

***The Holiness of the Heretical: Heretical Kabbalah as a Response to Catastrophe and the Limits of Theodicy*****Julian Ungar Sargon**

Former Clinical Director, PA Program, Borra College of Health Sciences, Dominican University River Forest, IL, USA

Citation: Julian Ungar Sargon (2026) *The Holiness of the Heretical: Heretical Kabbalah as a Response to Catastrophe and the Limits of Theodicy*. J of Clin Onco & Adv Thpy 2(3), 1-5. WMJ/JCOAT-129**Abstract**

This essay extends a constructive philosophical reading of Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschütz's self-referential hermeneutics—the discovery that the interpreter is “already written” within the eternal text—into a wider question in the study of Jewish mysticism: what distinguishes heretical Kabbalah from its classical predecessor and how might a tradition that crosses into heresy remain, in some defensible sense, holy. Drawing on Gershom Scholem's account of “redemption through sin,” Elliot Wolfson's reconceptualisation of antinomianism as hypernomianism—the transgression that preserves the very boundary it transgresses—and the post-Lurianic doctrine of evil developed by Tishby, Liebes, Idel, Magid and Maciejko, I argue that heretical Kabbalah is best understood not as the negation of classical mysticism but as its catastrophic intensification. Where classical Kabbalah answers the problem of evil through the architecture of tzimtzum, shevirat ha-kelim and tikkun, heretical Kabbalah answers catastrophe by locating the redemptive task inside the rupture itself. The result is a theodicy that refuses consolation yet refuses despair—a holiness conducted from within the abyss.

***Corresponding author:** Julian Ungar Sargon, Former Clinical Director, PA Program, Borra College of Health Sciences, Dominican University River Forest, IL, USA.

Submitted: 03.07.2026**Accepted:** 06.07.2026**Published:** 17.07.2026**From the Reader Already Written to the Problem of Evil**

Shai Alleson-Gerber has shown that Eybeschütz repeatedly read obscure Zoharic passages as encrypted references to his own life and mission [1]. In a previous essay I argued that this practice is intelligible only against a particular ontology of revelation: if the Holy

One “looked into the Torah and created the world,” then Torah precedes history, humanity and the individual life, and the interpreter does not insert himself into the text so much as recognise that he was always already inscribed within it. Identity, on this reading, is exegetical before it is psychological; revelation is complete, but recognition is not.

That argument left a question unresolved. If the self is discovered within an eternal and perfect text, what becomes of the self-discovered within a catastrophic history—the reader written into exile, persecution, the failure of messianic hope, the death camp? The Eybeschütz of Alleson-Gerber's study is, after all, a figure shadowed by the Sabbatian accusation; his cryptic self-readings were inseparable from suspicion of heresy [1]. The hermeneutic of the “reader already written” thus opens directly onto the central preoccupation of heretical Kabbalah: the conviction that the divine text anticipates not only the saint but the sinner, not only the redeemer but the apostate, and that the most exalted readings may be precisely those retrieved from the most compromised places.

Classical Kabbalah and the Architecture of Theodicy
Classical Kabbalah—here meaning the Zoharic and especially the Lurianic systems as they crystallised in sixteenth-century Safed—offers one of the most ambitious theodicies in the history of religion. Its power lies in transferring the problem of evil from the moral plane to the ontological. Evil is not, in the first instance, a human failing to be explained; it is a structural feature of a cosmos brought into being through divine self-limitation.

Three doctrines carry the weight. Tzimtzum—the divine contraction—makes room for a world by withdrawing the infinite light, so that finitude, and with it the possibility of evil, is the price of creation itself. Shevirat ha-kelim—the shattering of the vessels—locates a primordial catastrophe within the godhead prior to human history: the lights of emanation could not be contained, the vessels broke, and divine sparks (nitzotzot) fell into the realm of the kelippot, the husks or shells. Tikkun—repair—assigns to human beings, through the disciplined performance of the commandments, the labour of gathering the scattered sparks and restoring the broken order.

Isaiah Tishby's classic study of the doctrine of evil and the kelippah in Lurianic Kabbalah established how thoroughly evil is woven into this cosmology: the husks are not merely an obstacle to redemption but its raw material [2]. Wolfson has pressed the point further, reading Lurianic myth as an account of divine suffering—a godhead that is itself fractured, exiled and in need of repair, so that human tikkun participates

in the healing of God [3]. What must be underscored is that classical Kabbalah, for all its mythic daring, remains nomian: the sparks are redeemed through the law, not against it. The husks are to be separated from the holy, elevated where possible, but never embraced. The boundary between the sacred and the profane is precisely what tikkun preserves.

The Heretical Turn: Redemption Through Sin

Heretical Kabbalah begins where this boundary is crossed. The decisive theological move—whose most influential analysis remains Scholem's essay “Redemption through Sin”—reinterprets the Lurianic task antinomianly [4]. If the sparks have fallen into the deepest recesses of the husks, then the most exalted of them can be redeemed only by one who descends to their level. The messianic soul, on this logic, must enter the domain of impurity not despite its holiness but as the very form of its holiness. Sin becomes, paradoxically, a sacred act: a descent for the sake of ascent, a transgression in the service of repair.

Scholem traced this logic through Sabbatianism—the messianic movement around Sabbatai Zevi, whose apostasy to Islam in 1666 his followers reinterpreted not as failure but as the necessary descent of the redeemer into the realm of the kelippot—and through its eighteenth-century radicalisation in the Frankist movement [5,6]. Paweł Maciejko's work on Jacob Frank has shown how this descent was pressed to a nihilistic extreme, in which the abolition of the law was understood as the law of the messianic age [6]. Yael (Yehuda) Liebes and Shaul Magid have, in different registers, demonstrated how thoroughly these heresies were generated from within the classical kabbalistic imagination rather than imposed upon it from outside [7,8]. The heretic is not the Kabbalist's opposite. He is the Kabbalist who has taken the doctrine of the fallen sparks with terrifying seriousness.

Hypernomianism: Wolfson and the Holiness of Transgression

It is Elliot Wolfson who has given this paradox its most precise conceptual form. Against the long scholarly habit—inaugurated by Scholem—of describing the radical Kabbalah as antinomian, Wolfson proposes the term hypernomian [9-11]. The distinction is not pedantic. Antinomianism implies the anarchic suspension or abolition of the law; hypernomianism

names something subtler and, for our purposes, more important: the transgression of the boundary that, in the very act, preserves the boundary it transgresses.

Release from the law is not attained by discarding the law but by executing the law with an intensity that pushes past its perimeter even as that perimeter is preserved in the act of defiance.

In Wolfson's formulation, the mystical does not coerce an anarchic suspension of law but rather "its irresolute overcoming through relentless undergoing, the surpassing of the path by suffering its unremitting abiding [11]. The law beyond law is not lawlessness; it is the law fulfilled to the point of rupture. Wolfson's recurrent image is the pearl diver who descends "into the muck and mire of material existence not to indulge in it, but to redeem the sparks trapped therein," risking drowning not in order to break the law but to retrieve what lies beneath it [12]. This is the conceptual key to the holiness of the heretical. The hypernomian transgression is sanctified precisely because it does not annihilate the boundary; it honours the boundary by suffering it, by crossing it only under the duress of a redemptive necessity that the boundary itself has generated.

Read against the Eybeschütz material with which we began, the point sharpens. The reader who discovers himself "already written" in the Zohar discovers, in the heretical register, that he is written into the husks as well as the lights—that his vocation may require him to read himself in the very passages the tradition would prefer to leave unread. Alleson-Gerber's Eybeschütz, hovering at the edge of Sabbatian suspicion, is the limit case of a hermeneutic in which recognition and transgression have become difficult to tell apart [1].

Heresy as a Response to Catastrophe

Why does this turn occur when it does? The historical correlation is striking and, I think, not accidental: the great efflorescences of heretical Kabbalah follow upon catastrophe [13]. The Lurianic system itself crystallised in the generations after the expulsion from Spain in 1492; Sabbatianism erupted in the wake of the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648–49; Frankism gathered force amid the disintegration of Polish Jewry. Catastrophe is the condition under which the classical theodicy is felt to fail—or rather, under which its

consolations are felt to be inadequate to the scale of the wound.

Here the structure of heretical Kabbalah reveals its deepest logic. Classical theodicy explains evil: it assigns evil a place within a cosmic order whose ultimate meaning is redemptive. But after a sufficiently great catastrophe, explanation can come to feel like betrayal—a premature reconciliation with the unbearable. The heretical Kabbalist refuses this reconciliation. He will not place the catastrophe within an order that domesticates it. Instead, he locates the redemptive task inside the catastrophe: not above the rupture, consoling it, but within the rupture, working it from the inside. Holiness migrates from the realm of order into the realm of the broken.

This is why heretical Kabbalah so often appears, to its contemporaries and to later orthodoxy, as blasphemy. It does not defend God's justice; it descends with God into the place where justice has apparently failed. I have argued elsewhere that such heresy is frequently better understood as deferred prophecy—a revelation arriving in strange clothes, unrecognised because it speaks from the wrong side of the boundary [14]. In this respect the radical Kabbalists anticipate, in their own idiom, the twentieth-century theologies of protest and divine suffering that the Holocaust would make unavoidable—Hans Jonas's God who has emptied himself into creation and can no longer intervene, Richard Rubenstein's refusal of the consoling theodicies after Auschwitz [15,16]. The kabbalistic heretic and the post-Holocaust theologian share a single intuition: that fidelity after catastrophe may require the abandonment of theodicy in its classical sense, and the discovery of a holiness that does not require the catastrophe to be justified.

Alleson-Gerber's reading of Eybeschütz makes this convergence unexpectedly literal. He observes that the most striking feature of the mythology expounded in *Va-avo ha-yom el ha-'ayin* is the near-total absence of a demonic principle: evil, in Eybeschütz, is not a rival power but the ontological weakness of the God of Israel, who in attempting to create a world overextended himself beyond his own capacities and remains, in Alleson-Gerber's arresting phrase, "present as absent in our worldly exile [1]." Creation is unfinished not in the benign sense of *creatio continua* but in the harder sense that nothing in this world is ever truly accomplished

or complete. This is theodicy turned inside out. The catastrophe is not a fall from a prior perfection to be repaired; it is constitutive of a God who is himself frail, exiled and overextended—and whom one approaches, therefore, not by ascending out of the broken world but by descending further into it. The heretic's descent into the husks is, on this account, simply fidelity to the only God there is.

Holy Nonetheless: The Theological Wager

The wager of heretical Kabbalah—and the reason it remains, against every appearance, a religious and not a merely transgressive phenomenon—can now be stated. The heretical Kabbalist does not deny the holy. He relocates it. Where classical theodicy finds the holy in the restoration of order, the heretic finds it in the descent into disorder undertaken for the sake of the holy. The husks are not embraced as husks; they are entered as the hiding place of the sparks. The transgression is not celebrated as transgression; it is suffered as the cost of a redemption that the law itself has rendered impossible by ordinary means.

Three features keep this wager within the orbit of the holy rather than its negation. First, its intentionality: the descent is undertaken not for indulgence but for repair—Wolfson's pearl diver risks drowning to retrieve, not to drown [12]. Second, its preservation of the boundary: hypernomian transgression presupposes and honours the very law it exceeds, which is why it produces guilt, secrecy and suffering rather than liberation [11]. Third, its structural continuity with classical Kabbalah: the heretic operates entirely within the Lurianic grammar of sparks, husks and repair, drawing conclusions the classical Kabbalist drew back from but did not, in principle, foreclose [7,8].

This is the precise sense in which heresy can be holy. It is holy not because it is permitted—it is not—but because it is undertaken in fidelity to a God who is himself, in the Lurianic myth, broken, exiled and in need of repair [3]. To descend into the rupture is to follow God into exile. The heretic's sin, if it is one, is the sin of taking the divine catastrophe more literally than the tradition could afford to.

The Hermeneutic Stakes: Reading from the Abyss

We may now return to the hermeneutic ontology with which this essay opened. If the reader is “already

written” within the eternal text, then heretical Kabbalah discloses the darker corollary: some readers are written into the abyss. The vocation of such a reader is not to ascend out of the rupture into the consolations of order, but to read the text from the rupture—to recover the meanings that are legible only from within catastrophe.

This has consequences well beyond the history of mysticism, and I have explored some of them elsewhere in the clinical register, where the practitioner who would heal must often descend into the patient's broken world rather than summon the patient up into the practitioner's intact one [17]. The same heresy-orthodoxy dialectic structures the institutional life of medicine itself, where dissent from biomedical orthodoxy reproduces, often unwittingly, the older pattern of sacred rebellion; and the Lurianic image of the shattered vessels has proved a precise instrument for reading contemporary ruptures in the house of healing [18,19].

The structure is identical to the hypernomian descent: a crossing of the protective boundary, undertaken not to abolish it but to retrieve what has fallen beneath it, and sanctified by the intention of repair. The wound is read not as a problem to be explained but as a place to be entered. Theodicy gives way to accompaniment. Heretical Kabbalah, on this reading, is not an aberration at the margins of Jewish mysticism but a permanent possibility latent in its centre—the possibility that the deepest fidelity may look, from the outside, like betrayal, and that the holiest reading may be the one retrieved from the husks. Alleson-Gerber's *Eybeschütz*, discovering himself in the cryptic and the suspect passages of the *Zohar*, stands at exactly this threshold [1, 20-23].

Conclusion

Classical Kabbalah answers the problem of evil with an architecture—*tzimtzum*, *shevirah*, *tikkun*—that places catastrophe within a redemptive order. Heretical Kabbalah answers catastrophe by refusing that placement and locating redemption inside the rupture itself. Wolfson's reconception of antinomianism as hypernomianism shows why this need not collapse into mere transgression: the heretic crosses the boundary in a manner that preserves it, suffers the law to the point of rupture rather than discarding it, and descends into the husks only to retrieve the sparks. Such a religiosity is holy nonetheless—not because it is sanctioned, but

because it follows a broken God into the broken world and refuses to leave the catastrophe unredeemed.

Revelation, we said, is complete, but recognition is not. Heretical Kabbalah adds the harder clause: that some recognitions can be won only from the abyss, and that the reader who was always already written may find himself written there. The interpreter does not finally master the catastrophe. The catastrophe reveals the interpreter—and, if he is faithful, the holiness still hidden within it.

References

1. Shai Alleson-Gerberg (2014) *Derekh gever be-‘almah: darko shel R. Yonatan Eybeschütz le-zahot be-sefer ha-Zohar remazim elav ‘azmo*" (The way of a man with a maiden: R. Jonathan Eybeschütz's method of identifying allusions to himself in the Zohar). Cherub Press, Los Angeles 279-300.
2. Tishby I (1942) *The Doctrine of Evil and the Kelippah in Lurianic Kabbalism* [Torat ha-Ra' ve-ha-Kelippah be-Kabbalat ha-Ari]. Jerusalem: Magnes Press.
3. Wolfson ER (2022) Divine suffering and the hermeneutics of reading: philosophical reflections on Lurianic mythology. In: Gibbs R, Wolfson ER, editors. *Suffering Religion*. London: Routledge 101-62.
4. Scholem G (1971) Redemption through sin. In: *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*. New York: Schocken 78-141.
5. Scholem G (1973) *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, Trans. Werblowsky RJZ. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1626-1676.
6. Maciejko P (2011) *The Mixed Multitude: Jacob Frank and the Frankist Movement*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1755-1816
7. Maciejko P (2011) *The Mixed Multitude: Jacob Frank and the Frankist Movement*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1755-1816
8. Magid S (2008) *From Metaphysics to Midrash: Myth, History, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Lurianic Kabbala*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
9. Liebes Y (1993) *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism*. Trans. Stein B. Albany: SUNY Press.
10. ER (2002) Beyond good and evil: hypernomianism, transmorality, and Kabbalistic ethics. In: Kripal JJ, Barnard W, editors. *Crossing Boundaries: Ethics, Antinomianism and the History of Mysticism*. New York: Seven Bridges Press 103-156.
11. Wolfson ER (2018-2019) Hypernomian piety and the mystical rationale of the commandments in Nathan of Gaza's *Sefer ha-Beri'ah*. *El Prezente* 90-153.
12. Wolfson ER (2026) Mystical nihilism, theopolitics, ethics, and the law beyond law. Lecture, Harvard Law School.
13. Wolfson ER (2026) Mystical nihilism, theopolitics, ethics, and the law beyond law. Lecture, Harvard Law School.
14. Wolfson ER (2005) *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination*. New York: Fordham University Press.
15. Ungar Sargon J (2025) A religious response to Harari: the secular versus mystical interpretation of Jewish history. *Adv Med Clin Res* 6: 185-193.
16. Ungar Sargon J (2025) From sacred to secular heresy: parallel mechanisms of control in religious and medical institutions. *Int J Relig Spiritual Soc* 15: 65-75.
17. Jonas H (1987) The concept of God after Auschwitz: a Jewish voice. *J Relig* 67:1-13.
18. Rubenstein RL (1992) *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism*. 2nd ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
19. Ungar Sargon J (2025) The Sacred Shadow: Kabbalistic heresy and the antinomian roots of medical dissent. *J Tradit Med Appl* 4: 1-10.
20. Ungar Sargon J (2026) Shattered vessels in the house of healing: the ethical and psychological devastation of Medicaid cuts through the lens of hermeneutic medicine and mystical theology. *MOJ Public Health* 15: 15-22.
21. Scholem G (1941) *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York: Schocken.
22. Maciejko P (2017) editor. *Sabbatian Heresy: Writings on Mysticism, Messianism, and the Origins of Jewish Modernity*. Waltham: Brandeis University Press.
23. Ungar-Sargon J (2025) Revelation in strange clothes: heresy as deferred prophecy in Orthodox Jewish thought. *J Relig Theol* 7: 25-35.

Copyright: ©2026 Julian Ungar Sargon. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.