An Introduction to Kabbalah

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In recent years, Kabbalah—the primary variety of Jewish mysticism—has become a focus of popular culture. As so often happens in such cases, misunderstandings have ensued, which perhaps some history can dispel.

Kabbalah is Jewish religious mysticism. Rudolf Otto's definition of mysticism as "the stressing to a very high degree, indeed the overstressing, of the non-rational or supra-rational elements in religion" is helpful, but we need to go a little further: "A characteristic common to all types of mysticism is the Identification, in different degrees of completeness, of the personal self with the transcendent Reality" (Otto 22). In Judaism, the first part of Otto's definition allows us to contrast the rational, analytical parts of the religion—the law, ethics, ritual—with the "spiritual" parts—the feelings we get when we pray. But the second part best explains Kabbalah's meaning within Jewish life: mysticism is the overwhelming desire to know God.

Knowledge of God can be as simple as a feeling of closeness to a supernal presence, or an attempt to experience that presence through our senses. In Judaism, this is supplemented by the intellectual approach of trying to fathom God's being; to understand the "mind" of God is to know God. For some Jewish mystics, this knowledge is far more important than the ineffable feelings one gets. Kabbalah has come to include all of these aspects.

Historical Context of Jewish Mysticism

The Jewish mysticism known as Kabbalah has of course been influenced by Jewish orthodoxy and by earlier Jewish mysticisms; thus the Torah (the Hebrew name for the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) and the Talmud (a central text of mainstream Judaism, a record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, philosophy, customs and history) are crucial to it. Aspects of the cultures in which the Jews dwelled, such as Greek Neoplatonism and medieval Islamic philosophy, were a third influence. Finally, the Jewish mystical tradition has been affected by events in the world outside of itself, such as the expulsion of the Jews from Spain under Ferdinand and Isabella, or the upheavals of Eastern Europe in the 17th century.

Although traditionally observant Jews place its source with the Biblical patriarchs, Jewish mysticism finds its roots in the Neoplatonist[1] philosophers of Greece, particularly in the mystical idea of the soul and its relationship to God, seen as an overarching universal force. For the Jewish mystics, since their earliest writings in the third to fifth centuries CE, the soul has had an overwhelming need to return to its source, the divine home of all souls. Much of early Jewish

mystical thought concerned the attempts of the active soul to travel among the seven heavens, through the seven palaces, to reach the seat of the divine and to gaze upon the divine throne. Their quest was to know God directly, in hopes of solving the two major mysteries: the mystery of creation—what God was doing at the moments before and during the instant of creation; and that of Ezekiel's chariot (Ezekiel 1:1)—what God really "looks like." Both of these mysteries have been important to Jewish mystics ever since.

In the time of the writing of the Talmud, from 200 to 500 CE, the Jewish sages warned against this kind of mystical speculation. Attempts to understand what happened before creation were not forbidden, but were strongly discouraged, as was the effort to visit God's abode. In one Talmudic allegory, four sages make the attempt to visit the dangerous places; one dies, a second goes crazy, a third becomes an apostate, and only the fourth returns safely.[2] None but the wisest and most experienced can even consider making that journey, the story teaches us. The mysteries themselves were not to be written down, but rather taught by a master to small groups of well-qualified students. No wonder that those students must be married and over the age of 40 (and be men, of course), as these were minimum requirements for the emotional stability and maturity necessary to survive the process.

Kabbalah

In 1200 CE, the concept of divine *emanation*—the idea of God's essential nature as a force or being that emanates spiritual energy—appears for the first time in the writing of Jewish mystics in Provence in the south of France, then spreads to similar communities in northern Spain, at that time under Islamic rule. The idea of God as the Divine Emanator is what sets Kabbalah apart from the more diffuse interests of the earlier mystics.

Although these writers attributed the concept to ancient Talmudic sages, it was more likely an innovation. Living as they did in the culture of Islamic Spain—with its well developed philosophical, theological, scientific, mathematical, and literary traditions—it is not surprising that the Jews of that culture would be dissatisfied with their traditional notions of the world's creation, and that they would find useful the speculations of others who had been earnestly searching for knowledge of God.

The concept of "emanation" assumes there is an aspect of God that is essentially unknowable. We call this aspect *Ayn Sof*, the infinite, literally "without end." We know nothing about *Ayn Sof*, but we surmise that it is constantly active, like a fountain, forever emanating. The substance emanated is the source of everything in the spiritual and material worlds. Most importantly, creation takes place via a process of emanation, not just at the instant of Genesis 1:1, but continually, at all times.

God creates, then, via the instrument of emanation. But the mystics faced insistent questions: why did God decide to be a creator? Is God "the creator" prior to the moment of creation? Or was the initial creation a necessary step before God could be called the creator? In

those moments of creation, God creates not only the world, but God's very identity as the creator. The name “Elohim” is “awarded” to God upon the creation of the world. But how, exactly, does creation occur? For that we will have to consider the Zohar, the most important work in Kabbalah.

The Zohar

The Zohar recounts the interactions of a group of rabbis and their students traveling around Israel in the second century CE, experiencing life and learning from each other. It is formally a collection of mystical commentaries on the Torah, beginning with the first words of Genesis and going from there.

There are conflicting ideas concerning the Zohar's authorship and thus of its authority. It is traditionally understood to have been written by Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai, a second century Talmudist, but most non-Orthodox scholars consider it a thirteenth century creation, compiled from pre-existing oral sources by Rabbi Moses from León, Spain, circa 1280 to 1300 CE.

The Zohar was composed at a particular time in Jewish history. The Jews of Spain and Southern France were engaged in a dialogue among themselves about how to think about the tradition, indeed, even how to think about God. Greek philosophy, as represented by the more esoteric teachings of Maimonides, was challenging traditional views of the Torah and even of the basic nature of God. Socially, the Islamic Jewish world was challenged by the impact of Christian dominance. The Kabbalists at the time of the Zohar were developing entirely new ways of responding to these challenges.

Dense and intricately written (mostly in an archaic form of Aramaic), the Zohar sees God as a collection of interacting attributes and aspects.[i] Behind and encompassing these aspects is *Ayn Sof*, the unknowable, eternal force. Before creating the material universe, *Ayn Sof* created, by a process of emanation of spiritual energy, the *Sefirot*. The *Sefirot* (plural of *Sefirah*, literally “the enumerations”) are the ten emanations that reveal God through physical and other means; in other words, the *Sefirot* are both the knowable aspects of God and the most important aspects of humanity created in God's image.

Thus, the essence of God may be unknowable, but the attributes of God are entirely knowable, as they constitute the essential aspects of humanity. For the classical Jewish mystic, a major problem has been solved: we now know what God "looks like," although the answer may not be something that the earlier mystics would have appreciated or perhaps even understood.

Safed and the Spread of Kabbalah

After the expulsions of the Jews from Spain by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in 1492 and from Portugal in 1497, the Jews of Iberia migrated throughout Europe, North Africa, and, as one might have expected, to Palestine. Of the estimated 200,000 Jews who left the

Iberian peninsula, perhaps 90,000 went to Ottoman lands.[ii] One small group moved to a small city on a mountain-top in the Galilee called, in English, Safed, but pronounced Ts'fat.

By the middle of the 16th century, the population of Safed consisted of a few thousand Muslim and Jewish households. A thriving economic and administrative center, Safed became a hub of Jewish learning as well, attracting the best Jewish scholars of the time, including many who had brought Kabbalistic traditions with them.

Gershom Scholem, a major scholar, argues that the expulsion meant a double exile for these Jews—not just from Jerusalem under the Romans, but now also from their second home in Spain. Needing an explanation for these disasters, the thinkers, storytellers, mythmakers, and mystics of Safed built on the tales in the Zohar and thereby transformed the Kabbalah that they had received.

Safed had dozens of Kabbalah-influenced writers and teachers, but two in particular stand out.

Rabbi Moses ben Jacob Cordovero (1522-1570) re-characterized the nature of *Ayn Sof* as primordial "thought." His first book, *Pardes Rimonim* (An Orchard of Pomegranates), was a methodical exposition of Kabbalistic thought up until that time, and *Or Yakar* (A Precious Light), his magnum opus, is a line-by-line commentary on the Zohar, explaining its most paradoxical sections and resolving contradictions that had bothered Kabbalists for centuries. Cordovero's Kabbalistic writings are studied to this day.

Even more luminous was Rabbi Isaac ben Solomon Luria (1534 – 1572), also known as the Ari (the Lion).[iii] He arrived in Safed from Egypt, the story goes, on the day of the funeral of Cordovero. If Cordovero was the great systematizer, Luria was the great visionary and mythologizer. He wrote very little himself; his work was transcribed and interpreted by his disciples. A healer said to be able to invoke divine energy to travel long distances, make miracles, and read minds, Luria lived in Safed just three years before he died at age thirty-eight.

To explain the mechanism by which *Ayn Sof* creates the world, Luria drew on the tension between contraction (*tsimtsum*) and expansion (*hitpashtut*).[iv] *Ayn Sof*, Luria taught, initially occupies all of the material and spiritual worlds. Moved to create, *Ayn Sof* understands that there is no "space" for creation, so *Ayn Sof* withdraws (*tsimtsum*) to leave room for something else. And with a single emanated beam of spiritual energy into the void thus created, *Ayn Sof* creates the ten *sefirot* as containers for that energy. But the energy is so intense, it shatters the containers, dispersing the energy, and permitting the pieces of the containers to remain as the foundation of the material world. But that created world is now in a broken state. It becomes the task of the Jewish people to repair the containers, gather up the light, and "mend the world" (*tikkun olam*). This concept of *tikkun olam* has been central to Jewish ethical teaching ever since Luria's time, even among those who have no idea of its mystical origins. Creation now is understood as a continuing partnership between God and humanity, with central roles for each.

The Safed era was short-lived,[v] amounting to no more than two generations during the last half of the 16th century, but the invention of movable type and the establishment of the first commercial printing press in the Middle East in Safed itself meant that the work of the Safed Kabbalists was disseminated far more widely than any earlier Kabbalistic writing, with important consequences.

Eastern Europe and the Origins of Hasidism

Early in the 17th century, in the areas now known as Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania, a Jewish community of over 500,000 appeared to be established and secure, protected by the Polish aristocracy for whom they provided commercial and financial services. In 1648, however, a revolt by Ukrainian Cossacks killed tens of thousands of Jews and destroyed hundreds of small Jewish communities.[vi]

Soon after this catastrophe, a Turkish Jew named Shabbetai Zevi (1626-1676) claimed to be the Jewish Messiah, using the Lurianic Kabbalah to justify his claims. He created the largest messianic movement in Jewish history, yet a strategic miscalculation led him to his coerced conversion to Islam in 1666, disillusioning his hundreds of thousands of followers.

These two 17th century Jewish disasters left much of the population once again spiritually and materially shattered.[vii] Out of this background emerged the most recent Kabbalistic movement, Hasidism.

Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (1700? - 1760), a rural rabbi, brought a message of consolation to the East European Jewish communities devastated by the previous century's tragedies. His message used ideas from Safed, but instead of speaking in theological abstractions, he taught through stories and allegories. He was known as the *Baal Shem Tov*, or "Master of the Holy Name." The *Baal Shem Tov* (sometimes compressed to *Besht*) taught that anyone could become a pious one—a *hasid*—and thus the movement he created became known as Hasidism. His message that one should approach God with joy, rather than with scholarly expertise, appealed to many.

Over Hasidism's first three generations, a new kind of leadership emerged. In Kabbalah, a special intensity of prayer is required to bring God's spiritual energy down to the material world. One need not be a scholar to pray in such an effective way, but one does need a particular personality. Those with the power not just to pray, but to call upon God in God's various aspects to bring blessings, healings, and life itself on the people are called *Tsaddikim* (righteous ones). The *Tsaddikim* became the spiritual leaders of communities of *hasids*, and continued the tradition of celebrating the personal, mystical, and intimate relationship that every Jew could have with God.

In this environment, Kabbalah became less esoteric, and more a part of the normative way of being Jewish. Luria's idea of *tikkun olam* became something that every Jew could and

should do, not so much for any grand Messianic reasons, but rather for personal salvation. The Jewish idea of "heaven" can be roughly translated as having a "place in the world to come," and doing acts of *tikkun olam* became the best way of assuring oneself such a place. *Tsimtsum* could now become an ethical imperative, not just a theological principle. The *Tsaddik* in particular needed to personify such principles in order to be able to bring down God's energy upon his people. By the end of the 19th century, Hasidism had largely been triumphant in the fight for the "hearts and minds" of East European Jewry.[viii]

In the United States and Israel today, there are dozens of Hasidic groups with links to the original disciples of the *Baal Shem Tov*. They vary in their openness to modern culture, to modern dress, and to other Jews who observe the faith differently, but all keep the traditions and knowledge of Kabbalah alive.

Contemporary Kabbalah

In addition to the Hasidic tradition, there are several contemporary approaches to Jewish mysticism. One broadly follows the path laid out by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972).[ix] Heschel was the precocious scion of two Hasidic families, but became more familiar with the outside world than is typical in the Hasidic milieu. Best known for his social activism, marching with Dr. Martin Luther King and opposing the Vietnam War, he did his most lasting work as a religious philosopher, blending his early Hasidic education with a contemporary ethic to create a theology of "radical amazement," where carefully and lovingly observing the world around us is a profound religious act. He expanded the notion of the human-divine partnership of *tikkun olam* to emphasize God's need for people to complete the world, not just for Messianic purposes, but also in everyday activities.

Other examples of the continuing influence of Kabbalah range from the Kabbalah Centre organization led by Rabbi Philip Berg, quite controversial in its openness to all "seekers," its success at attracting paying customerss, and its fondness for having celebrities speak on its behalf,[x] to the Jewish Renewal movement, influenced by the thinking of Heschel and others, with its prayer services characterized by frequent use of Kabbalistic symbolism as well as Hasidic emphases on joy, intensity of prayer, and music.[xi]

Conclusion

Kabbalah is an integral part of the Jewish religion. Its central texts go back a thousand years, and over its millennium of existence it has been transformed from a primarily oral and esoteric tradition to one that is taught in universities, synagogues, community centers, and profit-making educational institutions. In many ways it is like other religious mystical traditions; in many ways it is uniquely Jewish. Whether one studies it for what it teaches about Judaism, about mystical knowledge of God, about creating a better connection with God, or for personal ethical improvement, the study of Kabbalah is an endlessly fascinating enterprise.

Notes

[1] "Neoplatonism is the modern term for a school of religious and mystical philosophy that took shape in the 3rd century CE, based on the teachings of Plato and earlier Platonists, with its earliest contributor believed to be Plotinus." [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoplatonism]

[2] Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Chagigah, pp. 11a – 15b.

[3] One of the best introductions to The Zohar is Arthur Green's *A Guide to the Zohar*, 2004. The standard scholarly explication of the main ideas in The Zohar is Isaiah Tishby's *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1989.

[4] See Green, *A Guide to the Zohar*, pp. 178ff for more on the spread out of Iberia. A discussion of the number of Jews subject to the expulsion can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Spain#Edict_of_Expulsion.

[5] A recent biography of Rabbi Luria that is both accessible and scholarly is Fine, 2003.

[6] An excellent elaboration of this process is in Matt, 1994, pp. 94-95.

[7] The best short introduction to Kabbalah generally is Dan, 2006, and the treatment of the Safed experience, pp. 71-83 is particularly clear and informative.

[8] The traditional number is "at least 100,000" but more modern historians using newer estimation techniques suggest that the number may be between 50,000 and 100,000.

[9] See Dan, 2006, pp. 85-92 for a clear treatment of this tragic period.

[10] This was also the area that was most victimized during the Nazi Holocaust, the remnants of which transferred themselves to Israel and the United States.

[11] A good thumbnail biography can be found in Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heschel), and an excellent summary of Heschel's thought in Hartman's introduction to Heschel's *Between God and Man* (1997).

[12] See the Kabbalah Centre's website (http://www.kabbalah.com/) for an overview.

[13] See Green's *Seek My Face, Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology* and *Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow.* Schachter-Shalomi's *Paradigm Shift* offers a survey of Renewal beliefs. For a more organizational slant, the website of "Aleph: The Alliance for Jewish Renewal" (https://www.aleph.org/) has good links for further explorations.

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