



RESEARCH

From Andalusia to Shanghai: Ariel Bension's Cross-Cultural Mysticism and Cultural-Political Creativity

Alberto Bardi¹

¹ University of Turin

Keywords: Sephardic Judaism, Jewish Mysticism, Cross-Cultural Intellectual History, Andalusian Philosophy, Interreligious Dialogue, Zohar, Tagore, Ariel Bension
<https://doi.org/10.64830/001c.171890>

Journal of Language, Culture, and Religion

Vol. 7, Issue 2, 2026

This article examines Ariel Bension's reinterpretation of Jewish mysticism as a resource for modern Sephardic cultural-political renewal. Focusing on *The Zohar in Moslem and Christian Spain*, it argues that Bension situated the Zohar within the intercultural world of medieval Andalusia in order to recover the Eastern dimensions of Judaism and challenge Eurocentric accounts of Jewish intellectual history. Yet Bension's engagement with Andalusia was not merely antiquarian or historical. It formed the intellectual foundation for his activity in Shanghai, where his encounter with the writings of Rabindranath Tagore enabled him to articulate a modern Jewish ethics of dialogue, spiritual universality, and cultural mediation. The article therefore reads Bension's engagement with Islamic philosophy, especially Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, and his reflections on Tagore as parts of a single intellectual trajectory: the transformation of Sephardic mysticism into a public language of intercultural ethics. Bension's originality lies not in the simple identification of affinities between Jewish, Islamic, and Indian mystical traditions, but in his modern cultural-political use of these affinities as the basis for Hebrew cultural renewal and Jewish participation in a wider spiritual conversation between East and West.

Introduction

Ariel Bension (1880–1932), a Sephardic rabbi, scholar, and cultural activist, occupies a distinctive place in the history of modern Jewish thought. His work joined historical scholarship, mystical interpretation, and political-cultural reflection in an effort to rethink Judaism as a tradition shaped by contact, translation, and spiritual exchange. Rather than presenting Jewish mysticism as an isolated or purely inward phenomenon, Bension situated it within a wider world of Islamic philosophy, Andalusian intellectual life, and Eastern spirituality. This comparative orientation did not lead him away from Judaism. On the contrary, it enabled him to formulate a distinctly Sephardic understanding of Judaism as a bridge between East and West, between particular tradition and universal ethical responsibility (Aranov 1979; Giller 2008; Evri and Behar 2017, 303–307).

This article argues that Bension's significance lies in the continuity between his Sephardic-Andalusian intellectual formation and his later cultural activity in Shanghai. *The Zohar in Moslem and Christian Spain* serves as the central scholarly text through which Bension articulated his understanding of Jewish mysticism as historically entangled with Islamic and Christian Spain (Bension 1932). Yet this book should not be read only as a contribution to the history of Kabbalah. It should also be understood as foundational to a broader cultural-political project. Bension's later engagement with Rabindranath Tagore in Shanghai was not a secondary episode or a digression from his earlier scholarship. Rather, it was the mature expression of the same intellectual formation: the moment in which his Sephardic vision of mystical dialogue became a public ethics of intercultural encounter.

The central question of this article is therefore not simply whether Bension identified parallels between Jewish, Islamic, and Indian mystical traditions. Such parallels had already been discussed, in different ways, by scholars of Jewish mysticism and by historians of Jewish-Muslim intellectual relations. Bension's originality lies elsewhere. He transformed these affinities into a modern program of Jewish cultural renewal. For him, the Andalusian past was not merely a historical memory, and the Zohar was not merely a medieval mystical commentary on the Torah. Together, they offered a model for thinking about Judaism as a dialogical tradition capable of addressing the crises of modernity: nationalism, secularism, colonial hierarchy, and the fragmentation of religious communities.

Bension's encounter with Tagore clarifies this project. In Tagore, Bension recognized a thinker who joined spiritual interiority with a critique of mechanistic modernity and a vision of ethical universalism. Tagore's insistence on the unity of being, his critique of narrow nationalism, and his call for the renewal of inner life resonated deeply with Bension's reading of the Zohar and of Islamic mystical philosophy. When Bension described Tagore as a spiritual figure whose poetic language recalled the voice of the Psalmist, he was not merely praising an Indian poet. He was identifying in Tagore a living expression of the same mystical and ethical structure that he had found in Andalusian Judaism and Islamic thought (Bension 1925; Tagore 1915). Shanghai, in this sense, became the modern site where Bension's earlier intellectual formation was translated into intercultural practice.

This article builds on Evri and Behar's important analysis of Bension as part of a broader Sephardic challenge to Eurocentric models of Hebrew modernization. Their study has shown that Bension, alongside Shaul Abdallah Yosef, formulated an alternative vision of Hebrew culture through a "real and symbolic return to the East" (Evri and Behar 2017). The present article shifts the focus from Hebrew literary modernization to the mystical and theological foundations of Bension's intercultural thought. It argues that

Bension's engagement with the Zohar, Andalusian Jewish-Islamic exchange, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, and Tagore was not merely an expression of Jewish Easternism, but the basis for a modern Sephardic ethics of spiritual dialogue. Throughout the article, "East" and "Eastern" are used primarily to reconstruct Bension's own historical and symbolic vocabulary, not as stable civilizational categories.

The article's guiding claim is therefore that Bension's activity in Shanghai and his engagement with Tagore were rooted in his earlier Sephardic and Andalusian intellectual formation. *The Zohar in Moslem and Christian Spain* provides the central scholarly articulation of this formation, while Bension's writings from Shanghai show how it was translated into a public language of intercultural ethics. In this reading, Shanghai and Tagore are not peripheral examples of Bension's Pan-Asiatic imagination; they are the historical setting in which his earlier formation in Sephardic Kabbalah and Andalusian mysticism became a modern program of cultural-political creativity.

In what follows, I first reconstruct Bension's Sephardic intellectual formation, emphasizing the importance of Jerusalem, Kabbalah, Islamic philosophy, and the memory of Andalusia. I then examine *The Zohar in Moslem and Christian Spain* as the central text through which Bension developed his comparative method. The discussion of *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* clarifies the connection between contemplation, mystical knowledge, and ethical action. The final major section turns to Shanghai and Tagore, arguing that this episode represents the culmination rather than the margins of Bension's thought. A brief comparison with Shaul Abdallah Yosef then situates Bension within a wider Sephardic project of Eastern Jewish renewal while preserving the article's focus on mysticism and intercultural ethics.

Bension's Intellectual Formation: Sephardic Mysticism, Andalusia, and the East

Bension was born in Jerusalem in 1880 into a Sephardic family whose historical imagination was shaped by the memory of Spanish exile and by the religious culture of Ottoman Palestine (Evri and Behar 2017, 303). The Sephardic world in which he was formed preserved a strong connection to the intellectual and liturgical traditions of medieval Iberian Jewry, while also participating in the multilingual and multi-confessional environment of the eastern Mediterranean. This background is essential for understanding Bension's later work. His comparative approach to mysticism did not emerge from abstract academic cosmopolitanism alone. It was rooted in a Sephardic consciousness in which Jewish identity was already marked by movement between Hebrew, Arabic, Islamic, and Mediterranean cultural worlds.

Jerusalem provided Bension with early access to Jewish mystical traditions, especially the symbolic language of the Zohar and the devotional world of Kabbalistic prayer. The city's Sephardic religious institutions preserved forms of learning in which mystical exegesis, liturgy, and communal memory were closely connected. In this setting, mysticism was not merely a speculative doctrine. It was a lived religious language, one that shaped prayer, interpretation, and the understanding of Jewish historical destiny. This early formation helps explain why Bension later resisted approaches that reduced mysticism to myth, superstition, or textual curiosity. For him, mystical texts remained sources of spiritual knowledge and ethical orientation.

At the same time, Jerusalem's multi-confessional environment exposed Bension to Islamic and Christian forms of devotion. The city was not an abstract symbol of coexistence; it was a concrete space in which religious communities lived in proximity, even when shaped by imperial hierarchies and communal boundaries. This proximity helped form Bension's conviction that religious traditions could be understood not only through separation but through resonance. The comparative impulse that later structured his writing was therefore grounded in a lived awareness of shared sacred geographies and overlapping religious vocabularies.

Bension's later academic training in Europe added philological and historical tools to this earlier formation. Like many Jewish intellectuals of his generation, he encountered the legacy of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, with its emphasis on historical criticism, textual scholarship, and the reconstruction of Jewish intellectual history (Evri and Behar 2017). Yet Bension did not adopt a purely historicist or demystifying approach. He used historical scholarship to recover the intercultural conditions under which Jewish mysticism developed, while continuing to treat mystical traditions as spiritually and ethically meaningful. This combination of historical method and spiritual seriousness is one of the distinctive features of his work.

The memory of Andalusia occupies a central place in this synthesis. For Bension, medieval Spain represented more than a lost golden age. It was a historical model of Jewish creativity within a shared intellectual world shaped by Arabic philosophy, Islamic mysticism, Hebrew poetry, and interreligious encounter. Although modern scholarship has rightly complicated idealized narratives of *convivencia*, Bension understood Andalusia as a symbol of cultural transmission and spiritual exchange (Wasserstrom 1995). It allowed him to argue that Jewish mysticism, and especially the Zohar, should not be understood as a closed or isolated phenomenon, but as part of a broader Mediterranean and Eastern history of symbolic thought.

This formation also explains Bension's interest in thinkers such as Ibn Ṭufayl, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn al-ʿArabī. Their writings offered him a language for connecting contemplation, divine unity, and ethical transformation. In particular, Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* provided a model of spiritual

ascent in which the individual reaches knowledge of divine unity through observation, solitude, and inward awakening. Bension interpreted this narrative not only as a philosophical allegory, but as evidence of a shared mystical structure linking Islamic philosophy and Kabbalistic symbolism (Bension 1932).

The Eastern dimension of Bension's thought should be understood in this context. His references to India and to Tagore were not accidental additions to an already complete project. They emerged from the same intellectual habit that led him to read the Zohar through Andalusia: the conviction that Jewish mysticism could be renewed by recovering its points of contact with other spiritual traditions. The East, for Bension, was not simply a geographical category. It was a spiritual and cultural horizon through which Judaism could rediscover dimensions of itself that had been obscured by Eurocentric narratives of Jewish modernity.

The Zohar in Moslem and Christian Spain: Mysticism as Intercultural Memory

The Zohar in Moslem and Christian Spain is the central text through which Bension developed his account of Jewish mysticism as an intercultural phenomenon. Published in 1932, the book situates the Zohar within the intellectual and religious world of medieval Spain, emphasizing the contact between Jewish, Islamic, and Christian forms of mystical and philosophical thought. Bension's aim was not merely to provide a historical background for the emergence of Kabbalah. He sought to show that the Zohar belonged to a wider symbolic universe produced by cultural contact, translation, and shared metaphysical concerns (Fishbane 2018).

This claim was significant because it challenged two dominant tendencies in the study of Jewish mysticism. On the one hand, Jewish mysticism could be treated as an internal development of Judaism, detached from the Islamic and Christian environments in which Jewish communities lived. On the other hand, modern Jewish scholarship could treat mysticism as a marginal or irrational element, less important than law, philosophy, or rational theology. Bension resisted both tendencies. He argued that the Zohar was central to Jewish spiritual life precisely because it preserved symbolic forms of knowledge that emerged from historical contact with surrounding traditions.

For Bension, Andalusia offered the historical setting in which this contact became especially productive. Jewish intellectual life in Muslim and Christian Spain developed in conversation with Arabic philosophy, Sufi symbolism, Hebrew poetry, and Neoplatonic metaphysics. The Zohar, although written in Aramaic and framed through rabbinic literary forms, reflected this wider world of exchange. Its concern with divine emanation, symbolic language, the

soul's ascent, and the hidden unity of reality could be read alongside Islamic mystical and philosophical traditions without reducing one tradition to the other (Bension 1932; Chittick 1989; Fenton 2003; Huss 2016).

The purpose of such comparison was not to dissolve Jewish distinctiveness. Bension did not argue that Kabbalah was merely a Jewish version of Sufism or Neoplatonism. Rather, he saw Jewish mysticism as a tradition that developed its own symbolic grammar while participating in shared spiritual questions. How can the finite human being encounter divine infinity? How does symbolic language mediate between visible and invisible worlds? How does contemplation transform ethical life? These questions linked the Zohar to broader currents of medieval thought, even as the Zohar answered them through specifically Jewish categories.

This approach clarifies the importance of the Zohar in Bension's intellectual project. The Zohar was not simply one text among many. It was the privileged site where Bension could demonstrate that Jewish tradition contained within itself a model of intercultural openness. By placing the Zohar in Muslim and Christian Spain, he reframed Jewish mysticism as a product of contact rather than isolation. The Zohar became, in his reading, both a Jewish text and a witness to the shared spiritual life of medieval Mediterranean cultures.

The ethical implications of this reading are crucial. Bension's interest in mysticism was never confined to metaphysics. He repeatedly connected spiritual insight with ethical action. In this respect, the concept of *tikkun* is especially important. Within Kabbalistic thought, *tikkun* suggests that mystical knowledge is inseparable from repair, restoration, and responsibility. Bension linked this Jewish language of repair to broader traditions in which contemplation leads not to withdrawal from the world but to renewed engagement with it (Idel 1988; Wolfson 1994).

This is where the *vita activa* becomes relevant. Here, *vita activa* is a conceptual bridge, naming the movement from contemplative insight to public and ethical life. Bension's mysticism is therefore not quietist. The mystic does not remain enclosed within private illumination. Spiritual knowledge creates obligations: toward community, toward other traditions, and toward the moral reconstruction of society. This connection between contemplation and action is one of the main threads linking Bension's reading of the Zohar, his interest in Islamic philosophy, and his later engagement with Tagore.

Bension was not the first modern thinker to recognize affinities between Jewish mysticism and other religious or philosophical traditions. Such questions had already occupied scholars of Kabbalah, above all Gershom Scholem, whose work established Jewish mysticism as a historical field of research and situated Kabbalah within broader medieval intellectual contexts (Scholem 1941, 1987). What distinguishes Bension is the cultural-political

use he made of these affinities: he transformed them from a problem of historical influence into a modern Sephardic argument about Jewish renewal, intercultural dialogue, and ethical responsibility. *The Zohar in Moslem and Christian Spain* is therefore not only a work about medieval mysticism. It is also a modern intervention into debates about Jewish identity, Hebrew culture, and the possibility of intercultural ethics.

***Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, Eastern Resonance, and the Ethics of Contemplation**

Bension's interest in Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* deepens this argument by showing how he understood the relationship between contemplation and ethical life. Written in twelfth-century Andalusia, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* tells the story of a child who grows up in isolation on an island and reaches knowledge of divine unity through observation, reason, and inward contemplation. The narrative combines Islamic philosophy, Neoplatonic metaphysics, and mystical reflection, and it became one of the most important philosophical allegories of the medieval Islamic world.

As Avner Ben-Zaken has shown, the significance of *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* lies not only in its Andalusian context, but also in its long cross-cultural reception, through which the text was repeatedly reinterpreted as a meditation on autodidacticism, natural knowledge, and the possibility of spiritual insight beyond inherited convention (Ben-Zaken 2011). This reception history makes the text especially useful for understanding Bension, whose own reading of *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* treated it as a bridge between intellectual traditions rather than as a closed artifact of Islamic philosophy.

For Bension, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* was significant because it dramatized a spiritual journey that resonated with Kabbalistic models of ascent. The protagonist's movement from sensory observation to intellectual apprehension and finally to contemplative union paralleled, in Bension's reading, the Zoharic movement from visible reality toward hidden divine unity. Both traditions treated the world as symbolic. Both understood knowledge as transformation rather than mere information. Both suggested that the human being could ascend from ordinary perception toward a deeper apprehension of reality (Goodman 2009).

The comparison also helped Bension clarify the ethical dimension of mysticism. *Ḥayy*'s solitude does not represent a final rejection of society. The narrative eventually raises the question of how contemplative truth can be communicated to others and what responsibility the enlightened person bears toward the community. This problem was central for Bension. Mysticism, as he understood it, was not complete until it returned to the world. The movement from solitude to insight and from insight to responsibility provided a narrative model for the *vita activa* that Bension also found in Jewish mystical sources (Bension 1932, 30-31).

The Indian dimension requires care. There is not a direct or simple line of textual transmission from Indian traditions to Ibn Ṭufayl or to the Zohar. Rather, Bension perceived in Indian religious thought another expression of the same symbolic structure: inward discipline, liberation from illusion, the unity of being, and the ethical transformation that follows spiritual knowledge (Tagore 1915). India is not a separate axis competing with Andalusia or the Zohar, but an extension of Bension's comparative method. Bension's reading of Indian spirituality, especially through Tagore, helped him see that the mystical questions raised in Andalusian Jewish and Islamic sources were not confined to the medieval Mediterranean. They belonged to a wider field of spiritual reflection in which different traditions developed analogous ways of thinking about unity, interiority, and ethical action.

In this sense, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* functions as a bridge between the Andalusian and the Eastern dimensions of Bension's thought. It belongs historically to the world of medieval Islamic Spain, but its narrative of contemplation and liberation allowed Bension to connect Andalusian philosophy with broader Eastern spiritual concerns. Through this bridge, Bension could move from the historical study of the Zohar to a larger claim about the universal structures of mystical experience.

This universalism, however, did not erase Jewish particularity. Bension's point was not that all mystical traditions are the same. Rather, he argued that Jewish mysticism becomes more fully intelligible when placed in relation to other traditions that share similar metaphysical and ethical concerns. The Zohar's language of divine light, symbolic depth, and *tikkun* remains distinctively Jewish. But for Bension, its distinctiveness is not weakened by comparison. It is clarified by comparison, because the encounter with Islamic and Indian materials reveals how Jewish mysticism participates in a broader human search for divine unity and ethical renewal.

Shanghai and Tagore: The Modern Realization of Bension's Mystical Ethics

Bension's activity in Shanghai marks the culmination of his intellectual project. It should not be understood as a marginal episode or as an appendix to his scholarship on the Zohar. Rather, Shanghai was the modern setting in which Bension's Sephardic-Andalusian formation became a public program of intercultural ethics. The movement from Andalusia to Shanghai is therefore not accidental. Both places function in Bension's thought as crossroads: spaces of contact between languages, religions, and civilizations.

Evri and Behar have shown that Bension's encounter with Tagore in Shanghai formed part of his wider Pan-Asiatic understanding of Jewish Easternism (Evri and Behar 2017). Building on this insight, I suggest that the Tagore episode should also be read as the culmination of Bension's mystical formation. Bension did not turn to Tagore merely because both could be

placed within an Eastern cultural horizon. Rather, Tagore gave modern expression to a structure of thought that Bension had already identified in the Zohar and in Andalusian Islamic philosophy: the movement from inward illumination to ethical responsibility. Tagore's spiritual humanism thus allowed Bension to translate the symbolic world of Sephardic mysticism into a modern public language of dialogue, cultural renewal, and religious universality.

Tagore was central to this translation. Bension's engagement with him was rooted in the same intellectual formation that had led him to the Zohar, Ibn ʿTufayl, and Andalusia. Tagore's critique of mechanistic modernity, his suspicion of narrow nationalism, and his emphasis on inner experience as the foundation of ethical life resonated with Bension's own conviction that religious traditions could renew public culture only if they recovered their spiritual depth (Bension 1925; Tagore 1915, 1917). In Tagore, Bension recognized not simply an Indian poet, but a figure who embodied the possibility of a spiritually grounded universalism.

When Bension likened Tagore's poetic voice to that of the Psalmist, he was making a theological and cultural claim. He was suggesting that the language of spiritual insight could cross religious boundaries without erasing them. Tagore's voice could resonate with the Psalms because both expressed, in different symbolic forms, the human longing for unity, beauty, and ethical renewal. This recognition was possible because of Bension's earlier Sephardic and Andalusian understanding of Judaism. The encounter with Tagore therefore did not introduce an entirely new axis into Bension's thought. It actualized what was already present in his reading of the Zohar: the belief that mystical traditions can mediate between particular identities and universal moral concerns.

Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s was not merely a geographical backdrop for Bension's activity, but a distinctive arena of colonial modernity, diasporic mobility, and intercultural encounter. As a treaty-port city, Shanghai brought together Chinese reformist currents, European imperial institutions, Asian commercial networks, and migrant religious communities within a dense urban space (Bergère 2009). Its modern culture was shaped by print capitalism, journalism, translation, performance, and new forms of urban sociability, all of which made it a particularly fertile site for intellectual exchange (Lee 1999). For Jewish communities, Shanghai also had a specific Sephardic and Baghdadi history, rooted in commercial networks that connected Iraq, India, China, and the British imperial world (Meyer 2003; Betta 2003). For Bension, this environment offered a concrete historical setting in which the ideals he had associated with Andalusia could be reimagined under modern conditions. His writings in *Israel's Messenger* show

him addressing a Jewish public situated between Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, and seeking to define Jewish renewal not as Westernization but as participation in a broader spiritual conversation between East and West.

Shanghai also gave political significance to Bension's belief in mysticism's mediating power. In a world increasingly shaped by racial nationalism, imperial domination, and ideological polarization, Bension's appeal to mystical universalism was not naïve or apolitical. It was a response to the failures of purely national, secular, or civilizational frameworks. He saw in mysticism a resource for reimagining relations between communities, not because mysticism abolishes difference, but because it discloses a depth of experience in which difference can become dialogical rather than antagonistic.

The connection between Tagore and the Zohar is therefore crucial. Both represented, for Bension, alternatives to a narrow and mechanized modernity. The Zohar preserved a symbolic vision of reality in which divine presence permeates the world and human action participates in cosmic repair. Tagore articulated a modern poetic and philosophical language of spiritual humanism, in which the renewal of the self was inseparable from the renewal of society. Bension brought these two sources into relation because both helped him formulate a Jewish ethics of intercultural responsibility.

This is why Shanghai should be understood as the mature expression of Bension's thought. In *The Zohar in Moslem and Christian Spain*, Bension reconstructs the historical conditions under which Jewish mysticism developed through intercultural contact. In Shanghai, through his engagement with Tagore and Asian spiritual thought, he enacted the same principle in the present. The past of Andalusia became a model for a modern future. The study of the Zohar became a framework for Jewish participation in global religious and cultural dialogue.

Bension's Shanghai writings thus reveal the political afterlife of mysticism. They show how a scholar of Kabbalah could become an advocate of intercultural ethics, and how Sephardic memory could be mobilized as an alternative to both assimilationist and ethnonationalist models of Jewish modernity. Bension's universalism was not a rejection of Jewish identity. It was a reinterpretation of Jewish identity through the Sephardic memory of contact, translation, and shared spiritual life.

A Sephardic Parallel: Bension and Shaul Abdallah Yosef

Bension's project has been productively situated by Evri and Behar alongside that of Shaul Abdallah Yosef, who similarly challenged the Europeanization of Hebrew culture by recovering its Arabic and Sephardic foundations (Evri and Behar 2017). Their comparison is crucial for understanding Bension as part of a wider Sephardic attempt to rethink Jewish modernity through the East. Yet Bension's distinctiveness lies in the mystical rather than primarily poetic or literary form of this recovery.

Whereas Yosef turned to the Hebrew poetry of Muslim Spain and its Arabic models, Bension turned to the Zohar, the Beit El Kabbalistic tradition, Islamic philosophy, and later Tagore's spiritual humanism. The difference is not merely one of sources, but of intellectual aim. Yosef's work sought to restore the Arabic and Andalusian dimensions of Hebrew literary culture; Bension's work sought to transform Sephardic mystical inheritance into a language of intercultural ethics. Both thinkers resisted the reduction of Jewish modernization to Westernization, but they did so through different archives and different forms of cultural creativity.

This comparison helps clarify the specific contribution of Bension's thought. He shared with Yosef a commitment to recovering the Eastern dimensions of Jewish culture, yet he located this recovery in the symbolic and theological world of mysticism. For Bension, the Zohar was not only a monument of Jewish spirituality but also a witness to the intercultural life of medieval Spain. Likewise, Tagore was not only an Eastern literary figure but a modern interlocutor through whom Bension could articulate the ethical implications of mystical universality. Bension's contribution therefore lies in the way he linked Sephardic Kabbalah, Andalusian Jewish-Islamic exchange, and modern Asian spiritual humanism into a single vision of Jewish intercultural responsibility.

Although Yosef illuminates the broader Sephardic context in which Bension worked, Bension's distinctive significance is his effort to make mysticism into a cultural-political resource. His writings show how Jewish mystical tradition could be mobilized not only to preserve a threatened Sephardic past, but also to imagine new forms of dialogue between Judaism, Islam, and Asian spiritual thought.

Mysticism as Cultural-Political Creativity

Bension's intellectual project ultimately turned mysticism into a form of cultural-political creativity. By this term, I mean the use of inherited religious symbols and texts to imagine new forms of communal life, intercultural dialogue, and ethical responsibility. Bension did not treat mysticism as a retreat from history. He treated it as a resource for acting within history.

The central movement of his thought runs from symbolic depth to ethical action. The Zohar taught him to read reality as layered, luminous, and open to divine meaning. Andalusian philosophy taught him that Jewish thought had developed through dialogue with Islamic and broader Eastern traditions. *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* offered a narrative of contemplation that returns to the problem of communication and responsibility. Tagore provided a modern poetic and philosophical model of spiritual humanism. Together, these sources allowed Bension to formulate a Jewish ethics rooted in mystical insight but directed toward public life.

This is the key to Bension's universal Judaism. Universal Judaism does not mean the abandonment of Jewish particularity. It means a form of Jewish self-understanding confident enough to enter into dialogue with other traditions and to recognize shared spiritual questions without dissolving difference. Bension's universalism was Sephardic in the sense that it drew upon a history of Jewish life shaped by Arabic, Islamic, Mediterranean, and Eastern contexts. It was universal because it treated this history as the basis for a broader ethic of relation.

The political significance of this vision becomes clear in the context of the early twentieth century. Bension wrote during a period marked by colonial tensions, rising nationalism, secular ideologies, and debates over the future of Jewish identity. In this context, mysticism could easily have been dismissed as irrelevant to public life. Bension argued the opposite. He believed that mystical traditions preserved resources that modern politics urgently needed: humility before transcendence, recognition of spiritual unity, symbolic imagination, and the ethical demand to repair the world.

This position also explains why Bension's work deserves renewed attention in the study of Jewish mysticism. His importance does not lie simply in documenting another modern reader of the Zohar. Nor does it lie in the claim that he discovered Jewish-Islamic mystical affinities for the first time. His contribution lies in the modern use he made of those affinities. He reactivated the memory of Jewish-Islamic and Eastern spiritual exchange as a model for cultural renewal and intercultural ethics.

Bension's thought therefore contributes to several fields at once: Jewish mysticism, Sephardic intellectual history, comparative theology, and global religious thought. Yet these fields converge around a single argument. Bension shows how a Sephardic reading of the Zohar could become the basis for a modern ethics of dialogue. His work demonstrates that mysticism, far from being politically quietist, can function as a language of mediation between communities and as a source of political imagination.

Conclusion

Ariel Bension's legacy lies in the continuity between his Sephardic formation, his interpretation of the Zohar, and his activity in Shanghai. His thought moved from Jerusalem to Andalusia and from Andalusia to Shanghai, not as a sequence of unrelated interests, but as a coherent intellectual trajectory. At each stage, Bension sought to recover Judaism as a tradition shaped by dialogue with other spiritual worlds.

The Zohar in Moslem and Christian Spain articulates the historical foundation for this project. By situating the Zohar within the intercultural world of medieval Spain, Bension challenged insular accounts of Jewish mysticism and recovered the importance of Islamic and Eastern contexts for Jewish spiritual history. His engagement with *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* clarified the

ethical structure of this mysticism: contemplation must lead to responsibility. His encounter with Tagore in Shanghai brought this structure into the modern world, showing how Jewish mysticism could participate in a broader conversation about spiritual humanism, cultural renewal, and intercultural ethics.

Bension's originality therefore lies not in the simple comparison of Jewish, Islamic, and Indian traditions, but in the cultural-political meaning he gave to comparison. He transformed mystical affinity into a program of Sephardic renewal. He used the memory of Andalusia to imagine the possibilities of Shanghai. He read the Zohar not only as a medieval mystical text, but as a living resource for modern Jewish engagement with the world.

This understanding also helps explain why Bension has been overlooked. His work does not fit easily into conventional categories. He was not only a historian of Kabbalah, not only a Sephardic cultural activist, and not only a comparative thinker. He stood at the intersection of these roles. Precisely for this reason, his writings offer a valuable case study in how Jewish mysticism could become a modern language of intercultural ethics.

In the twenty-first century, Bension's project remains relevant. Contemporary debates about religion and identity are still shaped by the tension between particular belonging and universal responsibility. Bension offers a model for thinking beyond this opposition. His Sephardic universalism suggests that religious traditions become most open to others not when they abandon their particular histories, but when they recover the dialogical and intercultural dimensions already present within them. From Andalusia to Shanghai, Bension's work affirms that mysticism can serve not as an escape from the world, but as a foundation for ethical life within it.

Submitted: October 29, 2025 CDT. Accepted: June 30, 2026 CDT. Published: October 13, 2026 CDT.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

REFERENCES

- Aranov, Saul I. 1979. *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Bension Collection of Sephardic Manuscripts and Texts*. University of Alberta Press.
- Bension, Ariel. 1925. "Dr. Bension on the Jewish Renaissance in Eretz Yisrael: A Message to the Jews and Arabs." *Israel's Messenger*, January 9.
- Bension, Ariel. 1932. *The Zohar in Moslem and Christian Spain*. George Routledge and Sons.
- Ben-Zaken, Avner. 2011. *Reading Hayy Ibn-Yaḡẓān: A Cross-Cultural History of Autodidacticism*. Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.492>.
- Bergère, Marie-Claire. 2009. *Shanghai: China's Gateway to Modernity*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Stanford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503624511>.
- Betta, Chiara. 2003. "From Orientals to Imagined Britons: Baghdadi Jews in Shanghai." *Modern Asian Studies* 37 (4): 999–1023. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X03004104>.
- Chittick, William C. 1989. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabī's Metaphysics of Imagination*. State University of New York Press.
- Evri, Yuval, and Almog Behar. 2017. "Between East and West: Controversies over the Modernization of Hebrew Culture in the Works of Shaul Abdallah Yosef and Ariel Bension." *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 16 (2): 295–311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725886.2017.1280904>.
- Fenton, Paul B. 2003. "Judaism and Sufism." In *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, edited by Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521652073.010>.
- Fishbane, Eitan P. 2018. *The Art of Mystical Narrative: A Poetics of the Zohar*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199948635.001.0001>.
- Giller, Pinchas. 2008. *Shalom Shar'abi and the Kabbalists of Beit El*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195328806.001.0001>.
- Goodman, Lenn E. 2009. *Ibn Tufayl's Hayy Ibn Yaqzan: A Philosophical Tale*. Translated by Lenn E. Goodman. University of Chicago Press.
- Huss, Boaz. 2016. *The Zohar: Reception and Impact*. Littman Library of Jewish Civilization. <https://doi.org/10.3828/liverpool/9781904113966.001.0001>.
- Idel, Moshe. 1988. *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*. Yale University Press.
- Lee, Leo Ou-fan. 1999. *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674274716>.
- Meyer, Maisie J. 2003. *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Whangpoo: A Century of Sephardi Jewish Life in Shanghai*. University Press of America.
- Scholem, Gershom. 1941. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Schocken Publishing House.
- Scholem, Gershom. 1987. *Origins of the Kabbalah*. Edited by R. J. Zwi Werblowsky. Translated by Allan Arkush. Princeton University Press.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. 1915. *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life*. Macmillan.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. 1917. *Nationalism*. Macmillan.
- Wasserstrom, Steven M. 1995. *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400864133>.
- Wolfson, Elliot R. 1994. *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691215099>.