

Article Sidebar: JAK046

KABBALAH IN TRADITIONAL JEWISH PRACTICE

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A growing number of people in popular culture have begun to adopt Kabbalah as a means of attaining mystical experiences and unlocking esoteric secrets. This marks a major difference between the use of Kabbalah in pop culture and in traditional Judaism, and removes it from its historic Jewish context. In traditional Jewish practice, Kabbalah is supposed to be studied and discussed only under the supervision of a learned rabbi, and, as with biblical and Talmudic studies, it is conceived of as a lifelong endeavor.

Jewish adherents do not study Kabbalah to attain mystical experiences or unlock esoteric secrets, nor do they study it as mere academic exercise; rather, they study Kabbalah in order to understand G-d, creation, and themselves, so as to help themselves better keep the Torah (the Mosaic Law) and its commandments. Torah observance is the basis of Kabbalah and the primary reason for its revelation. The final purpose of the whole enterprise is to bring G-d's "wholeness and healing" (Heb. *tikkun 'olam*) to the world. In other words, the goal of educating Jewish students in the esoteric understandings of Kabbalah and the mystical practices that arise from them is so that they could bring G-d's "wholeness and healing" to the world.

TRADITIONAL KABBALAH TEXTS AND SUBJECTS

Pop culture adherents and traditional Jewish students of Kabbalah study nearly identical texts, including the *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, and the *Tanya*, all Jewish writings with mystical contents. The primary text of all Kabbalah study, popular or traditional, is the *Zohar*.

Much of the subject matter in traditional Kabbalah comes from the *Zohar*, including the essences or attributes of G-d (the *sefirot*), the names of G-d, and the contraction of G-d. Other subjects include the nature of man, the organs of the body and their function in perceiving the nature of G-d, the layout of the heavens and its reflection of G-d's being, and many other mystical subjects.

Jewish students are taught about the late-first-century Israeli sage Rashbi (Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai), who was an important link in the development of Kabbalistic literature. According to Jewish tradition, Rashbi had a revelation from G-d that he was to teach his knowledge of G-d's essence and His creation to his students. Rashbi supposedly knew the same "secret" knowledge that G-d had shown to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Rashbi's teachings included the 10 *sefirot*, which is Hebrew for the "essences" of G-d. Kabbalah teaches that G-d has 10 particular characteristics that reveal who He is: His crown, His wisdom, His understanding, His love based on His covenants, His strength, His beauty, His eternity, His glory, His foundation, and His kingdom. Aspects of this teaching have made their way into traditional Judaism in the yearly counting of the Omer (marking each day between Passover and the giving of the Torah to Moses), in which typical Jewish practice refers to and describes G-d's characteristics (namely, His love, His glory, His foundation, and His kingdom) using Kabbalistic terminology.

Study of the *sefirot* is part of any beginning course in traditional Jewish Kabbalah. Pop-culture students of Kabbalah also study the *sefirot*, but without the necessary foundation for understanding the subject.

Jewish students usually have a background in the Bible, the Talmud, and relevant rabbinic commentaries. Pop-culture students usually do not.

Jewish students of Kabbalah typically study other subjects as well, including cosmology, astrology, numerology, prophecy, dreams, healing, and reincarnation, which may account for the popularity of Kabbalistic literature in recent years among those desiring mystical and paranormal experiences. This is not, however, the motivation for the study of these subjects in traditional Jewish Kabbalah.

JEWISH OPPOSITION TO KABBALAH STUDY

Historically, not all Jewish people have considered the study of Kabbalah a worthwhile endeavor. When Hasidic Judaism was born in the eighteenth century in Eastern Europe, a revival of mysticism occurred and Jews studied the texts of Kabbalah with renewed vigor. There was, however, a large negative reaction to Hasidic thought. Rabbis and students called the *mitnagdim* (Hebrew for “those who are opposed”) led this counter-movement and opposed the mystical practices of the Hasidic rabbis, including that of immersing themselves in Kabbalistic mysticism.

Thus, Orthodox Jews from a “mitnaged” background, many “modern Orthodox” Jews, and the overwhelming majority of Conservative, Reformed, Reconstructionist, humanistic, and Messianic Jewish adherents do not place a high value on the study of Kabbalah. The late conservative rabbi and Jewish Theological Seminary professor, Dr. Saul Lieberman, remarked that he did not want his students to study Kabbalistic texts (however, he did permit the study of such texts simply for their historical value). He declared, “It is forbidden to have a course in nonsense.” Large segments of the Jewish population today also consider Kabbalah to be mystical “nonsense.”

Today’s Jewish world places more emphasis on the study of the Bible and the *Talmud* (which contains the *Mishna*, a commentary on the written Torah; and the *Gemara*, a commentary on the Mishna), as well as commentaries on the Bible and the Talmud from noted rabbis.

DIFFERENT FRAMEWORK

The purpose of Kabbalah study in Jewish thought is to better keep the Torah and understand G-d, to the end of bringing wholeness to the world. The pop-culture Kabbalah phenomenon departs from this entire framework of Jewish thought regarding Kabbalah study; from its background to the motivation for its study to its purpose.

— Rabbi Dr. David Friedman