties about human-demon eroticism may reflect concerns about Jewish-Christian relations.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ On the use of *Yesod Yosef* by Yehiel Mikhel Epstein in his *Kitzur SHLA”H* (Fürth 1693/1696), see Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania*, 129-30. The earliest reference to *Yesod Yosef* which I have found is Abraham b. Benjamin Zev, *Zer‘a Avraham* (Sulzbach, 1685), f. 4r. Calahora’s book was reprinted in an expanded edition (Berlin, 1739) and earned a commentary by Rafael Unna, *Yesod M‘aravi* (Jerusalem, 1896).

⁹⁵ Jacob Elbaum, “Kav ha-Yashar: Some Remarks on Its Structure, Content, and Literary Sources,” in *Studies in Askenazi Culture, Women’s History, and the Languages of the Jews presented to Chava Turniansky*, eds. Israel Bartal et al. (Jerusalem: Shazar, 2013), 15-64 [Hebrew]; Jean Baumgarten, “Eighteenth-Century Ethico-Mysticism in Central Europe: the ‘Kav ha-yosher’ and the Tradition,” *Studia Rosenthaliana* 41 (2009): 29-51.

⁹⁶ On Joel and other *ba‘alei shem*, see Nimrod Zinger, *The Ba‘al Shem and the Doctor: Medicine and Magic among German Jews in the Early Modern Period* (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 2017) [Hebrew].

⁹⁷ Jacob Emden, *Migdal ‘Oz* (Altona, 1748), f. 259r.

⁹⁸ Sara Zfatman, *The Marriage of a Mortal Man and A She-Demon* (Jerusalem: Akademon Press, 1987), 82-102; Jeremy Dauber, *In the Demon’s Bedroom: Yiddish Literature and the Early Modern* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 164-171; Astrid Lembke, *Dämonische Allianzen. Jüdische Mahrtenehenerzählungen der europäischen Vormoderne* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 2013); David Rotman, “Sexuality and Communal Space in Stories about the Marriage of Men and She-Demons,” in *Monsters and Monstrosity in Jewish History: From the Middle Ages to Modernity* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 187-200; Maoz Kahana, *A Heartless*

Reading such tales alongside Lurianic discourse can also be instructive. In the Poznań story, for example, the Jew and his demon-lover meet during the Passover seder for a tryst in a magical room within an outhouse. Similarly, in the “Laws of the Outhouse” in Poppers’ *Or Tzadiqim* we read that “one should not speak in the outhouse, for there is a type of demon that can possess one and cause one to sin.”⁹⁹ Perhaps Lurianic kabbalistic concepts were amenable to the Jewish population because tales about sexual encounters with demons were so familiar. Conversely, it is worth remembering that even “elite” forms of Jewish esotericism were thoroughly embedded in more “popular” worldviews.¹⁰⁰

Calahora’s preaching, as enshrined in *Yesod Yosef*, reflects a particular moment in the history of kabbalistic masculinity in East-Central Europe. Although Calahora’s content originated with kabbalistic sources, his techniques were honed during his homilies for Sabbaths and holidays, often in the synagogue and sometimes on the street, over the course of decades. He translated conceptual frameworks into forms of communal discipline. *Yesod Yosef* reflects Calahora’s own kabbalistic thought and reading habits, carried out within elite rabbinic networks. Simultaneously, it records his attempts to influence local Jewish men and women to guard the covenant.

Conclusion

What I have called “kabbalistic masculinity” was characterized by a claim to cosmic influence and an imperative to self-discipline. From the sixteenth century onwards, this became the ideal of personhood for rabbinic elites across the Jewish diaspora. Concurrently, the embodied problem of wasted seed became ubiquitous in Jewish early modernity, figuring in all genres of Jewish writing—from halakhic codes to ethical literature to dream diaries. By the end of the seventeenth century, kabbalistic discourse about wasted seed was codified in Jewish liturgy and law, with entire monographs dedicated to the subject. Kabbalistic masculinity and the

Chicken: Religion and Science in Early Modern Rabbinic Culture (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2021), 116-119 [Hebrew].

⁹⁹ Poppers, *Or Tzadiqim*, 4.

¹⁰⁰ Paluch, *Intentionality*.

concern over wasted seed quickly impacted the “popular religion” of less-educated Jews, taking new forms in the process.¹⁰¹ Kabbalistic masculinity deeply informs both Eastern European Hasidism and contemporary ultra-Orthodoxy.¹⁰² The messianic virility and valorized repression of kabbalistic masculinity may even have left impressions on the ostensibly “secular” gender ideals of psychoanalysis, Zionism, or socialism, to name but three expressions of Jewish modernity.¹⁰³

This essay is just one chapter in the still unwritten history of the male Jewish body, a history which must also account for various relations with non-male and non-human bodies. Without ignoring the restrictive and conservative nature of the kabbalistic sexual ethic, it was not a mere anxiety or neurosis. Rather than pathologize the kabbalistic concern over wasted seed, we should historicize and corporealize it. Through their writing and preaching, kabbalists promulgated a conception of the ideal Jewish male body and tried to govern its interactions with other bodies and with itself. Within the “cosmic patriarchy” of kabbalah, to be a Jewish man meant having the power to create or destroy worlds, and hence strict responsibilities for one’s own body. And kabbalistic masculinity, as I have argued, is unthinkable without considering wasted seed, without examining the intensely ambivalent sensations and emotions which accompanied this physiological process and its generative implications.

Avinoam J. Stillman studies early modern Jewish history with specific interests in kabbalah, the history of the Hebrew book, and Jewish diasporas. He completed his BA at Columbia University and his MA at Ben Gurion University of the Negev. He is currently

¹⁰¹ Michael Stanislawski, “Toward the Popular Religion of Ashkenazic Jews: Yiddish-Hebrew Texts on Sex and Circumcision,” in *Mediating Modernity: Challenges and Trends in the Jewish Encounter with the Modern World: Essays in Honor of Michael A. Meyer*, ed. Lauren Strauss and Michael Brenner (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 2008), 93-106.

¹⁰² Benjamin Brown, “*Kedushah*: The Sexual Abstinence of Married Men in Gur, Slonim, and Toledot Aharon,” *Jewish History* 27 (2013): 475-522; Yakir Englander, *The Male Body in Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2021).

¹⁰³ I note the absence of kabbalistic discourse from Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). The ideal kabbalist, an ascetic spiritual warrior, is almost the opposite of Boyarin’s passive-yet-carnal rabbis.

completing his PhD at Freie Universität Berlin; his dissertation is an intellectual biography of Meir Poppers (d. 1662), a Kraków-born and Jerusalem-educated kabbalist who transmitted Lurianic manuscripts between the Ottoman Empire and East-Central Europe. He is also a founding editor of Blima Books, an independent press dedicated to “Radical Jewish Literature” and based in Jerusalem and Berlin.

Keywords: Kabbalah, Sexuality, Masculinity, East-Central Europe, Early Modernity

How to quote this article:

Avinoam J. Stillman, “On Kabbalah and ‘Wasted Seed’ in Seventeenth-Century Poland: A Chapter in the History of the Male Jewish Body,” in “Jewish Masculinities, 1200-1800,” ed. Francesca Bregoli, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 24, no. 2 (2023), DOI: [10.48248/issn.2037-741X/14364](https://doi.org/10.48248/issn.2037-741X/14364)