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“Revealing The Secret of His Wives” – R. Joseph Karo’s Concept of Reincarnation and Mystical Conception*

Joseph Karo was a man of the Renaissance. Born in sixteenth-century Spain and living in Salonica, Greece, in scholarly circles closely tied to Italian Jewry, Karo could have absorbed the spirit of the Italian Renaissance. Nevertheless, it was his creative personality rather than his education that shaped his diverse literary output. Indeed, Karo’s fluent style of writing, his combination of rational lawmaking and imaginative prose, and his prophetic aspirations put him in line with the great scholars of Renaissance, as the herald of the Golden Age of Kabbala in Safed.

Celebrated author of *Shulḥan ‘Arukh*, the latest codification of Jewish law, Karo is considered to be one of the four pillars of Jewish law (*Halakha*), subordinate only to Moses, the receiver of the written law (*Tora*); R. Juda the President, who sealed the oral law (*Mishna*), and the medieval Maimonides, author of the famous *Mishne Tora*. Karo’s dominance with regard to legal matters does not overshadow his prominence as a gifted Kabbalist. His mystical visions, written in a breathtaking literary style and preserved in an esoteric diary, originally titled *Sefer ha-Maggid* (“The Book of The Preacher”) and later *Maggid Mesharim*,¹ inspired his contemporaries and gained him the reputation of a prophet. Concentrating on the unique experiences of an individual mystic rather than abstract metaphysics, these visions reflect a typical Renaissance attitude, focusing on the human perspective while embarking on the quest for metaphysical truths. His creative imagination produced yet another kind of renaissance, a poetic revival of ancient texts – in particular, the reconstruction of fragments of the *Zohar* in his diary.² As a matter of fact, the importance of the *Zohar*, a pseudepigraphy that Karo regarded as a lost text of high sanctity, written in the second century and rediscovered after a thousand years, can

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¹ After *Isa 45:19*: “I declare things that are right.” All the quotations of the mystical diary are translated from the Hebrew version of *Maggid Mesharim*, A.Bar-Lev, (editor), Petaḥ-Tikva 1990 [Henceforth MM].

² On the Zoharic influence on Safed Kabbala, see Y.Liebess, “The Zohar as a Renaissance”, in: *Daat* 46 (2001), pp. 10–11 (Heb.); B.Huss, “The Zoharic Communities of Safed”, in: *Book of Jubilee Dedicated to Bracha Zack*, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press [in print] (Heb.).

be compared to the influence on Renaissance scholars such as Marcello Ficino, Pico Della Mirandola and Giordano Bruno of another pseudepigraphy, one attributed to an Egyptian high priest named Hermes Trismegistus. And Karo's mystical practice of contemplation through the Tetragrammaton³ is reminiscent of Ficino's Neoplatonic natural magic, in which physical objects and graphic symbols – including the cross – serve as talismans, which reflect the divine forces that revive them.⁴ Naturally, Karo was bound by the biblical restriction “Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor any manner of likeness” (Ex 20:4) and reflected only on the Hebrew letters, attributing a special value both to their graphic shapes and to their semantic meanings, while Ficino could relate to physical objects and artistic images as well.

Another similarity to the great scholars of the Renaissance is Karo's strong belief in magical concepts such as reincarnation (*Gilgul*) and mystical conception (*Ibbur*). Inherited from medieval Kabbala, the concept of reincarnation teaches that each and every soul has three incarnations, corresponding to three historical periods of Jewish history. The first, most ancient, incarnation is that of a biblical figure. In its second incarnation, the soul of the biblical figure enters the body of a Sage – a *Tanna* or an *Amora*. The third incarnation is the present one, in which the soul is given a last chance to atone for its sins in previous incarnations and be redeemed. The purified soul becomes a pure vessel of its divine source, a reflection of a *Sefira* or an angel, serving as an emissary and a bridge between the celestial army of angels and the corporeal army of God's devotees. Thus, the process of purifying previous incarnations elevates historical heroes to metaphysical status, following the common Kabbalistic concept that biblical figures – the Patriarchs, Moses and Aaron, King David and others – are symbols of the ten *Sefirot*.

A parallel concept is that of a magical “conception” or “pregnancy” (*Ibbur*, *Hit'abrut*), in which a new soul enters the body and, eventually, two souls dwell in the same body.⁵ This occurs only in unusual situations, however, when a male soul is given a female body, breaking the harmony between the soul's gender and that of the body. Apparently, Joseph Karo adopted the notion, first found as early as *Sefer ha-Bahir*, that souls, just like bodies, have specific genders. According to *Sefer ha-Bahir*, the different biblical accounts of the creation of mankind teach about the different stages of creation. First, the souls were created: “God created man in His own image ... male and female created He them” (Gen 1:27); this teaches that each soul was created with a specific gender, either male or female. Then, the bodies were created – the woman was formed out of the man's rib, and the souls entered the bodies. “Then the Lord formed man of the dust of the ground,

³ See MM, p. 174; R.J.Z. Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo, Lawyer and Mystic*, Oxford University Press 1962, p. 163.

⁴ See F.A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, London 1964, pp. 62–83; M. Idel, *Kabbalah New Perspectives*, New Haven & London 1988, pp. 49–58.

⁵ See MM, p. 107.

and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Gen 2:7).⁶ As a result, souls have genders that do not necessarily match the genders of their bodies. Such a disharmony, and not a physical flaw, is the true cause of infertility. In order to adjust the gender of the soul to the gender of the body, magical pregnancy is needed, in which another soul, of the appropriate gender, enters the body, allowing it to become fertile (in the case of a male body) or able to conceive (in the case of a female body). A complementary Kabbalistic idea is the organization of souls in "branches" or "clusters." Each individual soul is a "spark" (*Nišoş*) within the cluster, and its correction can rectify the entire cluster.

Karo's reliance on these concepts, widely reflected in his mystical diary, might call into question his underlying rationality and cast a shadow on his sense of morality and on the extent of his faith in God's transcendental omnipotence. In fact, Jacob Burckhardt criticized similar convictions often found among Renaissance scholars, characterizing them as superstitions that penetrated the vacuum created by the loss of true faith: "Faith has collapsed," says Burckhardt "but the power of magic remained valid."⁷ Describing the process by which superstitions, magic, astrology and fatalism replaced faith, he argues: "the confidence in God's guidance of the world had been shaken in the era of Renaissance due to the corruption and injustice of the political and the clerical leadership ... Yet, people kept their faith in the ultimate destiny of the soul in the world to come. But when they despaired from the belief in the eternity of the soul as well, they exchanged it with mere fatalism."⁸

As well reasoned as Burckhardt's observation might be, it does not fit the case of Joseph Karo, who did not rely on an imaginary world of ghosts to justify fatalism or to replace faith. On the contrary, Karo used these ideas as bricks in the construction of his messianic vision: like many of his fellow Kabbalists, he believed that the Messiah would come when all souls were ready for him. Therefore, the repair (*Tiqqun*) of the souls precedes the Messiah's arrival and makes it possible. Taking this sequence into account, it seems that Karo's preoccupation with the previous incarnations of his own soul and those of his wives, as described below, resulted from his desire to correct all aspects of those souls, including their sins in previous incarnations, and thus allow for the arrival of the Messiah. In other words, Karo's sense of responsibility toward Jewish history led him to strive to rectify it through mystical repairs to its most prominent figures. Moreover, his empathy with exemplary figures of Jewish history played a major role in the construction of his self-image, immortalizing his unique contribution to the messianic era in which he believed himself to be living.

⁶ See *Sefer ha-Bahir [Book of Brightness]*, R. Margalio, (ed.), Jerusalem 1951, *siman* 198, pp. 91–92; *The Book Bahir. An Edition Based on the Earliest Manuscripts with an Introduction* by M. Idel, D. Abrams (ed.), Los Angeles 1994, paragraph 140, p. 223.

⁷ J. Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, Frankfurt [1860] 1956, p. 256.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

Two figures – Moses and King David – played a major role in the construction of Joseph Karo's self-image. Given his messianic anticipations, his affinity to Moses is understandable; for Jewish tradition portrays Moses, the first redeemer, as a role model for the final redeemer, the Messiah.⁹ No wonder that Joseph Karo was convinced that he was the reincarnation of Moses. His conviction was rooted in the fact that both were legislators and both were blessed with the gift of prophecy. Indeed, Karo linked the voice that was occasionally heard through his throat and mouth to a divine messenger from the upper worlds, assigning the status of prophecy to the content of his revelations. This linkage was based upon the resemblance of the appearances of the voice to the prophecy of Moses, to whom God has spoken "mouth-to-mouth."¹⁰

The mysterious messenger was Karo's mentor, guiding his soul in its journeys to the upper worlds and there revealing the secrets of the Tora.¹¹ Unexpectedly, the messenger was androgynous, sometimes bearing a male identity, called ha-Maggid ("The Preacher"), and sometimes a female identity, called the *Shekhina*. The double-gendered mentor sheds light on Karo's occasional disregard for conventional boundaries: when spirituality was concerned, the meticulous Rabbi did not seem to determine the value of the soul by the gender of the body.

Karo's openness is well demonstrated in his attitude toward the second messianic figure that played a significant role in his self-image – King David. According to Jewish tradition, the Messiah will be the offspring of King David's dynasty. This tradition, which captivated the imagination of religious and political leaders, played a major role in Joseph Karo's messianic expectations for the year 1540 (A.M. 5300), which was anticipated to be the year of redemption.¹² His expectations were manifested in his conviction that his second wife had been a male in a previous incarnation, whose identity, coded in Karo's mystical diary, had been that of a prominent member of King David's dynasty. Therefore, their marriage would effect a repair of a mystical and messianic nature.

The "secret of the incarnation"¹³ of Karo's wife is closely connected to yet another mystery, which surrounds the number of his marriages and the number of his

⁹ See BamR, M. A. Mirkin (ed.), Tel Aviv 1964, Vol. 9 (section *Naso*) p. 283: "The final redeemer is like the first redeemer."

¹⁰ Num 12:8. See also Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, p. 269.

¹¹ The role of the divine messenger in Karo's mystical diary recalls the role of the long-dead Roman poet Virgil (70–19 B.C.) as the imaginary guide on the path through Hell and Purgatory in *The Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri's (1265–1321).

¹² The messianic calculations that point to 1540 (A.M. 5300) as the year of redemption can be found in the writings of two prominent Kabbalists of this generation – Solomon Molkho, whom Karo regarded as a holy martyr (MM., p. 362) and R. Abraham haLevi, the author of *Mishra Katarin*. See A. H. Silver, *A History of Messianic Speculations in Israel*, New York [1927] 1978, pp. 110–150; A. Z. Aescoly, *Jewish Messianic Movements*, Jerusalem [1957] 1987, p. 391–393 (Heb.); *Mishra Katarin*, M. Bet Arie (ed.), Jerusalem 1978, fol. 12b.

¹³ MM, p. 38.

wives. Halakhic and historical sources¹⁴ indicate that Joseph Karo had three wives, all known only by their fathers' names. The first wife was the daughter of R. Isaac Saba and the sister of R. Samuel Saba, the head of a Yeshiva in Adrianople in the Turkish Empire. Karo married her around 1522 and around 1530 they moved to Salonica, where she and three of their four children died of plague in 1534.¹⁵ One year after her death, Karo married again, this time to the daughter of R. Ḥayyim Al-Balage (Al-Balgary) of Nikopol, Bulgaria, and moved to his new father-in-law's hometown. Karo's second wife was the mother of his son, Solomon, born around 1540 in Safed. After her death, around 1565, Karo, still in Safed, married his third wife. Daughter of an Ashkenazi scholar, R. Zekharya Vernek, she was the mother of Juda, Karo's youngest son. Juda was born in 1569, when his father was 82 years old.

Notwithstanding these historical details, certain fragments in Karo's mystical diary suggest that between 1533 and 1536 he was married to two women at the same time, and the divine Maggid referred to them as "your second wife" and "your third wife."¹⁶ The diary, however, does not present information in chronological order, and important details – in particular dates and names – are omitted. Other fragments were written in a code,¹⁷ and the information cannot be readily understood. Therefore, the information regarding Karo's wives is so confusing that Zwi Werblowsky was unable to paint a conclusive picture of Karo's family life: he argues that Karo, despite his Sephardic origins, was unlikely to violate the Ashkenazi ruling that forbids polygamy, yet he is willing to accept the notion that Karo had a total of five wives, and, at some point in his life, may have been married to more than one woman.¹⁸ Werblowsky concludes his discussion with the observation that Karo's mystical diary reveals many psychological problems that should be analyzed by a professional scholar in the field of psychology.¹⁹

But Joseph Karo's life was not guided merely by suppressed drives or psychological complications, though they are certainly reflected in his writings. More important was his mystical logic, with which he reinterpreted the events of his life and reconstructed his emotional and practical worlds. To understand his mystical logic and solve the mystery of his wives, one must closely examine one of the first revelations of the divine Maggid, which occurred "In light of the day of the Shabbat, 22 of the first (month of) Adar," (February 19, 1530).²⁰ Apparently, Joseph

¹⁴ See Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, p. 99.

¹⁵ The tombstones of Karo's children – Buena, Isaac and Juda – were identified in a cemetery in Salonica. Their mother's tombstone was not found. See I. S. Emmanuel, *Mazevot Salonica [Precious Stones of The Jews of Salonica]* Jerusalem 1963, Vol.1, p. 70. (Heb.); The mystical diary confirms their death. See MM, p. 122.

¹⁶ MM, p. 75.

¹⁷ Following the Maggid's order (MM, p. 38): "And you are not allowed to write it in an accessible way for (other) people to comprehend."

¹⁸ See Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 94, 112, 132.

¹⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 114.

Karo at the time lived in Salonica with his first wife and their children. In this revelation, the Maggid reveals Karo's destiny in this world and in the world to come, starting with his present wife:

And I shall give you from this modest and worthy woman another son, for she deserves it because of all she has suffered ... and when she departs this life you will marry, *one after the other*, two *married/multiple*²¹ women ... and from these (women) you will have gifted sons, knowing His name and studying his Tora.²²

Like the famous oracle of Delphi, with her puzzling prophecies, the Maggid here reveals a prophecy that, understood literally, creates a paradox and leads to a practical catch. Karo learns that his first wife, who already has borne children, will be blessed with another son, and after her death, he will marry two women who will bear him more children. Nevertheless, Karo is told he will marry these women *one after the other* and then, only then, will they bear children. Although he was not formally subject to the ban of Rabenu Gershom, which does not allow Ashkenazi Jews to practice polygamy, Karo as a practical matter would not disobey it by marrying two women "one after the other" as literally said. On the other hand, he cannot fulfill the prophecy by marrying the second wife and divorcing her in order to marry the third wife, because both wives are to bear children but the second wife will not conceive until after he marries the third. The resolution of the paradox is implied by the Maggid's words about the women being "multiple" (*Kefulot*), that is, "doubled". Karo understood it to imply that the body of the second wife would possess two souls – her own soul and the soul of the third wife. The Hebrew term used here is *עיבור* and *התעברות* (conception), which indicates a kind of a mystical pregnancy, in which a new soul enters the body and the two souls eventually dwell within the same body.²³ In other words, Karo was foretold to marry two women in one marriage or a "multiple" woman with two souls: her original soul and a second soul that belonged to the third wife, which was going to enter her body. This interpretation of the prophecy explains the reason for the Maggid's reference "your second wife," referring to her primary soul, and "your third wife," relating to her secondary soul.

²⁰ The diary identified only day and month, saying nothing of the year. But since the Maggid promised Joseph Karo to "increase your academy (Yeshiva) *there* in quantity and in quality," Karo must still have been in the Diaspora, not yet having emigrated to the Land of Israel ("*there*"). He emigrated in 1536, making that the latest possible year for the revelation. Moreover, the reference to the month as "first Adar" indicates that the year was a leap year, in which the month of Adar is doubled. Thus, the relevant years might be all leap years of this decade, corresponding to: 1530, 1533, and 1536. In 1533 and 1536, however, 22 Adar 1 fell on Monday; only in 1530 was it the Shabbat. Accordingly the revelation took place in 1530 (on February 19), and Karo's composition mentioned in the revelation was probably *Bet Yosef*, first printed in 1536.

²¹ Most versions use the phrase *נשים בעולות*, meaning "married women" or women who are no longer virgins. The manuscript quoted by Meir Benayahu uses *נשים כפולות*, meaning "multiple women." See M. Benayahu, *Yosef Behiri [Joseph My Chosen One]*, Jerusalem 1991, p. 322. (Heb.)

²² MM, pp. 5–6.

²³ See *ibid.*, p. 107.

Joseph Karo fulfilled the Maggid’s prophecy: around 1535, a year after the death of his first wife and three of their four children in a plague in Salonica, he married his second wife, convinced that she was a “multiple” woman with an original soul and a secondary soul that was going to enter her body. The newly-married couple settled in Nikopole, Bulgaria, where the woman’s father, R. Ḥayyim Al-Balage (Al-Balgary) was the local Rabbi. The Maggid refers to the woman as “the daughter of a friend” (*Bat Haver*), a Talmudic phrase that denotes R. Ḥayyim’s virtue as a scholar of Halakha. Moreover, the word “friend” (*Haver*) in Karo’s mystical terminology was also applied to the members of his mystical circle, and might suggest that R. Ḥayyim Al-Balage belonged to this circle. The Maggid affirms another part of the prophecy, about the bride having been married before (*Be’ula*) by saying that Karo was “blessed to use a vessel of holiness,” another Talmudic phrase, indicating that she was the widow of a scholar as well.²⁴

Marrying and moving to Nikopole did not mark a new beginning in Joseph Karo’s life. Although he loved and respected his new wife, he did not have intimate relations with her. The reason was connected to his sense of guilt: although the remarriage had been prophesized by the Maggid, Karo remained haunted by the death of his first wife and the unexpected deaths of their children, and he believed they had been punished for his sin. The Maggid refers to Karo’s abstaining from relations with his new bride as an “exile” (*Galut*) and compares Karo’s sin to King David’s sin of adultery with Bath-Sheba, which caused him the death of four of his children:²⁵

One son died on Shabbat, and the speech of the eldest son was taken on Shabbat, and your eldest daughter died on the Shabbat, and even their mother died on the Shabbat. Hence, four (of your family) died, like (King) David who lost four (of his family) because of this sin.²⁶

Although the Maggid did not say it explicitly, the mystical equivalent of King David’s sin of adultery is the desecration of spiritual communion with God by evil and impure thoughts of a sexual nature, which might have been Karo’s actual sin.²⁷ His punishment was immediate – during that year of “exile” the Maggid refrained

²⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 38. The Talmudic source is bBM 84b. In another fragment (MM, p. 38) the Maggid implies that the woman even had a child or children with her first husband.

²⁵ See 2 Sam 12:6: “and he shall restore the lamb fourfold.” According to Rashi, King David’s four children were Bath-Sheba’s new born; Amnon; Tamar; and Absalom. According to Ralbag, the victims were Bath-Sheba’s new born; Amnon; Absalom; Adonijah.

²⁶ MM, p. 122.

²⁷ Using the symbolism of Kabbala, Karo might have desecrated the union of the *Ṣaddiq* (righteous one), symbolized by *Sefira* of *Yesod* (Foundation), and the *Shekhina*, the divine female, symbolized by *Sefira* of *Malkhut* (Kingdom). The Shabbat might have been the symbol of their union, and the reason for the deaths of his loved ones on that particular day. This interpretation is in accordance with the Zoharic symbolism, in which the Shabbat usually symbolizes the female *Sefira* of *Malkhut*, but also the union of the male and the female (*Yesod* and *Malkhut*) – symbolized by *Sefira* of *Tiferet* (Glory). See I. Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, London & Washington [1989] 1994, Vol. 3, p. 1223. It should be also noted that the Talmud argues that King David also died on Shabbat. See bShab 30a-b.

from appearing through his throat and mouth, distancing himself from Karo's impurity and thus connecting the sexual "exile" to the religious "exile" as two aspects of the same penalty. Throughout that year, Joseph Karo fasted often and afflicted himself. Forsaken by God, his psychological and moral wounds finally brought about a total crisis. On Rosh ha-Shana of 5296 (August 30, 1535) Karo became so physically ill that his life was in danger. He felt as if he had been summoned to a celestial trial, in which his soul was judged and almost doomed to death:

And in the time that you were dangerously ill, many defenders stood up for you and many prosecutors stood up against you. And in that night of Simḥat Tora²⁸ when you were very ill, your verdict was already given. Yet, the Ancient of All Ancients was revealed upon you with his splendor and He had mercy on you because of the Mishna that you had learned during your illness. And then He enlightened you to approach his reverence.²⁹

Karo's second wife devotedly took care of him, and the reappearance of the Maggid after a few months marked the beginning of his recovery. He understood those revelations to be a sign of divine forgiveness and an approval of his second marriage. No wonder that the first of the renewed revelations dealt almost exclusively with Karo's relations with his second wife, the secrets of her soul and the mystical purpose of their marriage. The discoveries played an essential role in the process of Karo's healing and raised his hopes regarding the marriage and the child it might finally produce.

On three consecutive Shabbatot during the month of Ṭevet 5296 (December 4, 11, and 18, 1535)³⁰ the Maggid broke the news to Joseph Karo, telling him that in her second incarnation, his wife had been a male by the name of Ṭarfon.³¹ A well-known mishnaic sage and priest, R. Ṭarfon was an excellent scholar, but, according to the Maggid, he was a greedy miser who did not donate to charity and refused to share his wisdom and his knowledge with others. His punishment was being reincarnated into a female body:

Hence, you witness her charitable behavior. She does a lot of charity, and she also loves you very much because you let Tora stream by writing books (of Tora) to teach others and by teaching them, and those activities are her repair (*Tiqqun*); therefore she loves you.³²

²⁸ September 20, 1535.

²⁹ MM, p. 386.

³⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 34–38, 75–78. The first of these revelations was not documented in Karo's diary, but some fragments were quoted in the third revelation in a manner permitting a partial reconstruction of its content. As for the dates, the documented revelations are dated: "Shabbat, 16th of Ṭevet" and "Shabbat, 23rd of Ṭevet," indicating that the first revelation occurred on Shabbat, 9th of Ṭevet. This information provides the basis for determining the year: since the revelations took place after the death of Karo's first wife, i.e. after 5294 (1534), the most probable year is 5296 (1535–1536), in which the dates in question fell on the Shabbat and which is consistent with other information regarding Karo's life.

³¹ The name "Ṭarfon" (טרפון) was coded and written as *nagopaṭ* (נגופט). In one manuscript the code was identified as "*atbash*" and the true name, "Ṭarfon," was written on the margin. See Benayahu, *Yosef Behiri*, p. 396. The *atbash* code is explained below.

³² MM. p. 38.

Apparently, Joseph Karo’s scholarly achievements and his wife’s acts of charity repaired R. Tarfon’s sins of parsimony. And since she had a male soul, the Maggid called her “little woman,”³³ and promised Joseph Karo to bestow her with a female soul in order to allow her body to conceive and bear a child. Satisfying Karo’s curiosity, he even revealed a piquant detail about the woman’s first husband, who had possessed a female soul, thereby enabling her first marriage to be fruitful. It should be noted that the term “little woman” refers to her lack of a feminine soul, which caused disharmony between the gender of the soul and that of the body that results in infertility, as explained above. Moreover, the usage of the adjective “little” in Karo’s diary is close to the usage of the term “littleness” (*Qatnut*) in Lurianic Kabbalistic psychology, where it describes a situation in which the soul suffers a mystical flaw, caused by the pull of the evil powers.³⁴ The association of “little” with the dominance of the evil powers confirmed Karo’s expectations that the union with his second wife was designed to redeem her soul by rectifying the sins committed by that soul in previous incarnations. Between the lines, however, the message was directed to a deeper understanding of the marriage’s messianic mission, which involved the identity of Karo’s wife in her first incarnation. Revealing that secret was much more difficult, for the Maggid spoke reluctantly, stammering in hesitation and refusing to share the secret:

And when you find out who (he) was in the first incarnation you will be in awe and you will treat her with great respect and you will be ashamed to use her for your (corporeal) delights. And you should know ... And you should know ... And so he (the Maggid) said for an hour or more, and he stopped and grew silent, and then repeated: And you should know ... as if refusing to inform me. Finally he said: The Almighty sent me to inform you what a great gift he had given you ... And you are not allowed to share this information with anyone but with those, whom I permit you. And you are not allowed to write it in an accessible way for (other) people to comprehend. And you should know that in the first incarnation (he) was ... And in the second incarnation (he) was ... And you (already) know that in the second incarnation (he) was a miser. And I let you know the secret of his present incarnation so (he) can receive his punishment and be accomplished by your deeds. And through her, you are worthy of sons and worthy of the learning of the written Tora and the oral Tora. And she is worthy through you, thanks to the money that she gives you and the way she serves you.³⁵

As mentioned above, the Maggid’s order to refrain from writing “in an accessible way for (other) people to comprehend” led R. Joseph Karo to use a code while writing what he regarded to be the most confidential information. In most versions of his mystical diary, however, the core of the secret – the identity of the woman’s first incarnation – was simply omitted, either by Karo himself or by the copyists and the printers of the diary’s manuscripts. Only R. Jacob Şemah, the first copyist

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

³⁴ See Y. Liebes, “‘Two Young Roes of a Doe’: The Secret Sermon of Isaac Luria before his Death,” in: *Lurianic Kabbalah*, R. Elior and Y. Liebes (eds) Jerusalem 1992, pp. 113–170 (Heb.); M. Pachter, “*Katnut* and *Gadlut* in Lurianic Kabbalah” in: *Lurianic Kabbalah*, R. Elior and Y. Liebes (eds) Jerusalem 1992, pp. 171–210. (Heb.)

³⁵ MM, p. 38.

of one of the manuscripts (now owned and quoted by Meir Benayahu) left the name in code: *sh-h-kh-t-kh* (שהכתך). The second copyist of that manuscript, R. Samuel Garmisan, recognized that code and added on the margin: “Names to be changed by *atbash*” (שׁוֹ - תִּ - אִ).³⁶ *Atbash* is an ancient code, already used by the prophet Jeremiah to curse the king of Babylon and the people of Chaldea without explicitly spelling out their names.³⁷ The method is simple, based on the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet arranged in 11 couples, “alpha and omega”: the first letter alef (א) replaces the last letter tav (ת) and vice versa; the second letter bet (ב) replaces the next-to-last letter shin (ש) and vice versa, and so on. Deciphering it in accordance with this code, the name *sh-h-kh-t-kh* (שהכתך) turns to Beṣal’el (בצלאל). In short, in her first incarnation, Karo’s second wife was Beṣal’el.

A well-known biblical figure, Beṣal’el son of Uri was chosen to be the architect and builder of the Tabernacle when the people of Israel wandered in the Sinai desert: “And He has filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship” (Ex 35:31). The Bible identifies Beṣal’el as a descendant of Peres, the son of Tamar and Judah. Hence, Beṣal’el was third cousin of Salma, the grandfather of King David’s grandfather.³⁸ Moreover, the Midrash asserts that Miriam the prophetess, Moses’ sister, was his grandmother.³⁹ Beṣal’el belonged therefore to both eminent dynasties: he was an offspring of the royal dynasty of Judah and Tamar⁴⁰ and an offspring of the House of Moses – a perfect genealogy for the Messiah.

Joseph Karo’s affinity to Moses, the prophet of all prophets, and to King David, the founder of the kingdom, was manifested in his conviction, verified by a divine messenger, that his second-third wife was the incarnation of Beṣal’el, the descendant of both dynasties. As a matter of fact, this belief was no secret among Karo’s contemporaries: although inaccurate, a version of the Maggid’s revelation, claiming that Joseph Karo’s son was “rooted” from Beṣal’el, spread in Safed and was quoted by R. Ḥayyim Vital.⁴¹ Perhaps the rumor reflected Karo’s conviction that his son – if this match bore fruit – would fulfill his messianic hopes.

As the reincarnation of Beṣal’el, however, the soul of Karo’s wife did not belong to the royal maternal cluster of souls but to the parallel paternal cluster, whose other members – Sarah, Tamar and Ruth – were disguised as female heroines. This

³⁶ Benayahu, *Yosef Behiri*, p. 396.

³⁷ See Jer 25:26; 51:1.

³⁸ See 1 Chr 2:1–20. Beṣal’el the son of Uri, the son of Hur, the son of Caleb, the son of Hezron, the son of Peres, the son of Tamar and Judah.

³⁹ See bSot 11b; 12a; ShemR (section *Shemot*) 1:17.

⁴⁰ Moshe Idel has pointed out that the souls of King David’s maternal dynasty were thought to be reincarnated into Joseph Karo’s wives. His lecture, given in the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies (Jerusalem 1989) has not yet been published, but parts were quoted in: M. Rutenberg, *Pardes HaNefesh [The Paradise of the Soul]*, Jerusalem 1996, pp. 107–109. (Heb.)

⁴¹ See Vital’s *Sefer ha-Gilgulim [Book of Incarnations]*, Przemysl 1875, p. 87b; Benayahu, *Yosef Behiri*, p. 396.

cluster had been rooted in the primordial soul of Adam that was desecrated after his sin in the Garden of Eden.⁴² In fact, Adam’s primordial soul is the soul of the Messiah; therefore its repair was essential to the process of redemption.⁴³

Joseph Karo’s conviction that his marriage to his second-third wife was meant to repair sins that prevent the arrival of the Messiah was no doubt based on the problematic dynasty of King David. The Midrash⁴⁴ portrays King David as being deeply bothered by the fact that his ancestors committed sins of incest: Abraham and Sarah were brother and half-sister;⁴⁵ Judah and Tamar were daughter-in-law and father-in-law⁴⁶; Ruth belonged to the people of Moab, the offspring of Lot and his eldest daughter.⁴⁷ All three biblical heroines had fertility problems; the Talmud and the Midrash understood these problems to derive from physical imperfections – usually the lack of maternity organs, while the Maggid attributes their infertility to the disharmony between their female bodies and their male souls, which made pregnancy impossible. Reinterpreting biblical, Midrashic and Zoharic sources, the Maggid reveals the secret of the various sparks thus reconstructs the history of the primordial soul of Adam.

The first “spark” is Sarah, whose “secret” concerned her marriage to her half-brother, Abraham. Reinterpreting the Talmudic statement that Abraham and Sarah were androgynous,⁴⁸ the Maggid explains that Sarah’s infertility resulted from the disharmony between her female body and her male soul. After she had been endowed with a female soul, symbolized by the changing of her name from Sarai to Sarah, she was able to conceive and bear Isaac.⁴⁹

The second “spark” is Tamar, Judah’s daughter-in-law, who had a male soul as well.⁵⁰ Her classification probably derived from the botanical nature of palm trees (“*Tamar*” in Hebrew), which are divided in masculine trees and feminine trees.⁵¹

⁴² The notion that Sarah, Tamar and Ruth belonged to the same paternal “cluster” of souls, rooted from Adam, should be compared to that of R. Menahem ‘Azaria di Fano, who categorized two clusters of feminine souls: the four mothers – Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel – belong to the cluster that rooted from Eve, while Tamar, the queen of Sheba and the harlot Rahab belong to another cluster. See *Sefer Gilgulay Neshamot [Book of The Incarnations of Souls]*, Jerusalem 1978, Letter 80, pp. 46–47.

⁴³ On the connection between Adam’s primordial soul and the soul of the Messiah in medieval Kabbala and Lurianic Kabbala, see G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York [1941] 1971, pp. 280–284; G. Scholem, *Elements of The Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, Jerusalem 1980, pp. 308–357 (Heb.).

⁴⁴ See *RutR*, 8a.

⁴⁵ See Gen 20:12.

⁴⁶ See Gen 28.

⁴⁷ See Gen 19:37.

⁴⁸ See bYev 64a. One of the sages, R. Nahman, argues that Sarah’s infertility resulted from her lack of a maternity organ. See also BerR, Vol. 2 (section *Lekh Lekha*) 44, 10–12.

⁴⁹ See MM, p. 78.

⁵⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 75–77.

⁵¹ See *Sefer ha-Bahir* (Margaliot), *siman* 198, pp. 91–92; *The Book Bahir* (Abrams), paragraph 140, p. 223; Tishby, *The Wisdom of The Zohar*, Vol. 3, pp. 1355–1358.

Moreover, according to the Midrash, Tamar was the daughter of Shem, the son of Noah,⁵² also identified with Melchizedek (“Righteous King”), King of Salem and “priest of God the Most High.”⁵³ Melting these traditions into one coherent picture, the Maggid reveals that Shem-Melchizedek sinned and lost the kingdom, which had been taken from him and given to Abraham. The soul of the dethroned king had come to dwell in Tamar, and had been forced to reconnect to the royal family in disguise (*Behe’alem*) by the deception of Judah. However, since Judah had sparks of a female soul, Tamar did not need to conceive a female soul in order to become pregnant and give birth to Peres.

The third member of the cluster is Ruth the Moabite, whose soul was actually the incarnation of Tamar’s soul. Explaining why Ruth did not bear a child with her first husband, the Maggid reinterprets the Midrashic interpretation of “conception” as having a maternity organ – a womb – as having a male soul in a female body:

As it was said about Ruth: “And the Lord gave her conception and she bore a son” (Rut 4:13). Our Sages learnt that Ruth did not have a maternity organ. This is what I meant (by saying) that her soul was a male soul because she was Tamar, and I have already said that the soul of Tamar was a male soul. Therefore Ruth was not worthy of a son (with her first husband) until God gave her pregnancy, meaning that God made the sparks of a female soul shine into her, and thus she gave birth to a son. Otherwise she could not have born a son, for Boaz did not have sparks of a female soul in him. But Tamar did not need to be given sparks of a female soul because Judah had sparks of a female, as explained.⁵⁴

Although it was not said explicitly, or perhaps said but censored in the written text, it might have been the Maggid’s intention to claim that the sins of incest committed by the cluster’s sparks – Sarah, Tamar and Ruth – were in fact a repetition of the symbolic sin of incest committed by Adam in the Garden of Eden. It can be insinuated when the Zoharic subtext is taken into account: according to the Zohar, Adam connected himself to the celestial mother – the *Shekhina* – alone, thus separated her from the celestial father – *Sefira of Tiferet* – and destroyed the divine unity.⁵⁵ In other words, the Maggid explains that Ruth tried to correct Tamar’s sin, Tamar tried to correct Sarah’s sin, and Sarah tried to correct Adam’s sin, but all three failed and committed the same sin again, thus repeating Adam’s sin and failing to correct the soul of the Messiah. Such an interpretation can also clarify Joseph Karo’s preoccupation with the adultery of King David and Bath-Sheba, because their sin damaged the primordial soul once more and caused the death of Bath-Sheba’s first son and King David’s other sons. And defining his own sins as the mystical equivalence of King David’s sins, Karo’s mystical misconduct caused the death of his first wife and their children and risked his second marriage.

⁵² See BerR (section *Vayeshev*) 85:10.

⁵³ Gen 14:18. See also the translation attributed to Jonathan ben ‘Uziel: “The Righteous King is Shem, son of Noah.”

⁵⁴ MM, p. 78.

⁵⁵ See Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, Vol.1, pp. 159–161.

Combining Karo’s sin and the sins of his wife’s soul, while taking into account the Zoharic subtext, one can comprehend the messianic purpose of their marriage: Karo’s wife’s behavior repaired the “sparks” of her cluster – Sarah, Tamar and Ruth – and atoned the sin of Joseph Karo as well. The Maggid promises Joseph Karo that the agony his wife experienced “while you were in exile from her, and the sorrow she had while serving you in your sickness,” coupled by her good deeds, purified her soul “from the contamination and filth of the serpent and she is (now) pure and clear,”⁵⁶ ready to “conceive” female sparks that would enable her to physically conceive and bear a child, as promised. And since Joseph Karo lost “two sons and one daughter, you will be blessed with four holy sons from this woman.”⁵⁷

Sealing the most tragic period of his life, Joseph Karo was finally allowed to have intimate relations with his wife. Her first pregnancy was not immediate, and may have ended in a miscarriage, as suggested in the Maggid’s explanation: “And what I said about your wife’s pregnancy is true ... Yet, you had been sentenced to death, and the Almighty in his mercy wished to save your soul therefore he gave (= took) this pregnancy instead of (taking) you.”⁵⁸ Shortly after, the couple, accompanied by R. Solomon Elkabetz, immigrated to the Land of Israel and settled in Safed. In 1540, four years after their arrival, they were blessed with a son. The newborn was named Solomon ...⁵⁹

R. Joseph Karo lived in Safed for 39 years, and all those years he continued to write in his mystical diary. His contribution to Safed’s Golden Age of Kabbala has not been fully weighted, since most academic studies focus on the Lurianic school of Kabbala as the ultimate expression of major ideas, rooted in medieval Kabbala.⁶⁰ Among these ideas – the concept of *Gilgul* – reincarnation and transmigration of souls; the messianic myth concerning Adam’s primordial soul that contains the entire soul of humanity, therefore necessarily contains the unborn soul of the Messiah; and the concept of mystical redemption – *Tiqqun* – of the world. It should be noted however that R. Joseph Karo preceded R. Isaac Luria (1534–1572) in reviving those medieval ideas and combining them in his original writings. Moreover, Karo’s messianic circle that was established in Salonica as early as 1533 and his actions to meet the messianic expectations for the year 1540 – his 1536 immigration to Safed and his involvement in the 1538 messianic attempt to renew the rabbinical ordination and reestablish the Sanhedrin – mark him as the prominent mediator between medieval Kabbala, especially the Zohar, to which he had been

⁵⁶ MM, p. 78.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 400–401.

⁵⁹ One of Karo’s grandsons, the son of Judah, was also given a name with messianic undertone, Jedidiah (“the friend of God”), the name Nathan the prophet gave to King Solomon. See 2 Sam 12:25: “and He sent by the hand of Nathan the prophet, and he called his name Jedidiah, for the Lord’s sake.”

⁶⁰ See Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 280–284; Scholem, *Elements of The Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, pp. 308–357 (Heb.).

introduced in Salonica, and the younger generation of Safed Kabbalists. Although his mystical diary concentrates on his individual experiences and hardly deals with abstract metaphysics, its impact on Lurianic Kabbala, in particular its influence on the mystical diary of Luria's disciple and scribe, R. Ḥayyim Vital should be farther investigated and recognized.

Appendix: The Biography of Joseph Karo ("The Precious One" in Spanish)

- 1488 Born in Spain.
- 1492 The family was expelled from Spain to Portugal; it later escaped Portugal, probably in 1498.
- 1522–1530 Adrianople, the Turkish Empire.
First wife, the sister of R. Samuel Saba, a head of *Yeshiva* in Adrianople.
- 1530 Salonica, Greece.
- 1534 Death of first wife and three of their children: Buena, Isaac, Judah.
- 1535 Second wife, daughter of R. Ḥayyim Al-Balage (Al-Balgary) of Nikopol, Bulgaria.
- 1536 First printing of *Bet Yosef* in Constantinople.
- 1536 Immigration to Safed, in the Land of Israel, with second wife and his friend, R. Solomon Elkabetz.

The Golden Age of Kabbala in Safed

- 1538 The attempt to renew the rabbinical ordination.
- 1540 Messianic expectations: the Messiah was expected to arrive.
- 1540 Birth of Solomon, son of the second wife.
- 1550 Composing *Shulhan 'Arukh*.
- 1565 Third wife, daughter of R. Zekharya Vernek, an Ashkenazi Jew.
- 1569 Birth of Judah, youngest son. Karo was 82 years old.
- 1575 Died at the age of 87 and was buried in Safed.