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# 12

## Philosophers, Poets, & Mystics: The Jewish Middle Ages

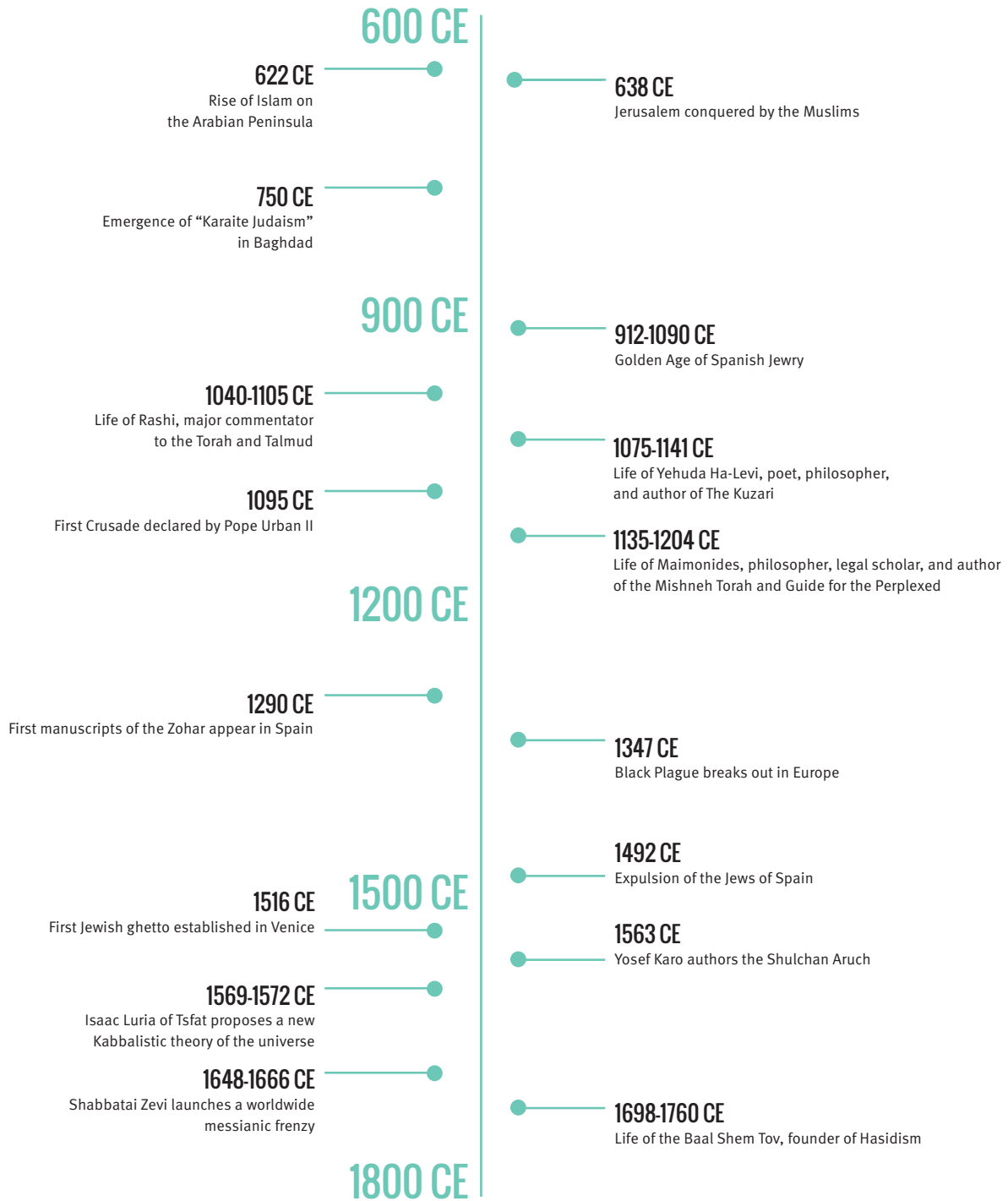
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In this class, we'll meet some of most colorful and important characters in Jewish history: From the mystics who probed the hidden world of Kabbalah to the Sultan's physician who taught that science and religion could be reconciled and the French winemaker who forever revolutionized Jewish study.

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# Judaism Under Crescent & Cross



# Poets, Philosophers & Mystics

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## **Rashi**

Commentator

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## **Yehuda Ha-Levi**

Poet

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## **Maimonides**

Philosopher

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## **Yosef Karo**

Legalist

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## **Isaac Luria**

Mystic

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# Rashi

## Commentary on Creation (Genesis 1:1-2:2)

### IN THE BEGINNING, GOD CREATED HEAVEN AND EARTH

What is the reason that the Torah starts here? It's because of what it says in Psalms: "God has shown His people His strength, when He gave them the heritage of the nations" (Psalms 111:6). That is to say that the Torah begins with Creation in order that if the other nations accuse us of being robbers, since we conquered the Land of Israel, we can reply that the entire world is the property of God, He created it and He gives it to whoever is proper in His eyes. It was His will to take it from them and His will to give it to us!

### GOD SAID: LET US MAKE MAN IN OUR IMAGE

Even though God didn't rely on anyone else in creating, and, frankly, this creates an opportunity for the heretics to claim that there is more than one God, the Torah doesn't skip an opportunity to teach us manners, in this case the importance of humility. A great person should always consult with and obtain permission from his subordinates, in this case the angels.

### GOD CREATED MAN IN HIS IMAGE, MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM

There seems to be a contradiction here, because later on it will say that God took one of Adam's ribs to make the woman (Genesis 2:21). There is a legend that Adam was originally created with two faces and only later was separated.

### ON THE SEVENTH DAY, GOD FINISHED THE WORK HE HAD BEEN DOING AND HE CEASED FROM ALL THAT HE HAD DONE

An explanation of this teaching is that God looked to see what the world was still missing, and saw that it was missing the idea of rest. Shabbat came, and with it came rest — and the work was completed and finished.

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#### How to study Rashi's commentary:

- What is Rashi's question about the verse?
- How does his answer help us to understand the verse?
- What do you think of his answer?

# Maimonides

## Letter to Ovadiah the Convert

Thus says Moses, the son of Rabbi Maimon, one of the exiles from Jerusalem, who lived in Spain:

I received the question of the master Ovadiah, the wise and learned convert, may God reward him for his work, may a perfect reward be bestowed upon him by the God of Israel, under whose wings he has sought cover. You ask me if you, too, are allowed to say in the blessings and prayers you offer alone or in the congregation: “Our God” and “God of our Fathers,” “You who have sanctified us through Your commandments,” “You who have separated us,” “You who have chosen us,” “You who have inherited us,” “You who have brought us out of the land of Egypt,” and more of this kind.

Yes, you may say all this in the prescribed order and not change it in the least. In the same way as every Jew by birth says his blessing and prayer, you, too, shall bless and pray alike, whether you are alone or pray in the congregation. The reason for this is that Abraham our Father taught the people, opened their minds, and revealed to them the true faith and the unity of God; he rejected the idols and abolished their adoration; he brought many children under the wings of the Divine Presence; he gave them counsel and advice, and ordered his sons and the members of his household after him to keep the ways of God forever, as it is written, “For I have known him to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of God, to do righteousness and justice” (Genesis 18:19).

Ever since then, whoever adopts Judaism and confesses the unity of the Divine Name, as it is prescribed in the Torah, is counted among the disciples of Abraham our Father, peace be with him. Therefore, you shall pray, “Our God” and “God of our Fathers,” because Abraham, peace be with him, is your father. And you

shall pray, “You who have taken our fathers for Your own” for the land has been given to Abraham, as it is said, “Walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give to you” (Genesis 13:17).

There is no difference whatsoever between you and us. You shall certainly say the blessing, “Who has chosen us,” “Who has given us,” “Who have taken us for Your own,” and “Who has separated us,” for the Creator, may God be extolled, has indeed chosen you and separated you from the nations and given you the Torah. For the Torah has been given to us and to the converts, as it is said, “One ordinance shall be both for you of the congregation and also for the stranger that sojourns with you, an ordinance forever in your generations; as you are, so shall the stranger be before Adonai” (Numbers 15:15). Know that our fathers, when they came out of Egypt, were mostly idolaters; they had mingled with the pagans in Egypt and imitated their way of life, until the Holy One, may He be blessed, sent Moses our Teacher, the master of all prophets, who separated us from the nations and brought us under the wings of the Divine Presence, us and all converts, and gave to all of us one Law.

Do not consider your origin as inferior. While we are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, you derive from the One through whose word the world was created. As is said by Isaiah: “One shall say I am Adonai’s and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob” (Isaiah 44:5).

Translation from *A Maimonides Reader*, edited by Isadore Twersky (1972).

# Kabbalah

**Whoever discusses four things, it is better that he should not have been born: What is above, what is below, what came before, and what will be after.**

Mishnah, Hagigah 2:1

**Our Rabbis taught: Four entered the Orchard. Ben Azzai looked and died. Ben Zoma looked and went mad. Elisha ben Abuya became a heretic. Only Rabbi Akiva entered in peace and exited in peace.**

Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 14b

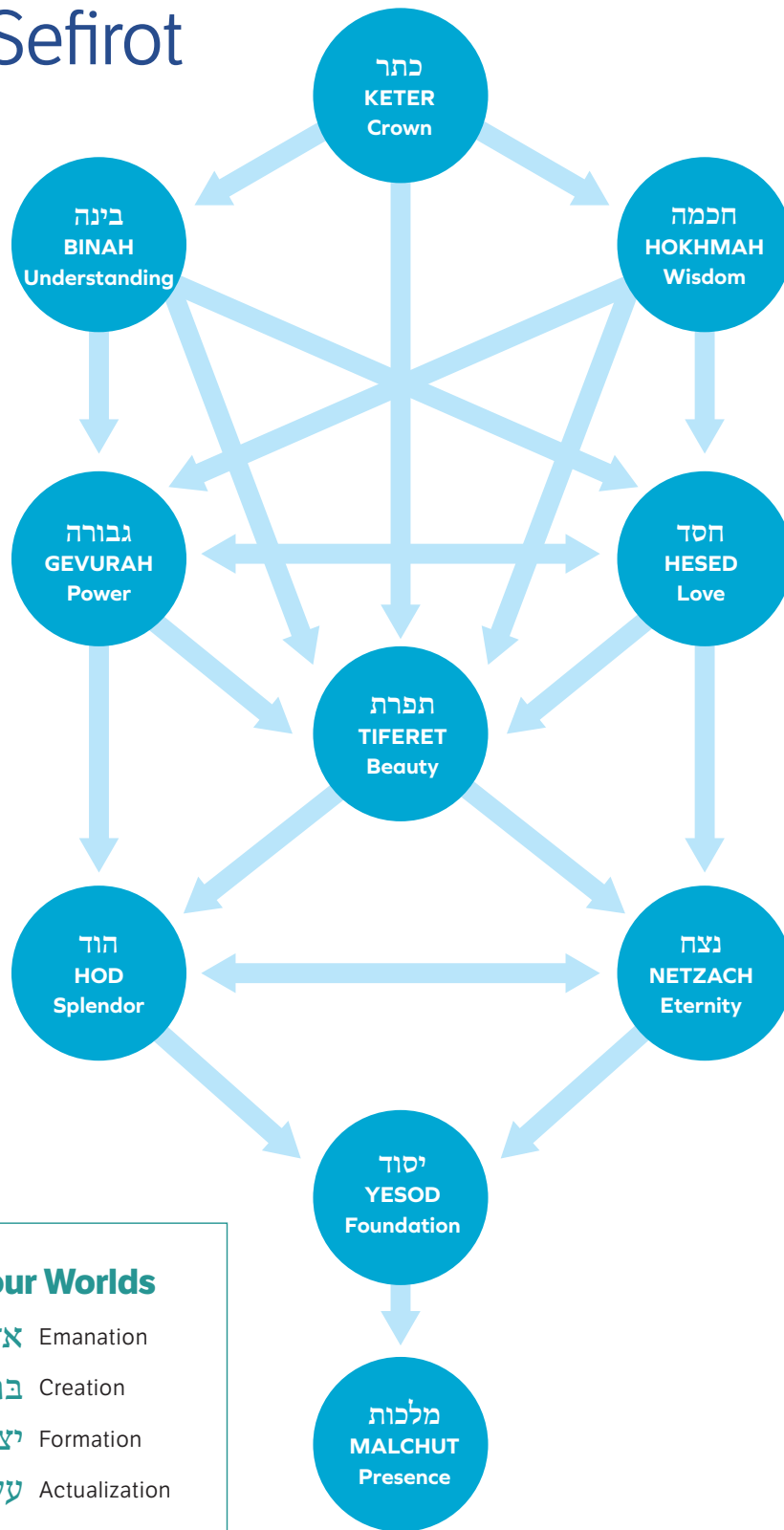
Rabbi Shimon said: “Alas for the person who regards Torah as a book of mere tales and everyday matters. If that were so, even we could compose a Torah of even greater excellence. All of the princes of the world possess books of greater worth. The Torah, however, contains in all its words higher truths and sublime mysteries. The stories of the Torah are only her outer garments, and whoever looks upon that garment as being the Torah itself — how sad for such a person! The clothing worn by a person is only the most visible part of him, and foolish people will look at him and only perceive his outer layer. However, the value of the garments is the body, and the value of the body is the soul. So, too, the Torah has a body and a soul that is enveloped in garments of worldly narrations.

Zohar, Beha'lotkha 152a. Translation from Gershom Scholem, *Zohar: The Book of Splendor* (1949)

An impoverished person thinks that God is an old man with white hair, sitting on a wondrous throne of fire that glitters with countless sparks, as the Bible states: “The Ancient One sits, the hair of His head like clean fleece, His throne — flames of fire” (*Daniel 7:9*). Imagining this, and similar fantasies, the fool corporealizes God. He falls into one of the traps that destroy faith. His awe of God is limited by his imagination. But, if you are enlightened, you know of God’s Oneness; you know that the divine is devoid of bodily categories — these can never be applied to God. Then you wonder, astonished: Who am I? I am a mustard seed in the middle of the sphere of the moon, which is itself a mustard seed within the next sphere. So it is with that sphere and all it contains in relation to the next sphere. So it is with all the spheres — one inside the other — and all of them are a mustard seed within the further expanses. And all of these are a mustard seed within further expanses. Your awe is invigorated; the love in your soul expands.

Moses Cordevero, *Or Ne'erav*. Translation from Daniel Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (1995)

# Ten Sefirot



**The Four Worlds**

- אצילות Emanation
- בריאה Creation
- יצירה Formation
- עשייה Actualization

# The Hasidic Revolution

Hasidism began in Eastern Europe with the Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760), whose teachings focused on personal prayer, spirituality, and joy. Over the coming centuries, Hasidic groups, each led by its own Rebbe, developed an approach to Judaism that taught that God is accessible to everyone at all times.

## On Joy

One of the major rules for worshipping God is that one should do everything possible to keep from sinking into sorrow. You should worship in joy. Weeping is very bad, unless it results from happiness.

**Baal Shem Tov (d. 1760)**

*Tzav'at Ha-Rivash*

## On Prayer

Do not think that the words of prayer as you say them go up to God. It is not the words themselves that ascend; it is, rather, the burning desire of your heart that rises like smoke to heaven. If your prayer consists only of words and letters, and does not contain your heart's desire — how can it rise up to God?

**Rabbi Zev Wolf of Zhitomir (d. 1800)**

*Or Ha-Meir*

## On Seeking God

I may not be able to see it right now,  
but the Holy One fills all creation.

Being is made of God,  
you and I, everything is made of God,  
even the grains of sand beneath my feet.

The whole world is included in and  
therefore utterly consumed within God.  
I, in my stubborn insistence on my own  
autonomy and independence,  
only succeed in banishing myself from any  
possibility of understanding.

**Piesetzna Rebbe (d. 1943)**

*B'nai Machshava Tova*





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**From today's class, I would like to learn more about:**

1.

2.

3.

## Books

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- Mark Cohen, *Under Crescent & Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages*  
An important and scholarly look at Jewish life under Christian and Muslim rule.
- Maggie Anton, *Rashi's Daughters*  
A historical novel about the family of Rashi, one of the greatest Jews of the Medieval Period, who educated his daughters to become scholars at a time when girls were typically barred from study.
- Sherwin Nuland, *Maimonides*  
A brief, readable introduction to the life and thought of the famous physician, philosopher, and rabbi by one of today's best-known doctors.
- Daniel Matt, *Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism*  
The best place to begin if you are curious about Kabbalah. Includes a brief history of its development as well as beautiful, poetic translations of many original texts.
- Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire*  
A beautiful and spiritual history of the Hasidic movement through the diverse personalities and teachings of its leading Rebbes.