I would like to open with a homage to a great German writer, Herman Hesse, whose books are pervaded with mysticism. In his magnum opus, *The Glass Bead Game (Magister Ludi)*, we find the following dialogue between the young student Joseph Knecht, the future master of the glass bead game, and his mentor, the old music master:

‘Oh, if it were only possible to find understanding’ Joseph exclaimed. ‘If only there were a dogma to believe in. Everything is contradictory [...] there are no certainties anywhere. Everything can be interpreted one way and then again interpreted in the opposite sense [...] isn’t there any truth?’ [...] The Master, after a short silence replies thus: ‘There is truth, my boy. But the doctrine you desire, absolute, perfect dogma [...] does not exist. Nor should you long for a perfect doctrine, my friend. Rather, you should long for the perfection of yourself. The deity is within you, not in ideas and books.’¹

Joseph’s outcry is shared by textual scholars, bewildered by the endless contradictions of possible interpretations. As we shall see today, the Master’s response, as is fitting for a book that prominently mentions German Pietism, follows the path of the Ḥasidim, who internalised theosophy, thus enabling them to embrace doubt. Or, as Hesse describes Knecht’s more mature understanding:

> For even as he was familiarizing himself with the ever more recondite mysteries [...] his doubts had by no means been silenced. He had already learned by experience that faith and doubt belong together, that they govern each other like inhaling and exhaling.²

The studies of Giuseppe Veltri, and more generally recent discussions here at the Maimonides Centre, have alerted us to the pivotal role of scepticism in the formation of modern Jewish discourse. Veltri and others (such as Richard Popkin, Yossi Chajes, and Allison Coudert) have pointed out the role of conversos such as Uriel da Costa, who experienced the relativity of religious identity and contributed to the proliferation of sceptical approaches. One should also mention here the intriguing connections which were already being made between Kabbalah and atheism in the seventeenth century, as discussed by Yossi Schwartz. To these should be joined Yaakov Dweck’s forthcoming discussion of the role of scepticism in resistance to the spread

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² *Ibidem*, 127.
of the Sabbatean movement. However, as we shall see, I wish to consider the presence of this theme in even earlier stages of modernisation.

The different ratios of doubt and certainty clearly distinguish pre-modern Kabbalah from that of the last few centuries. As Elliot R. Wolfson has shown, the use of the term vadday (‘for sure’ in colloquial English) marks zoharic rhetoric and exegesis. In tandem, one should note the recurrence of the phrase bli safeq (‘without doubt’) in influential texts such as the pseudo-Rabad commentary on Sefer Yeširah, actually penned by R. Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, who may well have taken part in the formation of the Sefer ha-Zohar. This is not to say that this locution is absent in major texts in modern Kabbalah, Sefer ha-Tanya by R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi being one striking instance. Nonetheless, it is doubt, rather than its absence, that one encounters in some of the better-known modern literatures.

Three examples should suffice. One, discussed quite recently as part of a wider study by Shaul Magid, is found in the nineteenth-century Liqquṭei Moharan by R. Nahman of Bratzlav: in an oft-discussed passage in Torah 64, he differentiates between the questions and quandaries—mevukhot—arising from the primordial rupture of the breaking of the vessels, which can be resolved, and those stemming from the seeming absence of divinity created by the simsum, or contraction, and the resultant ‘empty space.’ The correct response to the latter qushiot, or difficulties, is silent faith, rather than any discursive effort. It is true that this passage does not employ the term ‘doubt,’ yet sfeqot, or doubts, appear, alongside confusion, in a parallel discussion (which is not the parallel that Magid cites from the same section) of the seeming absence of God in the second part of Liqquṭei Moharan (Torah 12). Nahman’s references to eppiqorsut, translatable here as ‘heresy,’ clearly disclose the historical background of this teaching, and many of his other teachings, in contending with the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment.

Our second example is that of the radical hasidic teacher R. Mordekhai Joseph Leiner of Izbica. As I have written briefly elsewhere, in Leiner’s psychological typology of religious characters (which predates Jung by several decades), he grants both prominence and legitimation to the religious personality characterised by constant doubt. I have selected a discussion that I did not cite in my book: this homily is blatantly national (and should be read in light of Elliot Wolfson’s foundational studies of the attitude towards Gentiles in Kabbalah). Although, as a rule, one who encounters doubts and successfully clarifies them ‘for the good’ is greater than one who avoids doubt, this is only true of the ‘seed of Jacob,’ for God only ‘clarifies Israel for the good’ so that even converts are forbidden to experience doubt. In other words, the national divide is established partly as a bulwark against the increasing encroachment of doubt. More generally, it should be stressed that Leiner’s positive

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assessment of doubt echoes similar statements in other schools branching off from the Seer of Lublin, R. Jacob Isaac Horowitz.

A final late modern instance is located in Orot ha-Qodesh, a compilation of mystical reflections by the twentieth-century author R. Abraham Isaac Ha-Kohen Kook. In texts assembled in the first volume, Kook writes of the relativity of certainty, of the ascending and increasing degree of certainty in each world and each individual. Typically for such a unitary thinker, Kook (rewriting a text from Tiqqunei Zohar) stresses the unification of the nahar ulay (‘river of maybe’) with the river flowing from Eden, from the Yesod, or foundation of certainty; in kabbalistic terms, the phallic aspect of the higher feminine, Binah. For him, the source, higher up in the layers of Binah, is that of both certainty and doubt. In other words, Kook aspires, in an almost Zen-like fashion, to transcend the differentiation between doubt and certainty. At this source, doubts are transformed into joyful positivity, which reveals their true interiority. Yet in his dialectical poetics, when a certain level aspires to a level of certainty that is inappropriate for it, this necessitates a fall, a rupture, and an explosion (in other words, the breaking of the vessels that begins below Binah) until it can reascend to the source in a resurrection-like process. While R. Nahman contended with the beginnings of secularisation, Kook repeatedly explicitly engaged with its full-fledged form.

Yet I would like to move away from these more obvious cases and interrogate the first stirrings of doubt in early modern Kabbalah. In this phase, doubt is less a psychological experience or cognitive event, as it is for the hasidic writers and R. Kook, and rather pertains to ontology. I believe that the point of transition can be found around the time of Kant’s sharp differentiation between the ontological and epistemological realms, namely in the eighteenth century. Clear formulations of the embedded doubt in the very pattern of divine revelation can be found in the circle of R. Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, one of a set of fellowships whose writings became foundational for subsequent schools of modern Kabbalah. He also belonged to the same family as the seventeenth-century author R. Simone Luzzatto, whose sceptical stance was addressed in one of Veltri’s above-mentioned studies.

In his most important kabbalistic treatise, Adir ba-Marom, Luzzatto discusses the highly exalted divine aspect known in the Idrot section of the Zohar (and its canonical sixteenth-century Lurianic interpretation) as reisha de lo ityada (acronym: radla), the ‘unknown head.’ For Luzzatto, who reads such mythical, anthropomorphic terms as metaphors for historiosophical dialectic, radla signifies the nexus between the temporal hanhagah, or divine guidance of the world, and eternity. Thus, when we learn of the doubts in radla in Lurianic Kabbalah, this does not mean that it is possible that these aspects have no being. Rather, ha-kol yesh (‘all is’). However, they currently shine ‘by way of doubt,’ while in the eschaton they will ‘shine by way of

certainty.’ Elaborating on this terse, axiomatic statement, Luzzatto writes that in the present the vision of the divine lights ‘always comes in a doubtful manner’ due to their constant movement and complex re-combination. In this constant flux (echoing Judah Muscato’s image of steam, as discussed by Veltri), certainty is unavailable, and this is why they transcend human apprehension. In sum, epistemological doubt is a product of the present deep structure of the divine realm, with the promise of its transformation into certainty being part of the Messianic horizon.  

In other words, Moses Hayyim Luzzatto goes beyond his relative Simone in relocating doubt from human knowledge to the divine realm. Our text echoes an earlier (1730) epistle by Luzzatto, demonstrating ‘a small part of the way of the Idra’ (addressed to R. Isaiah Basaan, one of his early teachers), where he confides that radla is seen differently from moment to moment, and thus ‘gives birth to doubt.’ However, this is nonetheless a source of pleasure, as this is how the radla shine, given that they are unknown lights. In this earlier version of the commentary, composed around 1731–2, it appears that this is the nature of the light rather than being a problem.

Luzzatto’s approach is fleshed out in an influential text, the so-called Qelah Pith-ei Ḥokhmah (‘138 Gates of Wisdom’), based on his writings but probably edited and expanded in ḥasidic circles towards the end of the century. Before reading this text, one should note the introduction to the text of 138 Gates as found in one version (Ma’amar ha-Wikkuaḥ) of the larger work in which it is embedded, a debate between a kabbalist and a ‘researcher,’ or philosopher. Here, the author asks why we should know the list of doubts related to radla (as we shall see anon), and goes on to say that ‘there must be a great root in this matter, which was mentioned for a very great secret.’ Now let us turn to our main text (influenced by formulations by the sixteenth-century kabbalist R. Meir Ibn Gabbay):

The head that is not known is one light, where all the connections stand [...] however, it is a light which is not perceived or grasped at all. And whoever looks at it will have several unresolved doubts, for it does not appear that all the connections are found in it, but rather that it is a kind of light that cannot be grasped. And indeed, one cannot see its content, for sometimes it seems that there is one connection in it and sometimes it seems that there is another or even an opposite connection.

So we find that even though we know that all the connections are found in it, the light itself stands in a manner that cannot be grasped and seems to be in another manner. And its power is that we do not know the guidance [of radla], because if we follow any given matter that is below in [the world of] emanation to locate its source in this head, we cannot find our hands and feet because we cannot discuss it at all. Rather, sometimes it appears thus, some-

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times otherwise, in a manner that we cannot grasp, and thus it is called the head that is not known.\(^9\)

In the core text, which may be have been penned by Luzzatto, *radla* is a site of radical doubt, which manifests in a confusing and contradictory manner. Already here, we find a move away from temporality and messianism towards a version of the epistemological problematic, coupled with the limitations of language: ‘is not perceived and grasped at all,’ ‘whoever looks at,’ ‘one cannot see,’ or ‘we cannot discuss it.’ This trend is strengthened in the commentary, which is almost certainly later and Eastern European, perhaps ḥasidic:

> It seems difficult that we should not say that it has doubts, because, on the contrary, we said that it has all the connections, but the matter is that we are speaking about perception, that one who perceives its light cannot stand its light.\(^{10}\)

This ḥasidic weakening of the radical ontological implications of *radla* can be found in a recently published testimony (*Early Years* by Boruch Oberlander and Elkanah Shmotkin) by the last Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Menahem Mendel Schneerson, in the name of his father, the renowned kabbalist R. Levi Isaac Schneerson. According to the son, his father rejected the possibility of doubt in the divine structure and read the Lurianic formulations that we shall soon encounter as referring merely to the limits of human understanding.

It is now high time to turn to the Lurianic sources, which, as in many other matters, are formative and authoritative for most of modern kabbalistic writing. As noted above, as in many cases Luria’s teachings take the form of creative exegesis of the mythical-anthropomorphic layer of the *Zohar*, the *Idrot*, or gatherings. One should recall here the important discussions by Susan Schreiner and Stefano Tutino, addressing at length the tension between certainty and doubt in mysticism and religious thought in general that was already present in the earlier parts of the sixteenth century.

The twelfth gate (concerning ‘‘atiq, the aspect of the ‘ancient of days’’) of *Derekh Eṣ Ḥayyim*, the most widespread formulation of Luria’s teachings, as transmitted by his main student R. Hayyim Vital and edited in Europe by R. Meir Poppers in the middle of the seventeenth century, discusses the connections (alluded to in the text that we just saw) that emend the primal trauma of the breaking of the vessels. At the end of the first chapter of the gate, the aspect of *radla* is discussed, and the term ‘unknown’ is interpreted as follows: its existence is known, but not its content.

In listing the numerous doubts and *tmihot* (‘wonders’) that follow from this general question, the text (chapter four) gives mnemonic ‘signs’ for each one of them. The gate concludes (chapter five) thus: ‘Here we have explained all the doubts that I


\(^{10}\) *Ibidem*, 249.
heard from my teacher [Luria], and there are also innumerable and endless doubts, and I have not merited [hearing] them. And also, just like these doubts in ‘atiq, there are similar doubts in the rest of the order of emanation.” In other words, doubt is both pervasive and infinite. Perhaps it is also built in, for Vital writes ‘doubts in ‘atiq,’ not ‘about ‘atiq.’ The entire gate is edited from Oṣrot Ḥayyim by Poppers’ teacher, R. Jacob ben Hayyim Zemah, who was of converso origin. If one turns to Zemah’s own conclusive rendition, in his Mevo She’arim (Gate 3, part 1, chapter 1), we read as follows:

And ‘atiq is known [in the Zohar] as the supreme head, which does not know and it is not known what is in this head [...] and it says ‘does not know,’ that is to say that this head, which is ‘atiq itself, cannot know and apprehend the ein sof (‘infinite’), which is in this head. And relative to us it is said, ‘and it is not known what is in this head.’ And it is difficult, for it is obvious, if he himself does not know, all the more so that it is not known to us, but this means that we already know the reality of this head, what it is, that it is ‘Atiq, but what is inside this head is not known.”

Zemah’s locution seems to be the source for Luzzatto’s formulation, as we have seen, according to which doubt here has two layers. The deep level is that of the lack of divine autognosis. The lower level is relative to human comprehension and parallels the discussion in Oṣrot Ḥayyim. In a sense, Zemah, who assumes a lack of self-knowledge in the divine, is more radical than Luzzatto, who only goes so far as to embed doubt in the structure of divine revelation. In view of these sources, it is interesting that R. Joseph Ergas, an Italian kabbalist from the same milieu as Luzzatto, described Lurianic Kabbalah as putting an end to all doubts.

One should recall that Zemah’s writings (Oṣrot Ḥayyim and Mevo She’arim) were interpreted by R. Moses Zacuto, who corresponded with him, and his student R. Benjamin Kohan. In addition, Kohan’s own student R. Moses Hayyim Luzzatto also wrote glosses on Oṣrot Ḥayyim. If this lineage is upheld, we can trace a central vein of the modern kabbalistic discourse on doubt to a writer of converso origin. However, once the Sha’ar ha-Hagdamot (‘Gate of Introductions’) in the original manuscript of ‘Eṣ Ḥayyim is published later this year, joining the greater part of the manuscript’s eight gates which have already been published, then we will be able to determine whether this text also appears in Vital’s own writing and thus to uphold or refute this hypothesis.

I would like to cite one more textual source, in which radla is associated with silence as an epistemological stance in a Maimonidean manner. R. Kook’s teacher and/or study partner R. Shlomo Elyashiv writes as follows on radla in his Leshem Shvo ve-Aḥlama: Haqdamot u-She’arim, published in 1909 (not long after the period in which the two kabbalists studied together):

11 (Derekh) ‘Eṣ Ḥayyim [Hebrew], ed. Meir Poppers (Jerusalem: Yerid ha-Sefarim, 2013): pt. 1, 60 A.
But [of] *radla* there is no grasp (*tfisa*) [...] for it is totally removed [alluding here, based on an earlier discussion, to ‘*atiq*] and negated from apprehension, for it has no place and revelation [...] and to him silence is praise [based on Psalm 65:2].

This, of course, is the famous proof-text for Maimonidean negative theology, and, as I have shown elsewhere, the *Zohar* gives this verse a negative slant, as belonging to the fallen state of exile, although the verse refers to Zion! Indeed, the *Guide for the Perplexed* is a central source, particularly for this book, but also elsewhere in Elyashiv’s writing.

These texts call for further comparative, theoretical, and interdisciplinary examination (see, e.g., *Rig Veda* X, 129: ‘Only he knows—or perhaps he does not know’).

One tool which can be of value is psychoanalysis. Michael Feldman has written about patients who attempt to fill the analyst with doubt in the process of psychoanalysis. One goal here is to remove the discrepancy between analysand and analyst by acknowledging that they share a disturbing state of mind. From this point of view, statements about God’s self-doubt could be an attempt to mitigate the discrepancy between an omniscient deity and an increasingly doubtful religious subject.

A concluding historical comment: the gradual prominence of doubt as a theme of modern kabbalistic discourse parallels similar developments in the field of Halakhah, especially around the eighteenth century. Here one should note especially *Quntres ha-Sfeqot* (‘Treatise on Doubt’) by R. Judah Kahana Heller (1750–1819), brother of the more famous Aryeh Leib ha-Kohen Heller (1745–1812), who devoted a large part of his early work *Shev Shma’tata* to the question of doubt and doubt of doubt (*sfeq sfeiqah*) and had familial connections with Prague. Actually, the treatise on doubt responds to an earlier discussion by R. Shabbetai Kohen in his *Taqfo Kohen*. Kohen also authored ‘the rules of *sfeq sfeiqah*’ within his *Siftei Kohen* supercommentary on the *Code of Law* (*Shulkhan ‘Arukh*). These set the stage for the extremely prominent place given to the question of doubt in an early twentieth-century classic of Talmudic analytics, *Sha’arei Yosher* by R. Shimon Shkop, head of the Telz Yeshivah where Elyashiv studied. These mostly unstudied discussions should be placed alongside recent explorations of the origins of reasonable doubt (as in the writing of James Q. Whitman).

I would like to conclude with two comments pertaining to the history of Kabbalah scholarship and the role of German Jewry in this history. One is the need for closer attention to kabbalistic rhetoric, as recently exemplified in Roe Goldschmidt’s work. The other relates to the reception of Gershom Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Seemingly, the 1941 publication of this series of lectures marks the transition of the centre of Kabbalah scholarship, besides Jerusalem, from Germany to America. However, Scholem was disappointed by the published reviews and asked a colleague who shared his German background to respond to his book. This review

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was published in an abbreviated form in *The Jewish Frontier*, and in full in Scholem’s correspondence with Hannah Arendt (now also translated into Hebrew). Arendt claims in her review that Scholem has clarified, for the first time, the role of the Jews in the formation of modern man. *Inter alia*, she notes the connection between the modern *cogito* and the mystical subject, as well as the affinity between the scientific experimental approach and mystical experience. Following on from Arendt’s observations, one should stress the contribution of Kabbalah to the interplay of doubt and certainty that characterises the evolution of modern subjectivity.