The subject of this book, Ezekiel Landau (1713–93), was one of the leading rabbis of the second half of the eighteenth century. He is best known as the author of the responsa collection *Noda bi-Yehudah* and commentaries on the Talmud and *Shulhan Arukh*. For the last forty years of his life he was the chief rabbi of Prague, one of the most important Jewish communities in central or eastern Europe. He was perhaps more highly regarded in his own day than was the Vilna Gaon, although he is not so much remembered. Like the Gaon, he opposed the emerging Hasidic movement; his opposition to the Enlightenment was also widely known in his time. He is the source of the endlessly repeated claim that the hidden purpose of Mendelssohn’s Bible translation was to introduce traditional Jews to the German language.

Sharon Flatto’s new book on Landau—it is not a biography—is comprised of two unequal halves. The first section focuses on Landau’s polemics, mostly toward the end of his life, against three contemporary Jewish movements, namely, Sabbatianism/Frankism, Hasidism, and the Haskalah. The second half constructs a map of Landau’s views on kabbalistic matters. The first section is more controversial and has attracted the lion’s share of attention. However, it is the second half that is more important and that changes how we look at eighteenth-century Judaism.

Readers of Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* will recall that two of the movements that Landau combated—namely, Sabbatianism and Hasidism—are the final two “major trends” in that book. Flatto analyses another “trend” that has an equal claim to be seen as “major,” at least in the eighteenth century. This trend, which was exemplified by Landau, was an amalgam of eclectic Zoharic, Lurianic, and Cordoverian ideas, rituals, and piety. Flatto argues that it was normative—in Landau’s Prague, at least—throughout the later eighteenth century. In striking contrast to other, much better studied trends of early modern Judaism, such as Frankism, Hasidism,
and the Haskalah, kabbalah was largely uncontroversial within the Jewish community during the eighteenth century. Its ideas were successfully popularized and widely disseminated. But one might think of it as the hidden iceberg mass of eighteenth-century Judaism. Flatto’s book is a guide to this important style of eighteenth-century Judaism.

The first section begins with an excellent overview of the Prague Jewish community in the late eighteenth century. It then focuses on Landau’s controversies with contemporary Jewish movements. Using some new evidence (some of it more fully documented in the Yale dissertation that this book is based on), Flatto argues convincingly that Landau was more intensely opposed to the Enlightenment than he has been portrayed as being in much of the recent scholarship. Privately, he regarded Mendelssohn as, strictly speaking, a heretic. Landau opposed each of these groups for many reasons, but primarily, as Flatto argues carefully, on account of their rejection of rabbinic authority and opposition to traditional rabbinic training. This set of attitudes also sheds light on his defense of the great Prague Talmudist-kabbalist of the previous generation, the accused Sabbatian Jonathan Eybeschuetz (an incident that Flatto does not examine at any length).

But Landau also objected to the popularization of kabbalah in both Frankism and Hasidism. “Both young and old, children and women come to hear the deceptive kabbalah of Jacob [Frank] . . . and the writings of the Ari,” wrote a shocked Eleazar Fleckeles, one of Landau’s students (133). Landau strove, as Flatto shows, to reassert the traditional kabbalistic notion of esotericism, and his efforts to restrict kabbalistic study and rituals should be seen in that light.

Although an opponent of Hasidism, Landau himself, as Flatto argues, is best understood as nothing so much as a hasid, as that term was understood before Israel Baal Shem Tov (the Besht) and the rise of Beshtian Hasidism (86–87). Before he came to Prague, Landau studied for decades in Brody, where he was a member of the famous kloyz. Like other members of the Brody kloyz and other pre-Beshtian “Hasidim” in Poland, he studied kabbalah and, of course, Talmud. Landau emerges from Flatto’s study as ascetic, pietistic, and learned. He was concerned with the daily fight against demons, focused on fear as a spiritually powerful emotion, and was attuned to the pathos of the exiled Shekhinah and the search for devekut.

Landau has sometimes been viewed as an opponent of mysticism. Flatto shows clearly that this is a misreading of the man and his beliefs. His opposition to the use of kabbalah in Frankism and Sabbatianism, and in Hasidism as well, went hand in hand with a private commitment to kabbalistic beliefs, to the observance of kabbalistic rituals such as tikkun hatsot, and to the dissemination of at least certain kabbalistic mysteries in his public sermons. Kabbalistic themes are touched on in many of his published sermons, and