

Article prepared for Benzion Cohen:

in English

Rabbi David B. Yehuda he-Hasid, author of *Or Zarua*, was one of the early commentators on the Prayer Book as it existed in the beginning of the 14th Century. The author was the grandson of the immortal Nachmanides and, like his grandfather, both a Kabbalist and Torah scholar. A creative writer and thinker, he combines conventional Halakhic reasoning with a long series of Kabbalist insights and textual commentary.

It is a tribute to Benzion Cohen that, after a long and colorful career in the business world, he has undertaken to publish this relatively unknown Kabbalist and to allow Jewish history to reclaim one of its most distinguished and creative Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages.

The purpose of this work by "The Hasid," as he was respectfully and affectionately called by those who were fortunate enough to be aware of his writings and his life, was to help his fellow Jews to gain a true mystical experience in their prayer.

He moves from Bible to Talmud and Midrash to well known rabbinic commentators. His stylistic agility resembles that of the great poets of the Iberian Peninsula. His command of the Bible is, as one might expect, extraordinary. He comments about contemporary Kabbalists (although he rarely mentions their names or sources), included the Zohar; indeed, he translated the Zoharian book, *Ra'yah Mehemena*, one of the most recondite books of the Zohar literature. The Hasid guides the reader in the paths of mystical theology, his comments are often surprising in their modernity. For instance, in the explanation of the Seder plate is that the plate signifies the movements of the constellations around the sun -- over 250 years before Copernicus. His approach to good and evil is especially fascinating because of the radical approach. A pious Jew, R. David informs us, must offer prayers not only for himself but also for the sinners as well. His explanation of the Hebrew word *konenehu* in the Sabbath prayers comes to teach is that a pious man has the power to convert the ordinary person into a sinner -- by sheer contrast.

His analysis of the thirteen methods in hermeneutics of Rabbi Ishmael, a passage which is part of the daily morning services, is an excellent example of his ability to convert the logical rules of halakhic methodology into a series of Kabbalistic suggestions in gaining mystical insight. The same might be said in his comments on the popular *Ashrei* prayer.

Benzion Cohen deserves the applause and encouragement of all who are curious about some of the outstanding mystics of the Middle Ages.