

THE FAINT TRACES OF THE JEWISH MYSTICAL TRADITION: THE KABBALAH IN 15–18TH-CENTURY ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract

This article investigates the influence of the Kabbalah on Jewish architecture and synagogal art. Due to the destruction of the Eastern European kabbalist-related architecture and the preservation of only two indisputably “kabbalist” synagogues, the Abuhav and the Ashkenazi Ari Synagogue in Safed, Israel, secondary research that includes literature, religious texts, and historical photographic documentation analysis was undertaken. This allowed the identification of the elements of architecture, paintings, and sculptures that could be inspired by the Kabbalah or potentially created according to its rules and recommendations. However, it is impossible to unambiguously indicate the Kabbalah as the primary source of inspiration neither for architectural forms nor artistic representation in the interiors of synagogues. Because of the metaphysical orientation of its believers and the difficulties following the representation of abstract ideas by formal solutions, the outcome of the research proved, in most cases, the lack of any direct kabbalistic influences on architecture.

Keywords: The Kabbalah; Kabbalist Architecture; Architectural History; Jewish Architecture; Jewish Culture; Synagogal Architecture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since medieval times, “illusive” kabbalist mysticism has remained one of Jewish culture’s most captivating and controversial elements. Numerous studies on Jewish buildings, including synagogues, have been carried out; however, there is still a lack of research on the influence of the Kabbalah on architecture. There are two reasons for this state: the first one is connected to the closeness of kabbalist symbols to Jewish ones and, sometimes, the lack of a possibility to describe them as belonging to a concrete belief; the second one, probably the most important, concerns the elusive character of the Kabbalah: the system of beliefs is based more on a religious or rather philosophical

interpretation of knowledge with a limitation of its physical portrayal following the second of the Ten Commandments: “You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth” (Exodus 20:4; as, with differences, in Deuteronomy 27:15 and Leviticus 26:1). This limitation, even strengthened in Leviticus 19:4 (“Do not turn to idols or make molden gods for yourself: *אֱלֹהִים אֲנִי יְהוָה* am your God”), significantly affected Jewish art and architecture focusing on other than images and sculptures of humans and animals forms of artistic representation. This had a serious implication: the main focus of Jewish artists shifted to images and forms of plants, geometric forms, and writings. Excluding the

art made under the more or less forceful influence of other cultures, as in the case of the zodiac in synagogues during the Hellenistic and Roman periods in the area of Palestine, strict laws were partially re-interpreted in the 16th century by R. Yosef Karo who, following the 12th-century R. Ephraim of Regensburg, in chapter 141 of his *Shulchan Arukh* stated that two-dimensional paintings of human figures were permissible without human faces and complied with the aesthetic of distortion found in illuminated medieval Ashkenazi manuscripts that used bird's heads, blank faces, veils, helmets, crowns, or rear views to depict the human face as mentioned by [1]. Therefore, the relationship between the Kabbalah and architecture is ambiguous and thus open to various interpretations; furthermore, synagogues have never been sacred places like churches but are buildings that serve their purposes [2], and the religious symbols in their interiors are neither necessary nor obligatory. Thus, new point of view is presented on applying kabbalist culture in architecture from the 15th to the 18th century, both in Safed, then in the Ottoman Empire and Eastern Europe. Publications on the historical aspects of the Kabbalah and architecture are virtually non-existent, except for an article by Huberman [3] and a book mainly concerning modern architecture written by Gorlin [4].

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The article aims to answer the question about the origins and identification of the possible cultural influence of the Judaism-based Kabbalah on architecture. Therefore, the research on the relationship between the intangible Kabbalah and its tangible representation requires analytical literature studies covering the current state of knowledge, bibliographical studies of the *Zohar* and other religious texts, and observation and analysis of the existing architecture and related art. This article presents an analytical approach to understanding the complex relationship between sophisticated intangible kabbalistic culture and its tangible architectural expression. Potential problems in the research follow the difficulties in identifying intangible factors that influence physical space and the extremely rare presentations of potential kabbalist symbols in medieval, renaissance, and baroque Jewish architecture. Inevitably, there also are significant discrepancies between opinions presented in different sources on what is and what is not the kabbalist architecture or art. Moreover, there is a risk of confusion about some of the typical patterns or symbols with kabbalist motifs used within other parts of

Jewish culture, which are especially significant due to the limited number of known kabbalist synagogues and the lack of explanatory sources what hinders precise identification of the artistic representation.

3. ROOTS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE KABBALAH

The Kabbalah, which means “tradition”, is a theosophic conception of God [5]. Among its main doctrines are the nature of Eyn (Ein) Sof (the Supreme Being or the Infinite regarded as the pure essence of God) and its Emanations (Sephira) presented in the classical form of the Tree of Life (such as The Tree of Life (depicting ten Sephirot) from *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* by Athanasius Kircher published in 1652; Fig. 1), the cosmogony (Fig. 2), the creation of angels [6] and men, the destiny of men and the universe, and the Revealed Law [7].

Since the kabbalistic doctrine explains that all creation remains an emanation of the Infinite, the soul's

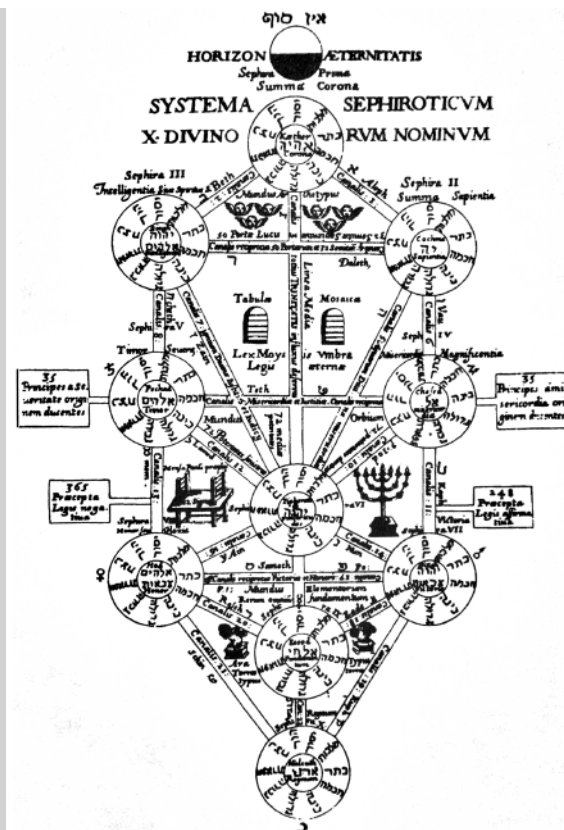


Figure 1.
The Tree of Life (Sephira) from *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* by Athanasius Kirchner (1652) [8]. Public domain

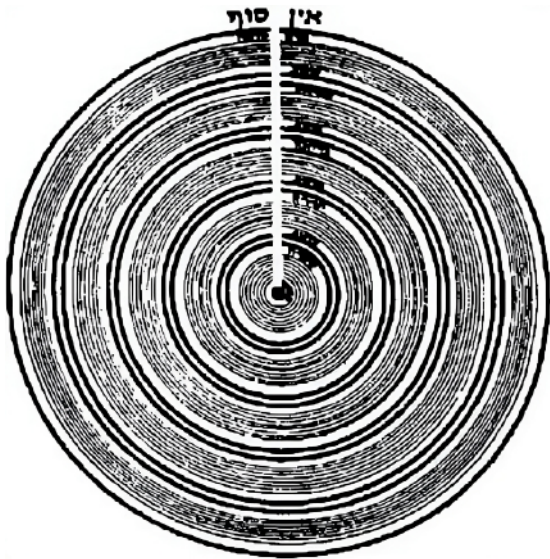


Figure 2.
The cosmogonic organization of the world represented by spheres associated with Sephirot within Ein Sof (schema) [9]. Public domain

existence is eternal. Except for the heretical forms of Sabbateism, and later Frankism, its systems were considered as conservative ideologies within the frame of Rabbinical Judaism [10]. The main book explaining the Kabbalah, *Sefer ha-Zohar* (the Zohar; Fig. 3), was probably written during the fast development of the philosophical and religious system in the 13th century [11,12] and divided into two, philosophical and practical, sections. Understanding the *Zohar* depends on knowledge of traditional Jewish culture and the specific philosophical kabbalist system and an open-minded perception of the sense and purpose of human beings in the world.

However, there are different opinions on the authorship of the *Zohar* and the place and time when it was written. Cited above Scholem also claims that the authorship of most of its text should be contributed to Moses de Leon in the 13th century instead of the 2nd-century sage Simeon bar Jochai, earlier recognized as the principal author. This was opposed by Liebes, who stated that the authorship belongs to the whole group that worked on the Kabbalah based on



Figure 3.
The cover of Zohar; Cremona, 1559–1560 [13]. Public domain

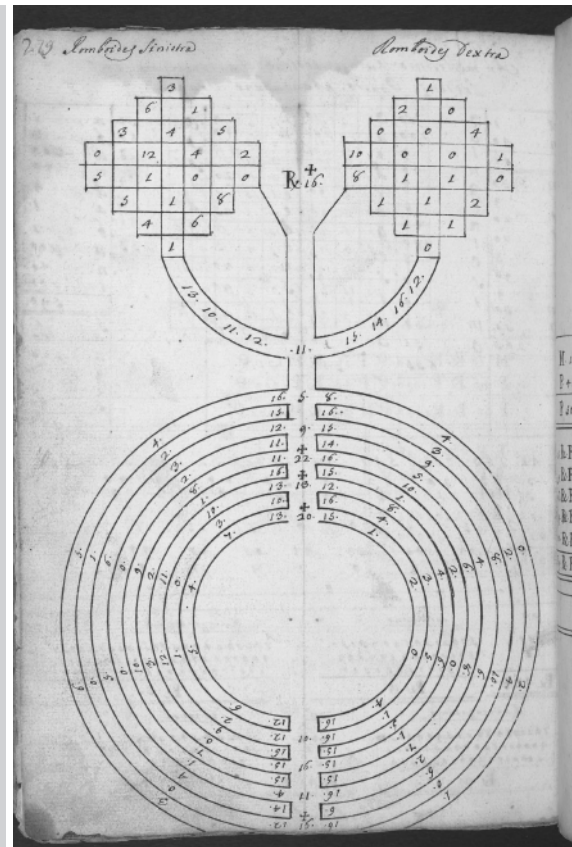


Figure 4.
Letters with assigned numerical values from the 16th-century treatise on Gematria [14]. Public domain

analysis of ancient tradition and texts, including those from the outside of the rabbinic tradition [15, as cited in 16]. According to Meroz [17] the part of the Zohar that describes angelology, Paradise, and theurgy was written during the 11th century, before the date commonly recognized as the time of its publication. At this time, the concept of Sephirot (sing. Sephirah; Keter – Crown, Chochmah – Wisdom, Binah – Understanding, Chessed – Kindness, Gevurah – Might, Tiferet – Beauty, Netzach – Victory, Hod – Majesty, Yesod – Foundation, and Malchut – Kingdom, also known as Shekhinah, the last in the chain and the closest to the material world) (The Beginning of Wisdom 1:3) as an explicit description of the organization of emanations of God, with their direct astronomical association, as a system did not exist. However, in Chronicles I 29:11 from ca. 500 BCE the description of God's attributes resembling all the emanations exists, as well as, in fragments, in Matthew 6:13 and John in Revelation 5:12-13 as stated by Van Auken [18]; these seem to be the source of the direct inspiration for the future development by kabbalists.

Eventually, the Kabbalah reached the height of its influence in the later Middle Ages and significantly influenced the development of Eastern European Hassidism. According to the Lurianic Kabbalah, named after the prominent kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria (ha'ARI; 1534 1572), who eventually died in Safed, Eyn (Ein) Sof reveals himself through the above-mentioned 10 Sephirot. The Sephirot vary in their gender attributions. According to some teachings, including *Zohar*, the left pillar represents female principles and the right one male principles, while the central pillar that unites male and female principles remains gender neutral (*Zohar* 1:17a); thus, particular Sephirot correspond to different genders.

Following the recognition of the Kabbalah as one of the essential elements of medieval Jewish philosophy and mysticism, gematria (Fig. 4) was applied to find a hidden relationship between letters of the Hebrew alphabet, numerals, and attributed energies [19]. Gematria, a numerological system with ancient roots referenced in the Mishnah in 200 CE, which was also known to ancient Babylonians and Greeks, and later Christian Gnostics [20], created new philosophical possibilities for a specific interpretation of written text. According to its followers, decoding the numerical values of Hebrew letters could reveal hidden meanings that would allow for understanding the world. However, the relationship between letters, their values, and architecture that has remained, for

example, a part of the folk culture in Safed [21] cannot be explicitly confirmed due to the main purpose of gematria: in this case, architecture, as opposed to symbolic art, did not play any significant role for kabbalists.

The Kabbalah, as a Judaism-based theosophical system of beliefs, could affect the development of architecture in two ways: through the religious rules, customs, and beliefs that may influence space in terms of its function and, more often, through the creation of art in architecture in the form of symbols. Therefore, these two groups of factors need to be considered together. Moreover, including historical conditions in the analysis can shed light on the arguable existence of kabbalist symbols in architecture. In both the groups of factors, the relationship between the intangible Kabbalah and its tangible representation can be divided into interconnected elements; these elements, of both a quantitative and qualitative nature, include the frequency of the physical representation of the symbols in architecture and art, their physical location, and the level of encoding in their information. As in the case of aesthetics, the effective reading of the encoded information depends on the observer's knowledge.

4. THE KABBALAH IN ARCHITECTURAL SPACE

Even though its sources may be indicated in ancient times, the Kabbalah was developed, as mentioned above, in medieval Spain and later in the Ottoman Empire and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. To analyze the relationship between the Kabbalah and architectural space in these socio-political contexts, rules and traditions are taken into consideration. It is assumed that the system had a limited influence on architecture, especially in terms of its function, due to the highly developed and continuously evolving intellectual base that did not correspond to any physical representation, as explained above. In other words, most kabbalists did not possess a strong interest in creating the architectural space that, as explained below, is a common custom of any religion in the process of institutionalization. Although the architecture of the synagogues originates from the same source as the later Christian churches, the Roman basilica, the plans of the first of them, such as the ancient synagogue in Delos, strongly resembled Roman villas. In medieval times, the form of the ancient Roman basilica evolved through the addition of transepts into more complex forms of Latin or

Orthodox churches [22]. These forms were also used as a model for other styles of synagogues in medieval Europe, including Spain, and mosques. More complex changes have occurred in aesthetics, especially in the case of synagogues' interiors. Here, the patterns and religion-based symbols directly referring to religious texts have started to play an increasing role in architectural design. There is no clear indication of the use of kabbalist symbols in architecture and related art before the 15th century due to the lack of synagogues built before this date and serving continuously as kabbalist temples until today. Moreover, the symbols of the Kabbalah in the majority of cases, are often not depictable graphically due to their usually multi-layer meaning, which would lose at least part of its complex essence when represented (only) in the physical world.

Conversely, as in other systems of beliefs and religions, symbols with encoded meaning that remain more open to interpretation than those in precisely explained kabbalist texts appear on the walls and ceilings of kabbalist synagogues. A similar phenomenon to the one described above occurs in the case of Christianity, in which symbols that were more sophisticated than a simplified representation of fish started to be popular in art and architecture during the process of the religion's institutionalization. As an outcome, tangible artifacts, as well as paintings and

other physical forms of information, came to be necessary and were very often simplified due to the potential recipients of the encoded information, part of the religious system. Eventually, the richly decorated interiors of the kabbalist synagogues were filled with kabbalist symbols. Even though the kabbalist influences on architecture and related art remain controversial, some architectural solutions indicating a connection to the kabbalist system were applied in the medieval, renaissance, and baroque synagogues, above all in Israel, Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus. For this purpose, the kabbalist-associated elements of architecture, including the forms, patterns, and symbols appearing in synagogues from the 15th to the 18th century in those areas, have been analyzed.

5. KABBALAH-BASED DESIGN: A CASE STUDY OF THE ABUHAV SYNAGOGUE IN SAFED

The Abuhav Synagogue, built in the 15th century in what was then Ottoman Safed and is now Israel, presents one of the examples of a kabbalist synagogue since it was designed, according to local tradition, by Rabbi Yitzhak Abuhav of Castile from Toledo [23]. During this time, before the conquest by the Ottomans in 1516, Safed remained under Mamluk



Figure 5.
The courtyard of the Abuhav synagogue; phot. R. Lindeman [24]



Figure 6.
The ceiling of the Abuhav synagogue with the representation of musical instruments; phot. H. Johnson [25]

rule. As in the case of other synagogues, the exterior of the synagogue remains relatively simple in terms of aesthetics.

Because it was almost totally destroyed in the first earthquake in 1759, when only the southern walls with the ark survived, as well as in the second one in 1837, and eventually rebuilt, the current building merely resembles its original form and interior [26]. The synagogue's design was not based on Spanish archetypes but followed the new approach to synagogal architecture with the application of kabbalist forms and symbols.

The main exceptions are the preservation of the courtyard at the entrance following the Christian law prohibiting its exposure [27], the use of stone as a building material, the rectangular shape of the windows, and the only simplified resemblances to the Moorish style in the portal of the main entrance and the frames of the windows on the second floor. To enter the stone-built Abuhav Synagogue, it is necessary to pass through the courtyard. This provides time to allow one to focus on the correct thoughts

before entering the synagogue, as mentioned in the *Zohar* (1:11a:6). On the other hand, R. Yosef Karo in his *Shulchan Arukh* 90:20 and R. Joel Sirkes, who recognized the Kabbalah as an integral part of Judaism [28], in his *Bayit Chadash* at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, noted without any reference to the Kabbalah the simple logic of having a courtyard in front of the sanctuary to allow a person to compose their thoughts prior to prayer. This role of courtyards in the design of medieval synagogues is also visible in many other late medieval cases, including the examples in the Jewish City in Casimir, Poland.

The interior architecture likely contains kabbalist references, probably originating in numerology. However, architectural solutions may possess some encoded meaning and observers' interpretation depends on their ability to read this information according to their knowledge of a certain culture. In some cases, this meaning can be confirmed just by the existence of written texts describing the intention as well as the process of design and construction of religious buildings. As one of the most significant elements, according to oral tradition, the interior design includes four columns in the main hall that probably represent the four worlds of holiness – Azilut, Beriya, Yetzira, and Asiya – in opposition to the four worlds of impurity (Ball Ha'Sulam's Introduction to the *Zohar* 10). Alternatively, the number four could have a different meaning; here, it may refer to the four angels of Ezekiel's vision (The Beginning of Wisdom 9:12) with animal faces; the prophet himself played a significant role in kabbalist mysticism [29]. Moreover, the number four may refer to the four components, namely fire, earth, water, and air, the four directions of the world, and four materials described as gold, silver, brass, and iron (*Zohar* 2:23b:8 9; 2:24a:1; 1:80a:9 10). The number of steps to the centrally located bimah probably refer to the six days of creation (*Zohar* 1:140b:21; Or Neerav, PART VI 5:5); the bimah itself may represent the seventh day of creation. Along the southern wall, the Ark, as the most important element of the synagogue, is divided into three sections that refer to the three patriarchs mentioned in the *Zohar*: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (*Zohar* 1:11a:6). In addition, three Arks are mentioned in Exodus 25:11. One of the Arks contains one of the oldest scrolls of the Torah, and its authorship is attributed to the founder of the synagogue. However, the meaning of all these elements associated with numbers, even though appealing in terms of relation to the Kabbalah, cannot be unambiguously verified, in my opinion.

The number of windows in the dome, 10, may represent the Ten Commandments, in opposition to the law stating that the number should be 12 to represent the tribes of Israel. This number of windows in the Abuhav Synagogue suggests different symbolic meanings, or it may simply relate to the construction of the ceiling. Instead, the number 12 appears as a symbol of Jewish musical instruments painted on the dome's ceiling. However, due to the restoration of the synagogue after the earthquakes mentioned earlier, it is impossible to confirm that the symbols had also been painted in the previously existing buildings. Here, the floral patterns are typical of all Jewish synagogal art and thus do not create additional kabbalist connotations. Conversely, the above-mentioned symbols of musical instruments in the dome refer to music as a sensual connection with the spirit. The seven traditional musical instruments (Fig. 6) are presented in three groups (*shofar* (horn), *pa'amon* (bell), and *hazzerot*; *chalil* (flute) and *tziltzele*; and *tof* (tambourine) and *oud*) and the remaining five separately (*kinnor* (lyre), *nevel*, *nechiloth*, *meziltayim* (cymbals), and harp). What should be underlined is that although musical instruments appear relatively often in synagogue paintings, their number is significantly limited in opposition to the Abuhav Synagogue interior. The importance of music in the Kabbalah was stressed by Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, for whom a mystical combination of Hebrew letters as the intellectual exercise of pure thought to express the rhythm of cosmic life was compared to musical composition exerting a similar influence on the human soul [30]. Glazerson [31] notes the complex, uplifting, and explanatory role of music with the relationship between octaves and spheres explaining the kabbalistic meaning of traditional Jewish musical instruments and music itself with the use of gematria. Moreover, as Avenary [32] claims, kabbalistic attempts to reveal the secrets of creation, or the heavens, often refer to musical symbols, metaphors, and allegories. He argues that, according to kabbalists, music, which plays a role leading to knowledge as well as the constant repetition of music's revelation through mystical intention, indicates that music is God's creation.

Colors play, or at least used to, a significant role in the medieval Kabbalah [33] as a physical representation of certain phenomena. Therefore, the ceiling of the Abuhav Synagogue and the bimah remain Kabbalah-related parts of the interior aesthetics due to the two colors used in their respective cases, which were popular in the architecture of Kabbalist Safed: white and blue.

According to Sagiv [34], the color blue, widely used in art and architecture in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern regions for its protective powers, possesses a specific meaning in Jewish culture which does not result from external influences. In the Kabbalah, the colors white and blue or black described in the Zohar (1:51a) refer, respectively, to the divine infinity that can be neither affected nor changed and the lower realm that can be destroyed when lacking a connection with God. This reveals the purpose of the blue light, as a part of it cleaves to white light, as a necessary factor eventually motivating to rise toward the divine and to avoid destruction. Blue remains associated with the highest emanations, like *Chochmah* – wisdom, and the lowest ones, like *Malchut* – kingdom. Moreover, the relationship between these two colors remains significant due to the importance of Israel approaching the Chochmah because, as cited in the Zohar, “it is Israel alone which impels the blue light to kindle and to link itself with the white light, Israel, who cleave to the blue light from below” (1:51a).

6. KABBALIST INFLUENCE IN THE INTERIOR: A CASE STUDY OF THE ASHKENAZI ARI SYNAGOGUE IN SAFED

The second synagogue in Safed that presents kabbalist influences is the Ashkenazi Ari Synagogue (Fig. 7) built in the late 16th century in memory of Isaac Luria (known as Ari). The location of both kabbalist synagogues in the same small town highlights the important role that Safed played in the 16th century as a center of the Kabbalah [35]. As in the previous case, the synagogue was demolished in the earthquake in 1837 and subsequently rebuilt. Since it was created after the earthquake by an artist of unknown origin from Kolomyia, Ukraine [36], the Holy Ark in the Ashkenazi Ari Synagogue [37] presents a type of ark used in the 18th century in the wooden Eastern European synagogues. The entire structure is carved in olive wood and covered with colorful patterns and ornaments, as in the case of the interiors of those synagogues. The first two levels of the ark are divided by an architrave. The Holy Ark, to which there are three steps, consists of three levels: the first one, the base, with double doors to the scrolls of the Torah covered with a *parochet*, is framed by Corinthian columns and pillars on each side decorated with plant ornaments and blessing hands (the latter); the second one presents the tablets with the Ten Commandments from the Book of Exodus (Exodus 24:12) surrounded by



Figure 7.
The Ari Ashkenazi Synagogue in Safed; phot. E. Dyan [43]



Figure 8.
The Ari Ashkenazi synagogue ark – upper parts with the representation of a lion and the Tree of Life; phot. R. Lindman [44]

plant ornaments and flanked by single columns; and the third level, remaining bent inside and topped with a crown, includes a rich three-dimensional plant

ornament including a lion with an anthropomorphic face (Fig. 8). The lion's human face resembles the lion in the polychromies of the Cold Synagogue in Mogilev created after 1740 by Chaim ben Yitzhak ha-Levi Segal of Sluck [38] and refers to the face of man (*Zohar*, 1:20b:4); it also contains the acronym ARI. The image of the lion, accepted as a symbol in Eastern European Jewish culture although debated, resembles and represents the great kabbalist Rabbi Itzhak Luria known under this acronym, in whose honor the synagogue is named [39].

There is one more important kabbalistic artistic influence on the second level of the Holy Ark: the tablet with the Ten Commandments is presented in the form of the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life has been adopted by various cultures, religious systems, and beliefs [40], including the Kabbalah, here for the purpose of the graphical depiction of the relationships between the sephirot. The kabbalistic reference follows the relationship between the Sephirot and the Ten Commandments: according to kabbalists, Jews, through their performance of the commandments and prayers, could influence the realm of sephirot [41]. This can also be directly understood as the relationship between the ten sephirot of holiness represented by the Ten Commandments combined with their antagonist anti-Sephirot of impurity or darkness mentioned in *Maaseh Nissim* on Pesach Haggadah, Magid, The Ten Plagues 18:1. The Tree of Life as a kabbalistic

symbol used to be represented on the covers of Jewish prayer books in Eastern Europe, as in the case of the prayer book in the Voupa Synagogue [42].

7. KABBALISTIC INFLUENCES IN SYNAGOGUES IN POLAND, UKRAINE, LITHUANIA, AND BELARUS

Since the evolution of the Kabbalah and, eventually, the appearance of Hassidism, some of its original concepts, however, rarely, have appeared in the synagogal art in Eastern Europe. It should also be underlined that there is an important connection between the Lurianic Kabbalah and Hassidism in Eastern European countries and Safed: the Lurianic cult of saints represented by, respectively, tzadiks and famous kabbalists [45] flourished in both areas. Albeit restricted by the Catholic church and authorities [46, 47], numerous synagogues started to appear in Eastern European cities and towns after the subsequent expulsions of Jewish communities from Spain, Portugal, and other countries. These synagogues were built, as previously, of stone or what was new, requiring a skilful labor force, of wood; both types created a new chapter in the history of original Jewish architecture due to their unique design. The stone-made synagogues were characterized by their strong defensive characteristics because of the numerous conflicts, wars, and pogroms in the multi-ethnic area, as in the case of the synagogue in Pinsk, Belarus, while the wooden ones created a new type of architectural solution. Built from the beginning of the 17th century in the eastern areas of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, where the Kabbalah and Hassidism were most influential [48], those synagogues possessed wooden structures of the main mass and complex, multilevel pitched roofs sup-

ported by complex wooden trusses and separated from the ceilings [49], which took the form of vaults or cupolas. The form of the building resembled small Polish manor houses built in the same territory; thus, most probably, they were the source of the architectural inspiration for the Jewish religious buildings. On the other hand, their richly ornamented ceilings strongly resemble Turkish military tents from the 17th and 18th centuries.

Another opinion was presented by Lukomski [50], who claimed that the form of the roofs resembles a compilation of European Renaissance and Chinese (?) architecture. The bimahs in the synagogues were situated in the middle of the buildings, in some cases surrounded by four columns supporting the ceilings. The most formidable remained the richly painted interiors, with numerous writings, patterns, and symbols covering all the accessible areas of the walls and ceilings. Most of the wooden synagogues have been destroyed by wars, fires, and other catastrophes, but there is still at least partially preserved documentation of many of them; however, the ceilings of two synagogues in Hvizdets and Khodoriv, with their polychromies, have recently been reconstructed and exhibited in, respectively, Polin Museum in Warsaw and Beth Hatefutsoth Museum in Tel Aviv.

Conversely, originally, the typical Eastern European Hassidic houses of prayer, called shtiblekh, kloyzn, and beth midrash [53], were mostly modest (Fig. 9), one-floor residential buildings adopted for religious practices. In the evenings and at night, they also served as places of religious study for men. Their plans were simple, and their interiors were not decorated, following the religious attitude towards physical matter and the poverty of the Hassidic communities; as Hassidim became more affluent, their



Figure 9.
The Baal Shem Tov's beth midrash in Medzhybizh [51].
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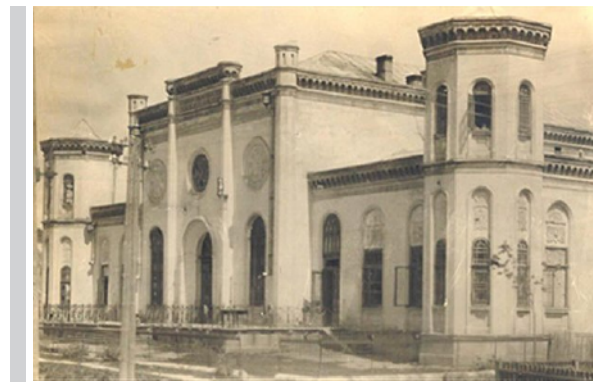


Figure 10.
Hasidic synagogue in Chortkiv, 1910 [52]. Public domain

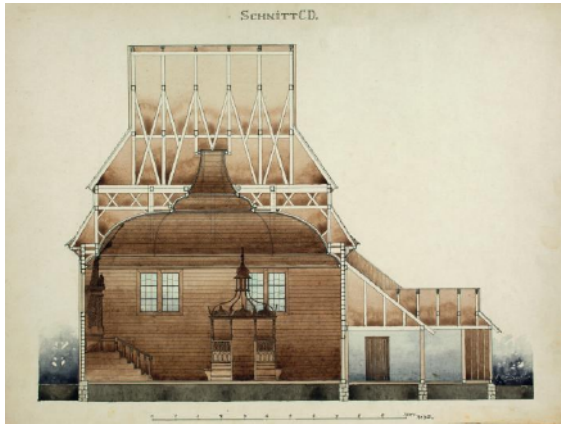


Figure 11. Section of the synagogue in Hvizdets with crown-based shape of dome; draw. A. Breyer [57]. Public domain



Figure 12. Double-headed eagle; polychromy in the Hodoriv Synagogue; phot. A. Breyer [58]. Public domain

synagogues also became more elaborate. Therefore, no direct kabbalist influences can be found in their architectural form and artistic decoration; the same relates to the architecture of the late Hassidic synagogues from the 19th and 20th centuries (Fig. 10), practically owned by *tzadiks* from the most prominent Hassidic families possessing also “dynastic” residences, as in Sadhora or Chortkiv, nowadays both in Ukraine.

Although it is difficult to identify specific kabbalist influences in the architecture of Eastern European synagogues due to the Kabbalah remaining an inseparable part of Judaism, some important exceptions exist. One of the most prominent architectural solutions with a kabbalist origin adopted in the interiors of Eastern European wooden synagogues is the form of the above-mentioned separated roof structure ceilings in the form of vaults with centrally located cupolas. The domes on pendentives based on octagons

had the shape of a crown. Here, the specific shape of the ceilings, even though originating in a structural solution, may additionally depict the relationship between the imaginable God’s domain and the human world that directly refers to infinite mercy. This type of crown-based shape of domes was visible, among others, in the 17th – and 18th-century wooden synagogues in Valkininkai [54], Smotrych, Hrodna [55], Sniadowo, Hvizdets (Fig. 11), Voupa [56], Nowe Miasto, and Grojec, all located in what are now Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, and Poland and thus the former lands of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (16th–18th centuries). Such an architectural representation of a connection between God or Heaven and humans also exists in buildings of other religions: the high ceiling of a gothic Christian cathedral depicting stars in the sky is visible, for example, in the case of the 13th-century Sainte Chapelle in Paris, France, and an even more complex representation of the sky covers the ceiling of the 17th-century Fatima Masumeh Shrine in Qom, Iran.

The most aesthetically impressive and at least partially unambiguous kabbalist influences on the interior architecture of Eastern European synagogues remain connected with the design of the Holy Ark, as in the case of the Ashkenazi Ari Synagogue in Safed. The Holy Ark in the wooden synagogue in Warka [59], Poland, built at the beginning of the 19th century and burned down in 1939, had a sculpture on the second level of a chariot referring to the kabbalistic supernal holy chariot related to the patriarchs mentioned in the Zohar (1:18a:10, 1:19a:6, 1:130b, 2:23b:9) or, above all, to the chariot (Merkavah) described in Ezekiel’s prophetic vision (Ezekiel 1:4–26); the latter alludes to the mystic part of Hassidic culture. It is also possible that the artist who made the ark considered more than one meaning of the chariot. Even though a single-headed eagle is included in the design of the Holy Ark in Suchowola [60], Poland, its origins as a kabbalist symbol may be disputed.

A different situation arises in the case of symbols of double-headed eagles. A double-headed eagle is another important kabbalistic symbol included in the Holy Arks of the synagogues in Vyzuonos, Saukenai, Valkininkai (all in Lithuania), and Radozhin (Belarus) [61] and part of the polychromies on the vaults or walls of the synagogues in Khodoriv, Voupa, and Jablonow (Poland). The head of the eagle (Fig. 12), according to mentioned earlier Huberman [3], refers to the kabbalistic symbolism popular in Poland in the 17th century: it represents the dualism

of the right-hand line as grace and the left-hand line as a line of judgment, while the eagle itself represents mercy as God's feature on the middle line. What is interesting at first sight is that the double-headed eagle in those synagogues could represent the expanding Russian Empire [62] that conquered the areas of the eastern part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at that time. This explanation seems to not be correct: such a meaning of the symbol in a synagogue would border idolatry. The double-headed eagle follows the Eastern European kabbalistic allegorical representation of the dualism of mercy in the form of an animal motif. Other symbols include the menorah, David's Star (Shield), and lions; however, the ones represented in those synagogues in the Holy Arks or the polychromies cannot be interpreted as specifically kabbalist art. The same applies to various types of floral patterns that are commonly depicted or sculptured in synagogues.

Eventually, the conscious inspiration from the Kabbalah, including form, light, and symbols, started to appear in architectural design no earlier than modern times with the increased interest in and popularization of the system, as described by Gorlin [4]. From the perspective of the kabbalists, however, these tangible applications may seem to be entirely deprived of the original meaning and simply naïve.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The ambiguity of the kabbalistic symbols and forms confirms that Jewish architecture and art are more complex and open to interpretation than could have been predicted. Moreover, searching for more veiled kabbalist meaning is most frequently irrelevant and may lead to a profound overinterpretation of architectural space. The same symbols and architectural forms could be subjected to a different comprehension, and the intention of the authors could be hidden and vague, as in the case of symbols of eagles, especially when the architecture and art are created in a hostile or rather unpredictable environment and have to keep deeply encoded information, readable only to insiders. Only the Eastern European wooden synagogues, which mostly did not survive the Second World War, together with the still-existing Abuhav and Ashkenazi Ari Synagogues in Safed, remain possibly influenced by the Kabbalah in the form of the only few symbols and the polychromies on the ceilings and walls. However, in their architectural forms, no explicit kabbalistic influence has been found. This specific relationship between the Kabbalah and

architecture may require future analysis due to the fast development of new research methodologies and potential discoveries of new iconographic and textual documents in currently unavailable archives.

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