Russ-Fishbane's book is devoted to one of the most fascinating movements in the spiritual life of medieval Judaism: a Hasidic (pietist) movement which operated in the Islamic lands, particularly Egypt, and which was clearly influenced by the Islamic Sufi movement. The roots of this spiritual movement can be found already in the writings of R. Bahia ibn Pakuda, a rabbinic judge (dayan) from Zaragoza, and in the poetry of David b. Hizkiya the Exilarch, both of the eleventh century; their Hasidic notions, however, were consolidated into an organized social movement only toward the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth centuries, in Egypt. The Sufi orders of Egypt flourished under the Ayyubid rule, and the rituals they practiced, including ecstatic song and dance, held significant attraction even for non-Muslims. The Jewish movement influenced by this spiritual climate gained serious momentum when Maimonides's only son, R. Abraham Maimonides, joined it. R. Abraham was extremely influential politically as the Head of the Jews (Ra'is al-Yahud) in Egypt, a respected adjudicator and original thinker, and under his leadership the movement flourished in Egypt, despite some opposition. The movement continued to be a vital component of the spiritual life of the Jews, in Egypt in particular and in the East in general, throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but declined later with the advent of an alternative movement in Jewish thought--kabbalah. The fact that the leaders of the movement composed their treatises in Arabic was to the movement's detriment at a time when Hebrew replaced Arabic as the dominant cultural language in the Islamic lands. These writings were therefore neglected; they were left uncopied and were not translated into Hebrew. Some of them were printed in the nineteenth century, others only in the twentieth. Additional manuscripts penned by the movement's thinkers still await publication.

The Hasidic movement drew scholarly attention due to the deep influence Sufi thought had on it. It was a Jewish revival movement which, paradoxically, absorbed ideas and practices from its rival religion. The various authors inspired by the movement did not hesitate to quote from Sufi poets and thinkers; they adopted much of their terminology from Sufi thought; they even clearly mimicked ascetic practices that were popular among the Sufis, such as seclusion, fast days, staying awake at nights and even abstinence. The most prominent area of religious life in which one can detect Islamic influence on the adherents of the movement is that of prayer. Jewish prayer was re-modeled by the movement along the lines of Islamic prayer: worshipers kneeled on their knees during prayer, as Muslim worshipers do in mosques; they were organized in straight lines, and prayer was full of bows and prostration. The Hasidim were also stringent with regards to ablution before prayer, reflecting the Muslim insistence on this religious obligation. R. Abraham even ruled, in opposition to his father's halakhic ruling, that the obligation of ablution existed even on Yom Kippur, a day on which washing is prohibited.

The book surveys the basic perceptions of the movement, the most prominent works produced by its thinkers (primarily those of the thirteenth century) and the unique praxis of its adherents. Russ-Fishbane focuses on the most prominent thinker of the
movement in the thirteenth century, R. Abraham b. Moshe Maimonides, but also devotes significant time to a thorough examination of the writings of other thinkers, such as R. Abraham's son, R. Obadiah; Abrahim ibn Abi'l-Rabi' "the Pious"; as well as to several anonymous compositions whose authors have not yet been identified.

The book's "hero" is R. Abraham Maimonides, but one should not treat it as his biography. The book focusses on one area in which R. Abraham was active--his Hasidic thought and his participation in the Hasidic movement. Other aspects of R. Abraham's historical figure are mentioned only briefly, such as his role as Ra'is al-Yahud, including the supervision of the endowments of Egypt's Jews, his relationship with the French sages who emigrated to Egypt, his systematic objection to the Palestinian prayer tradition, his campaign against the Palestinian practice of triennial Torah reading and more. His literary contributions are also not examined fully: apart from his writings on Hasidic thought, R. Abraham left behind many literary contributions, such as his halakhic responsa and the various statements he composed in defense of his father's writings, which were under attack throughout the thirteenth century. The book does, however, examine in great depth R. Abraham's Hasidic writings, including his most magnificent literary contribution, Kifayat al-'abidin ("The High ways to Perfection," ed. Samuel Rosenblatt, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

The book is composed of three parts: in the first part, the author surveys the rise of the movement in Egypt. Russ-Fishbane gathers the scattered pieces of data from the Cairo Genizah and uses them in order to create a comprehensive historical narrative. He competently describes the consolidation of the movement in Egypt, beginning already in Maimonides's lifetime and developing further after his death. Throughout the book the motif of the Hasidic adherents' reliance on Maimonides's rational writings, which at first glance seem distant from the world of the Hasidim, repeats itself. Philosophy and mysticism, the author emphasizes, are not necessarily diametrically opposed to each other, and one should view the movement's thought as a kind of "philosophical mysticism" (54). Moreover, the author convincingly proves that the leaders of the movement were not interested in speculating about the divine world, but rather focused on the believer's ecstatic experience and on delineating a method by which one could achieve closeness to the divine. The daily praxis of the Hasid, and not contemplation of the divine, was their focus. The knowledge they strove to attain was not metaphysical; "knowledge of the pietist path," rather, "was understood, first and foremost, as a gnosia oriented toward a life of practical discipline" (90).

Russ-Fishbane sketches the various degrees of identification with the movement, "from those who considered themselves full-fledged disciples, to those who participated in pietist prayer circles, to others who adopted pietist rites and manners to differing degrees" (56). He demonstrates also that identification with the philosophy of the movement was not limited to rabbinic Judaism; Karaite Jews also exhibited interest in Sufi literature and were also drawn to the Hasidic movement (56-58).

I do not, however, find convincing the author's claim that the testimony found in a seventeenth century source regarding the "conversion" of many Karaites to rabbinic Judaism in R. Abraham Maimonides's lifetime is a testament to these Karaites' participation in a "common mystical fellowship" with rabbinic Jews. The author notes that the dating of this testimony to R. Abraham's lifetime is mistaken, but does not state the time at which the event actually took place, which was during the rule of R. Abraham II, R. Abraham Maimonides's grandson (i.e. at the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth centuries), as mentioned explicitly in R. Ishtori ha-Parhi's "Sefer Kifar Vaferah" ("the Book of Button and Flower"). It would seem to me that it is more likely that this information should be understood, more simply, against the background of the demographic and cultural decline of karaite Judaism in Egypt and Palestine at the time and the growing influence of rabbinic halakha on their practice. To this discussion of karaite interest in the Jewish-Sufi Hasidic movement one should also add that this interest extended into the early Ottoman Era, a time at which the rabbinic Judaism of the East was itself dwindling and disappearing, as Paul Fenton recently described in an article not cited in the book. [1]

Russ-Fishbane devotes a fascinating and original discussion to pietism and family life (62-70). He concludes that women and children were also active in the movement, but that loyalty to the Hasidic practices it encourages led at times to familial conflict. The author, following Avraham Grossman's research, demonstrates that R. Abraham's attitude towards women was fairly positive, and that Hasidic thought gave equal standing to women, even if implementation in practice did not always reflect this principle ("it is important to distinguish between theory and reality", 66). On the other hand, writes the author, R. Abraham also exhibited a negative attitude toward sexuality and viewed family life as an obstacle to spiritual attainment. In light of this R. Abraham recommended the postponement of marriage and even recognized the possibility of complete abstinence, based on the model of the Talmudic figure of Ben 'Azzai, although this path was not recommended for the majority of believers.

Another topic discussed at length in this part of the book is the critique that was leveled at the members of the movement, primarily due to of their adoption of Sufi practices, and the ways in which the movement's thinkers, particularly R. Abraham, dealt with it. The author also discusses the ways in which the relationship between the leaders and followers of the movement and methods of spiritual guidance were institutionalized in the Egyptian Hasidic movement, ways which were again similar to the relationships between Sufi sheiks and students. This institutionalization, which cannot be detected in the first wave of Jewish-Sufi Hasidism in Spain in R. Bahai's days, stemmed, in the author's opinion, from the growing number of Egyptian Hasidim and from the need to establish stable modes of action and supervise the way in which the Hasidic teachings were transmitted to the next generation. This section also examines the ascetic practices adopted from the Sufi world, such as remaining awake throughout the night, fasting and seclusion. The defense of the use of these practices was based on finding biblical precedents for them and understanding these precedents as representing the ways of the prophets, which had been forgotten by the Jews and were now to be reinstated by the Hasidim. A deep discussion is also devoted to the question of attitude toward individual prayer. Despite general rabbinic support for communal prayer, the Hasidic writings legitimated
individual prayer on the part of the Hasid, at least on certain occasions, based on an assumption that such a mode of prayer would aid his concentration.

An extremely central practice in the world of the Sufi order is the dhikr, a ceremony of ecstatic chanting of God's names, at times accompanied by dancing and playing of music. Surprisingly, the sources do not testify to similar rituals among the Jewish Hasidim (123), perhaps because no biblical precedent could be found for this practice. Nonetheless, singing and music occupied an important place in the world of Egyptian Hasidim. R. Abraham encouraged singing during prayer and viewed music as an important tool that enabled prophetic attainment.

The second part of the book is devoted to prayer and the synagogue. Due to the objection to their religious ideas, the Hasidim formed their own prayer groups in individual homes and the like, at which they prayed according to the guidance of their teachers. R. Abraham's Kifayat al-'abidin includes detailed instruction on the restructuring of prayer in the spirit of Hasidism. The author surveys R. Abraham's prayer reforms extensively: the different physical gestures one should make throughout the service, the prostrations, etc.

The third section of the book focusses on the perception of prophecy embraced by the philosophers of the Hasidic movement and on their messianic expectations. A central role was given to prophecy already in Maimonides's "Guide to the Perplexed." In contrast to al-Farabi, who viewed the philosopher as the perfect man, Maimonides saw prophecy as the peak of human perfection. The prophet is he whose mind, attributes and power of imagination have reached perfection. One can thus identify a certain amount of Sufi influence, in the spirit of ibn Sina, and as Russ-Fishbane notes, "By restoring prophecy to its exalted rank, Maimonides did for subsequent Jewish philosophy and mysticism what ibn Sina did for their Islamic counterparts" (190).

However, the centrality of prophecy in the religious experience was transformed, in Hasidism, from a theoretical ideal to a way of life. The writings of the Jewish Sufi thinkers attempt to reconstruct the traditions of the ancient prophets and the manner in which aspiring prophets prepared themselves for prophecy, out of an understanding that the return of prophecy was still an attainable goal in their day. The expectation of the imminent return of prophecy to religious life was closely tied to the messianic perception of the Hasidim. The reason for the absence of prophecy is the Jews' lowly situation in the diaspora, which negatively affects their mental and emotional abilities. The coming of the messianic age, which the Hasidim expected to arrive speedily, would lead inevitably to a renewed ability to attain prophecy.

Russ-Fishbane's book is an excellent introduction to R. Abraham Maimonides's thought and that of his generation, and to the manner in which they designed a challenging spiritual path for seekers of the divine. An understanding of the world of the Jewish Sufi Hasidic movement raises interesting questions regarding Jewish authenticity and foreign influences, as well as regarding the ways in which spiritual movements within Judaism adopt foreign models and content borrowed from competing religions. Thus, for instance, it would be interesting to compare the way in which the Egyptian Hasidic movement adopted ideas and practices from the Muslim world with the way another movement of the same era, the German Hasidic movement known as "the Ashkenazi Hasidic Movement," adopted ascetic motifs and popular symbolism from their Christian neighbors. The author briefly mentions Ashkenazi Hasidism (51-52), but identifies several important distinctions between the two movements which "set Egyptian Jewish pietism apart from parallel movements" (52). However, the existence of several shared elements in both movements, such as the encouragement of abnegation and asceticism, the centrality of prayer, the leading of the movement by a charismatic spiritual figure (R. Abraham Maimonides in Egypt and R. Yehuda ha-Hasid in Europe) and in particular the fact that both movements developed at exactly the same time, leaves the reader with the unresolved question of whether the simultaneous flourishing of two Hasidic movements in two such distant locations and cultural contexts could possibly be due only to historical coincidence.

Russ-Fishbane's book is compulsory reading for anyone desirous of understanding the cultural processes undergone by Eastern Jewry in the late middle ages. It illustrates the pull Hasidism had over many Jews and clarifies the background for the differences in intellectual tastes among Jewish intellectuals, from Aristotelian-philosophical examination to ecstatic and emotional thought, differences which are expressed daily in numerous practices. The book was written by a young scholar, but he exhibits thorough knowledge of both the Jewish and the Islamic sources, impressive analytical skills, the courage to disagree with his predecessors and suggest a renewed interpretation of the data and a unique perspective of a spiritual movement which has not garnered sufficient scholarly attention to date.

Note:
Arnold E. Franklin. His revolutionary program for revitalizing Judaism in the spirit of Sufism failed to be realized not only because he was overshadowed by his father but because of the time and energy he spent on leadership, presumably undertaken to preserve his father’s heritage.