

Kabbalah 101+

Everything You Wanted To Know About Kabbalah But Had No One To Ask

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This lecture should be studied prior to any further study in Kabbalah.
It is geared to all beginners, Jews and righteous Gentiles (benei Noah) alike.

Introduction into the Oral Torah

Regarding the holy Torah, the great Sage Ben Bag Bag is quoted as saying, "Hafukh Bah V'Hafukh Bah Ki Kula Bah" Turn it over again and again for everything is in it." (Avot 5:25). The Sages of Israel have taught us that every bit of human knowledge is to be found in the holy Torah. All we have to know is how to find it. There has always been more to the Torah than meets the eye. Torah deals with far more than just our corporeal physical reality. Torah is the comprehensive guide to all metaphysical reality as well. It is these metaphysical teachings of the Torah that are today called the "Kabbalah."

First and foremost it must be understood that the teachings which today are called Kabbalah¹ have always been an integral part of the Torah that Moses received from G-d on Mt. Sinai. Thus the Kabbalah has always been an essential part of the Jewish religion.

Every serious student of the Bible, who reads it in the original Hebrew, recognizes that there are certain sections in the Torah, N'vi'im (prophets) and Ketuvim (writings) that

¹ Unfortunately not all material in today's market that is called Kabbalah is legitimate according to the Torah. For hundreds of years there are been unscrupulous peoples who have perverted the holy Kabbalah and added to it pagan teachings of Egyptian and other foreign origins. Such perversions or Christianizations are a blatant attempt to manipulate the power inherent in the holy Word of G-d. True Jewish Kabbalah, in spite of what others claim, has no connection to the occult, to magic or any other foreign form of spirituality. Judaism, and Kabbalah is simply a part of Judaism, totally disavows these perversions, and I strongly advise my readers to be wary of anything entitled Kabbalah that does not come from a legitimate Orthodox Jewish source. Mind you there are a number of illegitimate Jewish sources out there as well.

simply do not make the clearest of sense on the first reading. Within these passages there are words which might seem out of place or superfluous. Many times words are spelled with what appears to be an extra or a missing letter. Sometimes entire sections appear to be meaningless repetitions of genealogies and the like. Yet, those of us Jews who believe that the "Torah of HaShem is perfect" (Psalm 19:8) recognize that there are no mistakes in the Divine Word, nor is there anything in it that does not contain multiple depths of meaning.²

How then since ancient times was one to understand the depths of the written Word of G-d? Certainly the peoples of Moses' day as well as in the days of Joshua, the Judges and Kings all had questions as to what the Torah meant when it says, "All who work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death" (Ex. 35:2). Fearing the death penalty for Sabbath violation, which we see was instituted in Moses' day (ref. Num. 15:32-36), the people must have asked what specifically were the forbidden types of work the violation of which lead to capital punishment. Nowhere does the Torah record the details of forbidden Sabbath work. Yet, the details of forbidden Sabbath work must have been known to the people of those days, or they all would have violated the law and been subject to punishment. If these details were not written down in the Bible, how then were they known? The answer to this is quite rational and practical.

When a person had a question about one of the laws that Moses received from G-d, that person probably went and asked Moses, "What does this mean? What type of work is forbidden on the Sabbath?" Moses would then turn and ask G-d for the necessary details of the law that He had just given. Moses would thus tell the people, "In the Torah it is written such and such, and G-d has told me that this means such and such." We thus have two aspects of the Word of G-d, the written word and its oral meaning. This is how written and oral Torah came into being. Both are equally the Word of G-d. Oral Torah was passed down orally throughout the ages until such a time when G-d directed otherwise.

It is clear from reading the Bible that not everything written therein is explained therein. In spite of Christian denials, the existence of the oral Torah is beyond question. When Moses spoke the word of G-d commanding us to observe this or that law, he must have outlined the details necessary for us to fulfill our obligations of observance. When the Torah was given, and when the later prophets had spoken, there must have been an original meaning that was and is the true understanding of the Bible. These teachings, though not in writing, were always treasured among the Jewish people.

² Rabbeynu Bahya in his classic Torah commentary (to Gen. 36:39) states regarding the verse, "and Timna was the concubine to Eliphaz, the son of Esau" (Gen. 36:12), that there is no difference in importance between this verse and the verse "Shema Yisrael" (Hear O' Israel, Deut. 6:4). All verses of the Torah, Rabbeynu Bahya says, are of equal importance, all concealing with them secret hidden Names of G-d.

The Writing of the Oral Torah

Within one hundred year after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 68 C.E., the ancient traditions of Judaism were actually in danger of being forgotten. In 188 C.E. there arose a man who was the prince of the House of David, the man who would have been Israel's king had the monarchy been intact. This man was Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi (the Prince). He was directed by Divine inspiration to record the oral laws of the Torah. This was the creation of the Mishna, the repetition of the Torah, the codification of the oral law. The teachings of the oral Torah, therefore, were not haphazard inventions of the minds of sincere hearted men. The oral Torah, like the written Torah, was, and is the Divine Word of G-d. Both oral and written Torah have equal authority. The Mishna, however, was not the first part of the oral traditions to be permitted be to written.

Two generations prior to Rabbi Yehuda lived one of the greatest of all Jewish saints. He was Rabbi Akiba. Rabbi Akiba was also directed by Heaven to inscribe portions of the oral Torah into writing. The result of his efforts was the masterpiece of Kabbalistic literature, the original teachings of Torah dating back to Abraham himself, the holy Sefer Yetzirah, the Book of Formation. Yet, Rabbi Akiba was not alone in being guided by Heaven into putting into writing the ancient knowledge of the holy oral Law. Rabbi Akiba's foremost student, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai (whose son Rabbi Eliezer was a contemporary of Rabbi Yehuda) was also directed by Heaven to put into writing a compilation of metaphysical teachings that had been handed down from generation to generation as well as those teachings which Rabbi Shimon received directly from the translated beings of Moses and the prophet Elijah. Rabbi Shimon directed his student Rabbi Abba to transcribe their words and conversations. However, these texts were not to be publicly known for another 1,000 years. G-d had ordained that the Jewish people were to go into exile for a 1,000 year period. What was most devastating about this exile was not our loss of our land, but rather the loss of aspects of our holy Torah. For the exile included our being exiled from the Face of G-d, meaning that prophecy was taken away from the eyes of the people. Divine revelation was to be concealed. Therefore, the works of Rabbi Shimon were stored away only to be restored to a generation far into the future.

During these 1,000 years the holy texts were only studied by small and concealed groups of secret masters whose job it was to be the guardian of the true knowledge and interpretations of the Bible. When these manuscripts were eventually revealed 1100 years after their authorship they came to be known as the holy Zohar, the Book of Brilliance. One should not consider the idea of books concealed for 1,000 years to be a farfetched story, for history has clearly documented that the Dead Sea Scrolls were hidden and preserved for 2,000 years.

The Metaphysical Oral Torah

Just as the laws governing the physical world have been handed down to us, so too have the laws of the metaphysical universe been handed down to us. The part of the oral Torah that deals with metaphysical reality is the soul of the Torah. These were the ancient teachings taught in the Biblical schools of the prophets.³ These metaphysical, meditative, so-called mystical teachings of the oral Torah were closely guarded secrets. In order to study them, one had to be in contact with one of the secret guardians who knew the keys to opening the secret codes that concealed these teachings. One therefore had to receive directly from a qualified initiated teacher. Without this direct connection one was not able to receive anything. Therefore did this aspect of the holy oral Torah come to be known as the "Kabbalah", the reception.

Once a student was found worthy and accepted by a teacher to receive the secret Torah knowledge, his education did not stop with that which this teacher imparted to him. The secrets of the Torah include among them the methods and techniques used since Biblical days to cultivate the spirit of prophecy. This "kabbalistic" knowledge enabled one to cultivate the experience of Divine revelation. The student would properly sanctify himself until, like the Biblical prophets and Talmudic Sages, he became worthy of receiving insights, revelations and teachings from a Heavenly guide, who usually was one of the guardian angels of the Torah. Thus, Kabbalah has two aspects to it: the unbroken chain of authoritative reception and the revelation of new insights⁴ into the Torah which continues and expands the chain of authority. Prophetic revelation has thus always been maintained among the Jewish people. This level of prophecy, however, is called "ruah hakodesh" (the holy spirit), for revelation since the destruction of the Temple has been limited to teaching the depths of the Torah, instead of the delivery of social messages for the gathered nation. Since the Jewish people are today in exile, G-d has

³ It is clear that the Bible speaks of schools of prophets. It is well known in Jewish teachings that prophecy did not simply come to a person. That individual had to learn to cultivate the spirit of prophecy through living a righteous and holy life. These teachings have been passed down to this day, a number of which I have translated in my book, Yikrah B'Shmi - Call Upon My Name.

⁴ Our Sages have taught that there are many correct interpretations of the Torah (shivim panim l'torah). The one thing these share in common is their connection to the chain of authority, specifically, to add to what has already been revealed and to not attempt to detract from it, or change it. Many false teachings also arise under the name of so-called revelation. As a matter of fact, this is how cults get started. The leader says he has received a special message from G-d or from an angel telling him something new and at the same time that something is wrong with what has previously been revealed. It is only by our awareness of and our allegiance to the Torah and halakha that we have the ability to discern truth from falsehood. One who is armed with the wealth of Talmudic knowledge, coupled with legitimate Kabbalistic wisdom, is quite able to distinguish between the "sacred and the profane". For this reason do the Kabbalists require of any aspiring Kabbalistic student that he are fully grounded in Talmudic study, so that he too will have the power of discretion to distinguish between true Torah teachings from Heaven and falsehood presented in Torah's name.

raised up in each community Rabbinic leaders who are experts in His written and oral Word. To these great Sages and saints G-d speaks in prophetic manner, revealing to them His directions for their individual communities. These Sages in turn write down their revelations in the form of law codes or commentaries thereto. Sometimes they write about their revelations into the metaphysical realms of the angels, souls and holy sefirot. Unfortunately today's masses, only consider this latter type of work to be Kabbalah. A correct understanding of what is true Kabbalah is almost unheard of today outside of the Kabbalistic circles who study and practice the teachings of the ancient prophetic Torah.

There are those secular so-called scholars, Jewish and gentile alike, who attempt to pick apart the metaphysical parts of the holy oral Torah and claim that the Kabbalistic traditions of Judaism were invented or (G-d forbid) imported from outside of Judaism sometime in the Middle Ages. This type of foolish critique is easily dismissed by those who are learned in Torah knowledge. The Talmud and even the Mishna, is replete with references to the metaphysical teachings. There are also many holy Jewish metaphysical texts pre-dating the final completion of the Talmud in Babylonia in 500 C.E. Although the holy Zohar was not revealed until 1290, the Sefer Yetzirah was well known throughout ancient times and is even mentioned in the Talmud (San. 65B). Other texts of the prophetic Merkava school have also been preserved. Many of these teachings are also found in the Zohar. The Merkava texts usually speak about the revelations given to, or received from Enoch, who became the master archangel Metatron.⁵ The holy Zohar often quotes sources from the Book of Enoch. Enochian texts become ever so significant with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which scholars claim are the most ancient Jewish texts ever to be found. Within the Dead Sea Scrolls, most of which were written hundreds of years before Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's compilation of the Mishna, there are discussions of Jewish law very similar to what is later found in the Mishna.⁶ But more

⁵ The most famous of Merkava texts and the most preserved is called 3rd Enoch, or in Hebrew, Sefer Hekhalot (Book of the Palaces). Many of the teachings found herein are repeated throughout much of later Kabbalistic literature, especially in the works of Rabbi Eliezer of Germiza. Prior to the spread of Kabbalah in medieval Spain, about the time of the first Crusade, there arose a group in France known as the Hasidei Ashkenaz. Rabbi Eliezer of Germiza was one of their most prominent Sages. A master of the prophetic and practical Kabbalah, Rabbi Eliezer is said to have used the Hekhalot knowledge of angeology to perform an ancient Kabbalistic practice called "kefitzat haderekh" (shortening the way), and traveled instantaneously from France to Spain. He went to Spain allegedly to initiate the RaMBaN into the secrets of the Kabbalah. It was from this time that Kabbalah did begin to spread in Spain. The influence of Rabbi Eliezer's work is seen to this day in most pre-Ari'zal Kabbalistic works, as well as in the teachings of the later Hasidim, founded by the Ba'al Shem Tov.

⁶ Although the language and terminology may be similar, many of the laws of the Dead Sea Qumran community most certainly do not agree with the law as outlined by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. There is scholarly speculation today that the Qumran sect had more in common with the group known as the Tzidukkim (Sadducees) than with the Sages who were known as the Perushim (Pharisees). In spite of their divergent views in halakha (Jewish law), there seems to be almost total agreement between the holy Sages and the Qumran community on matters of a metaphysical nature. For more information on

than this, texts have been discovered which speak of the prophetic Merkava (Enochian) teachings. Many portions of the Dead Sea Scroll's metaphysical teachings are identical to what is found in the Zohar.⁷ Portions of the Dead Sea Scrolls then seem to prove that the Kabbalistic teachings are legitimately Jewish and are as old as Judaism itself. Kabbalah, like Jewish law, are parts of the same oral Torah that Moses received from G-d at Mt. Sinai. Kabbalah, therefore, cannot be taken out of its Judaic or Halakhic context.

The Exile and the Concealment of the Secrets of the Torah

Being that there was such a large body of Jewish metaphysical literature and practice during Temple times, why then did it seem to disappear for over one thousand years, only to reappear in medieval Europe? This question itself is quite deceiving, for the metaphysical-Kabbalistic teachings never really disappeared. Many will say that the teachings went underground, guarded by specially chosen and trained Rabbis. While this is true, it is still only partially correct. With the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem came the Heavenly edict that the exile was to last for a period of one full day in the eyes of G-d, and as the Bible teaches, "a day of HaShem is 1,000 years" (Psalm 90:4).⁸ The edict of exile was to be both physical and spiritual. However, the metaphysical-Kabbalistic teachings never really disappeared (just as the holy land was never completely empty of Jewish residents). Rather, the teachers and guardians of the

the Dead Sea Scrolls from a Jewish scholar who doesn't attempt to falsely Christianize them, I highly recommend the book, "Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls" by Dr. Lawrence H. Schiffman (J.P.S. Philadelphia, 1994). This book is one of the few "breaths of fresh air" in the research of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

⁷ As an example of this I will quote one section from the Serekh HaYahad (Manual of Discipline) as well as a quote from the founder of the Hasidic movement, the Ba'al Shem Tov. I believe the similarities in the two will be self evident.

"From the G-d of Knowledge comes all that is and shall be. Before ever they existed He established their whole design, and when, as ordained for them, they come into being, it is in accord with His glorious design that they accomplish their task without change. The laws of all things are in His Hands and He provides them with all their needs." Dead Sea Scrolls; Serekh HaYahad 3

"Every man must know that all his paths and all his actions are guided by blessed G-d's providence. G-d places within one's mind the thoughts of all what one is to do, as it is written, Remember, it is He who gives you the power to do great things. . . We thus find that there should be no man who shows remorse over anything that happens, for all is by the Hand of blessed G-d. One who challenges fate, shows that he does not believe that all comes from G-d's providence. Such a one is called Rasha, wicked. What he believes is not true. For everything occurs in accordance with the Supernal Will, with the exception of the awe of Heaven." Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov, Ekeb, 10

⁸ "The edict of exile was for a thousand years. Any extension is due to the people's unwillingness to repent." Zoh. 2, 17A

traditions simply did not admit new members into their secret cells. The study groups remained closed, and the teachings were passed down exclusively among these insiders. Anyone outside of these groups would never have even known of their existence. But in spite of secular scholarship's attempts to disprove the existence of these underground groups, they cannot make the reality of these groups simply go away.

The secret societies of the Kabbalists included among them all of the Sages of the holy Talmud. It was these Talmudic/Kabbalistic Sages who recognized that a long and bitter exile awaited the Jewish people, and it was they who were given the responsibility by G-d to prepare the people to endure. The Sages of the oral Torah held in their hands (and still do) that which is called the "keys to the kingdom". The Torah (Deut. 17:8-13) has given authority to the Sages of Israel to decide all matters of G-d's law. What they forbid on earth is forbidden by Heaven and what they say is permitted is also agreed to by G-d and His Heavenly court.⁹ The Sages received Divine guidance that a text should be written to embody the heart and soul of the laws of the Jewish people; and that by being bound to this work, the Jewish people would have an anchor of support in a world that was dark of new prophetic revelations.

The Holy Mishna

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi began by committing to writing the holy Mishna. As it appears to the eye, the Mishna is a compilation of the laws of the oral Torah divided into six sections. But to Rabbi Yehuda and the other Sages, the Mishna was far more than a simple book of laws. Within the fabric of the text Rabbi Yehuda weaved in codes and clues to the secret metaphysical Torah that underlie and support physical reality.¹⁰ By studying, understanding and performing the laws as outlined in the Mishna one would not only be observing the laws of the holy Torah and thus maintaining the Jewish religion, one would also be aligning the spiritual and physical domains in perfect unity. Physical and metaphysical reality thus met, merged and were harmonized. Even the name that Rabbi Yehuda chose for this work hints to its secret component. The word Mishna is spelled with the same letters as the word Neshama, which means soul. One knowledgeable of Hebrew would see this.

⁹ My non-Jewish readers might find these words similar to those spoken by the apostate Yeshu in his claims that he gave this authority to his disciples. The Christian church has therefore considered itself the heir to the Jewish people and claims that G-d's authority rests with it. The main Christian objection to Judaism is our holy oral Torah which they condemn as "man-made trash" (G-d forbid). We Jews have an obligation to inform our non-Jewish friends that this Christian belief is blasphemous and anti-semitic. Christian claims of divine authority contradict the Torah and are, therefore, dismissed outright.

¹⁰ Zohar 3, 99B (Ra'aya Mehemna)

Rabbi Yehuda's plan was most brilliant, to completely unite and harmonize the physical with the spiritual. By studying and observing the laws of the Mishna (and the Talmud) one was actually studying the secret metaphysical-Kabbalistic traditions. And when the time was right the Sages of those days would reveal the secret codes to their students enabling them to also see the hidden depths that G-d guided Rabbi Yehuda to conceal within the Mishna. As G-d guided Moses in the writing of the written Torah, concealing within its letters and words all the secrets and teachings in the universe, so too did G-d guide Rabbi Yehuda in writing the Mishna in the same way. Years later in the 16th century, a master prophetic Kabbalist publicly revealed how he would simply recite sections of the Mishna like a chant. This would put him into a trance-like state where the holy Shekhina, the Divine Presence of G-d, would speak with him and reveal to him hidden truths concealed within the depths of the holy books.¹¹ This man achieved a great level of holiness and illumination, so much so that he was chosen by Heaven to provide the final codification of Jewish law up until the coming of Mashiah. This man was Rabbi Yosef Karo. His Divinely inspired work is known throughout the Jewish world as the Shulchan Arukh, the authoritative Code of Jewish Law.

Although the Mishna's depths contain many Kabbalistic allusions, its surface is by no means void of secrets. The wordings of the laws and the laws themselves contain many secrets. The commandments of the Torah themselves specifically are allusions to the greatest of Kabbalistic learning, Ma'aseh Merkava, the secrets of the metaphysical world.¹² Similar to the written Torah, the deeper teachings of the Mishna are integrally connected to their simple surface meanings. The master Kabbalist Rabbi Haim Vital compares the relationship between the surface and secret Torah (Mishna and Talmud)

¹¹ These are a small example of what Rabbi Karo received. He kept a spiritual diary of the revelations that he received. This work is available today in most Hebrew book stores. It is entitled, Magid Mesharim.

"Says Rabbi Yosef Karo: I started to read Mishnas and after I had finished five chapters, while still reading, "the voice of my beloved" knocked (on the door of) my mouth to play upon it (as a musical instrument). It started by saying, "HaShem is with you wherever you go, and in all that you do. All that you do, G-d shall prosper (the works of) your hands. But only if you cling to me, my awe, my Torah and my Mishnas, always". Introduction

"Do not separate your thoughts from my Mishnas even for a moment. For I, I am the Mishna that speaks from your mouth. I am the Mother, the Sustainer of mankind. I will teach you and give you success in the path that you shall go." VaYikra

"I, I am the Mishna, that speaks from your mouth, I am the sustaining mother; I am the angel of the covenant of whom Jacob spoke "the angel who has redeemed me" (Ber. 49) VaYehi

All translations are from my work, Yikrah B'Shmi - Call Upon My Name.

¹² Sefer Shvili Emunah of Rabbi Meir Ibn Aldabi, the grandson of one of the greatest Talmudic Sages, Rabbeynu Asher (the Rosh) . Nativ HaShemini (page 349, Jerusalem version 5750)

teachings to the relationship between a body and its soul.¹³ The soul is the light of the body. The body is the vessel for the soul. So the Mishna (and Talmud) are the body for the secret metaphysical Torah teachings. The body enables the soul to perform the commandments and thus acquire merit. Yet, without the soul, the body would remain still, in darkness, without any light. This relationship of body and soul, Torah law (halakha) and Kabbalah, reveals one of the most profound teachings of the Torah: the need for the rectification of disunity.

While reading the Mishna, unlike the written Torah, we see that there are recorded Rabbinic opinions on matters of law that seem to contradict one another. Nothing could be further from the truth. In G-d's holy Torah, both written and oral, nothing is contradictory, nor is anything without sublime purpose. There are great secrets hidden within the arguments in the Mishna and Talmud.

The Creation of Diversity in Jewish Practice

When all of Israel was gathered together in the holy land and governed by the Divinely ordained Davidic monarchy and spiritually led by priest and prophet, then together the people unitedly heard the voice of G-d speaking to the unified people. However in exile, when we are scattered to the four corners of the earth, G-d has ordained that our observances of Torah law properly reverberate the spiritual climate of the area in which we are in.¹⁴ So there arose within the oral Torah various and different forms of halakhic practice, prayer and worship. All of these different forms were legitimately based on the oral Torah and each has its place and purpose in the general spiritual scheme of things. As for those practices which did not have a place in accepted halakha (law), they too were recorded in the Talmud and specifically discounted so that later generations would not come and reconsider a rejected opinion thus making a mistake thinking that a forbidden practice would be allowed.

¹³ Specifically Rabbi Vital refers to the written Torah, Mishna and Talmud as being the "gufei Torah" the body of the Torah, and Kabbalah as being its soul. He emphasizes how the two must absolutely be together. Rabbi Vital writes this in his Introduction to Sha'ar HaHakdamot, which is presently published in his book, Etz Haim 2A.

¹⁴ Rabbi Haim Vital explains in his Etz Haim that the purpose of the exile of the Jewish people was so that we would travel to every part of the globe and, by our performance of G-d's commandments in that place, sift, refine and elevate the fallen sparks of holiness that fell from above and became entrapped in that place. As each place is different in climate, temperament and location, so too the application of the commandments in that place would specifically meet the spiritual needs of the sparks in that place. One great example of this is prayer. Rabbi Vital wrote in the name of his teacher, the Ari'zal, (in Sha'ar HaKavanot) that the reason why there are so many different traditions in prayer corresponds to the fact that there are twelve tribes in Israel, and that each has its own gateway into heavenly Jerusalem (where all prayers go). Therefore each community is to continue in their own traditions for they are all correct. As long as the criteria of the law are being met, minhag (communal tradition) is a good and proper thing. When a minhag arose that was not in accordance to halakha, Rabbis arose to condemn it. This procedure of refinement continues to this day .

G-d is His infinite wisdom opened up the Torah for His people and enlightened us as to the multiple ways of properly performing His Will. Yet, this enlightenment was not given to the Jewish people on a silver platter. We had to cultivate it, and thus earn it. By placing us in exile G-d was not so much punishing the Jewish people for our sins, but rather G-d was promoting the Jewish people to a higher spiritual level, wherein which as the “keepers of the keys to Heaven” we would arise and become “partners with G-d in creation” (Shabat 10A). Not that we achieve divinity (G-d forbid), but rather we would fulfill our human responsibility and take control of our individual and collective destiny. After all, the Torah does say (Deut. 30:12), “[the Torah] is not in heaven”. The Torah is on the earth, in the safekeeping of the holy Sages of Israel. This places a great responsibility in our hands. Nowhere is this responsibility and authority more clearly spelled out than in an episode that is recorded in the holy Talmud (Baba Metzia 59).

The Keys to the Kingdom

The Talmud records a discussion between Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Joshua and the Sages regarding a certain type of oven, whether it can become unclean or not. The debate became rather heated with Rabbi Eliezer bringing proof texts to conclusively show that the oven in question was acceptable. The Sages, however, led by Rabbi Joshua would not accept Rabbi Eliezer's arguments and declared this type of oven to be unclean. Frustrated that the Sages would not accept his proofs, Rabbi Eliezer turns to a different type of demonstration to validate his point. He demands validation by the power of miracles. Rabbi Eliezer cries out, “If the law is as I say, let this carob tree prove it.” Immediately and miraculously, the carob tree uprooted itself from the ground and is thrown a long distance. The Sages respond by saying that we do not learn Torah law from a carob tree. Frustrated, Rabbi Eliezer again cries out, “let this stream of water then prove me right.” Miraculously, the stream begins to flow backwards. Again, the Sages say that this proves nothing. Rabbi Eliezer cries out, “let the walls of the yeshiva themselves prove me right.” The walls of the yeshiva began to shake and topple. Rabbi Joshua rebuked the walls, saying when the Sages are discussing Halakha, who gave the walls the right to interfere. The walls stopped shaking in honor of Rabbi Joshua, but they did not return to their previous straight condition out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer. Frustrated to no end, Rabbi Eliezer finally calls upon Heaven for assistance. A Heavenly voice was then heard booming into the Yeshiva saying, “Why do you quarrel with Rabbi Eliezer, for the halakha is in accordance to his opinion in every matter.” Rabbi Joshua rises to his feet in honor of the Heavenly proclamation and quotes Deut. 30:12, saying, “The Torah is not in Heaven”. What does this mean? Rabbi Jeremiah said that since the Torah was given into our hands at Mt. Sinai, we do not listen to heavenly voices in matters of halakha. For it is written, “Follow the majority” (Ex. 23:2).” And so it was that the halakha was established in accordance to Rabbi Joshua and the Sages. A short time after this Rabbi Natan met the immortal prophet Elijah on one of his missions to

earth. He asked the prophet what happened in Heaven during the time that this controversy arose. Rabbi Natan feared that G-d would have been enraged by such apparent arrogance on the part of these Rabbis. But no, Elijah gave him a most surprising and reassuring response. G-d, Elijah told Rabbi Natan, was laughing! The Holy One said, "My children have overruled me, my children have overruled me."

The profundity in this story is not lost to even modern eyes. The prominent psychologist, Erich Fromm, references this story in his book, "You Shall Be As G-d's"¹⁵ to illustrate the maturity, profundity and emancipation of Jewish spirituality. In this story, the Talmud relates to us a most profound Kabbalistic lesson about the proper place of man in his relationship with G-d. This is similar to the words that G-d spoke to the prophet Ezekiel after his experience of the vision of the angels and the fiery chariot recorded in Ezekiel, chapter 1. After witnessing this grandiose mystical vision which is the epitome of Kabbalistic/Merkava practice, the first words that G-d speaks to the prophet are these: "Stand upon your feet and I will speak with you." (Ezek. 2:1). In other words, as true servants of G-d, as true guardians of the "keys of the kingdom", the Sages have to stand up even to G-d so as to fulfill their Divinely ordained responsibility.

G-d was not angry with Rabbi Joshua and the Sages for they were being obedient to the will of G-d as He Himself has outlined in His Torah. G-d Himself is bound by His Word to us. This is the definition of a covenant. G-d rejoiced that Rabbi Joshua and the Sages were of such spiritual maturity that they were not impressed with signs and wonders. G-d rejoiced that the Sages had applied the very power that G-d had given them to use. By the way, one of the commentators to this section of Talmud, the Etz Yosef, writes that indeed Rabbi Eliezer was correct in deciding that the oven in question was kosher. The Sages didn't disagree with him on that issue. The disagreement was on something else, that being whether the oven in question, while technically kosher, could be declared as such. It seems that there were other ovens similar to the one in question that all agreed would become unclean. The oven in question here was the exception. However, the Sages recognized that the layman might not be able to tell the difference between the one type of oven that would be acceptable and the other type that would be forbidden. Therefore the Sages used their G-d given authority to build a hedge around the Torah (Avot 1:1) and forbade this oven, even though technically it wasn't forbidden. So, Rabbi Eliezer was right, the Voice from Heaven was right, but so were Rabbi Joshua and the Sages. Each was right from their individual points of view.

The Purpose of the Exile

The purpose of G-d exiling the Jewish people from our home land was to motivate the Jewish people into cultivating the organ of holiness that brings us most close to G-d. We

¹⁵ "You Shall Be AS G-d's, Erich Fromm (Henry Holt, N.Y. 1966) reference pages 77-79.

were required to develop the power of our minds. The oral Law had to be applied to the many new and different situations that arose in the life of exile. The prophetic Sages of the Mishna and Talmud could not just haphazardly pick and choose how the holy law of G-d was to be enacted, nor could they any more rely upon a direct response from Heaven as to what to do. The days of priest and prophet were over. G-d's intent was that the Jewish people now cultivate our own intelligence so that we ourselves will be able to distinguish between light and darkness, and between the holy and the profane. Each and every Jew now would have to learn to become a priest and prophet, thus fulfilling the collective destiny of the Jewish people by becoming "a nation of priests." (Ex. 19:6). This is the whole purpose of Judaism and the whole purpose of the Kabbalah.

Matters of oral Torah, be they questions of Jewish law or the most profound teachings regarding the supernal worlds, have always been discussed and even argued. Each of the opinions offered by a competent Rabbi is correct, even those that contradict one another. It is up to us to use our G-d given wisdom to see how all the pieces of the Torah puzzle fit together. The holy Sages of the Talmud knew this mystery and properly recorded the Mishna and the Gemara with the specific intent that we not only learn the laws of the oral Torah, but that we also cultivate the power of our minds and thus elevate the world around us. The varying forms of halakhic practice which were accepted by our holy Sages were and are all correct in G-d's eyes. Our job is to learn how this is so. The mere act of the learning cultivates the expansion of our mental faculties and thus prepares the mind to be ready for prophetic influx. The master Kabbalist the Ari'zal is reported¹⁶ to have studied the arguments in the Talmud to such a point that sweat would pour from his face and he would be physically exhausted. When his student Rabbi Haim Vital would ask him why he studied with such vigor, the Ari responded by telling him, "everything that we do not understand in the holy oral Torah is due to our sins which prevents us from receiving understanding. By pushing ourselves to understand every point with crystal clarity, we remove the husks of darkness from our minds, and thus can the light of G-d shine in." The vast ocean of Talmudic legalisms, therefore, served a very profound metaphysical-Kabbalistic function of providing a vessel, the vessel that would receive the light of G-d's holy Torah and thus would Israel shine that light to the world, fulfilling the words of the prophet Isaiah that we are a "light unto the nations" (Is. 42:6).

Throughout the exile of the Jewish people, before the exposure of the Kabbalistic schools in medieval Europe, all Kabbalistic knowledge was safely guarded within the pages of the holy Talmud, concealed within the Agadic stories, and veiled within the legalistic discussions. When the later Sages came forth to renew the Kabbalistic teachings they simply reviewed the Talmudic studies, looking at them from a deeper perspective. This is how the Kabbalistic systems were safeguarded and not forgotten over a 1,000 year period when Kabbalistic study was publicly forbidden. The Sages of

¹⁶ Sha'ar HaMitzvot, Parashat V'et'hanan 33A

the Talmud, who were the greatest of all prophetic Kabbalists, applied the ancient Kabbalistic doctrine of unify light with vessel, body with soul, and wove into the fabric of the Mishna and Talmud all of the concealed secrets. When the ancient Zohar was brought to Spain in the mid 1200's, it was edited and put into its present format as a Torah commentary. When other Zoharic works were later brought into Spain, they were formatted as separate books, specifically the Tikunim and the Zohar Hadash. In all of these classics one will find references to Mishnaic and Talmudic material from various points of view. For in the eyes of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai, Rabbi Abba and the other editors of the holy Zohar, the Mishna, Gemara, Talmud and Zohar are all equal in holiness and authority. The Zohar (3, 244B) itself clearly states that the Mishna and Talmud were written based upon the secrets of the Torah. In the Zohar Hadash (Ruth 108A) it is revealed that both the Talmud Yerushalmi and the Talmud Bavli stood before G-d as part of the holy Torah prior to the creation of the universe.

The only difference in authority between the Talmud and the Zohar is with regard to legal finality. In the case of varying opinions regarding a legal practice, it is the opinion of the holy Talmud (i.e., Talmud Bavli) that is the final word of G-d on the matter.¹⁷ No Sage or Kabbalist has ever disagreed with this, for the Sages who made this rule were the same Sages who wrote and guarded the Zohar. The Sages who decided on the supremacy of the holy Talmud even over the holy Zohar were themselves the prophetic Kabbalists who were ordained by G-d to be the guardians of the sacred Torah. Through the grace of G-d, they greatly succeeded in their task. The proof of this is the continuing survival of the Jewish people. Here we are almost two thousand years after the destruction of the Temple and the beginning of our exile and not only are we complete as a people, our holy Torah, both written and oral, both revealed and concealed, physical and metaphysical is complete alongside of us. Our blessed G-d has surely been with us and has blessed us with our Rabbis, the faithful shepherds who saw us through the dark hours of exile and provided for us the "rod and staff of comfort" (Psalm 23). Our present work continues, for the more we study our holy Torah and reveal its hidden depths, the more we are able through our observances of the holy mitzvot to properly unite the physical and metaphysical teachings of the Torah and bring ever closer the coming of our long awaited King.

Kabbalah and Jewish Law

This brings me to one of the most essential of all Kabbalistic teachings: the absolute necessity of the prerequisite of Talmudic learning to Kabbalistic study as well as the need for complete Halakhic observance. The Sages have always recognized that a body without a soul is dead, and a soul without a body is a ghost. All of the metaphysical Torah teachings cannot have any value or benefit unless they have a vessel in which to

¹⁷ Kaf HaHaim, Rabbi Ya'aqob Haim Sofer, Orakh Haim 25:75 in the name of Rabbi Yosef Karo's Beit Yosef.

be received. This vessel, of course, is the Halakha. The relationship between the metaphysical oral Torah (Kabbalah) and the physical oral Torah (Halakha) is the relationship of body and soul. You cannot have one without the other. Jewish law provides the vessel of manifestation for the metaphysical Kabbalistic light. All Kabbalistic literature speaks of the need to rectify and unify the upper and lower worlds, the spiritual with the physical. How can this be done unless both are involved? This requires of us preparation and sanctification of both body and soul, which is our inner and outer realities. Both realities, the introverted inner and the extroverted outer, have their source in the upper sefirotic worlds and correspondence below within the human body.

Right and Left Brain Torah

G-d in His Wisdom has created two lobes within the human brain, the right and the left. These lobes manifest different forms of human thinking. In other words, human consciousness which is experienced in the mind, which is housed in the brain, is experienced and expanded by two distinct functions of thought: left brain rational analytical thought, the thought patterns which connect us with the physical outside world, and right brain archetypal, intuitive thought, that which connects us with the psychological-spiritual inside world. Both modes of cerebral function are essential for balanced mental health. G-d in His mercy has enabled us to both know ourselves and the world around us. This is inherent in our spiritual and biological (physical) nature. Therefore, the holy Torah also has laws and teachings relating to both of these human aspects.

In order to understand the world external to us, we use our rational analytical skills. Corresponding to this G-d has ordained for us mitzvot of the holy Torah, things that we do that govern our relationship with the world around us. These laws of His holy Torah keep us balanced in the spiritually correct place so as to be able to receive the influx of G-d's Divine influence and guidance. Therefore observance and fulfillment of Jewish law is an essential prerequisite for the reception of all of the benefits that the Kabbalistic aspects of the Torah have to offer. One who does not observe the mitzvot of the holy Torah therefore lacks the ability to receive the Divine light. More than this such a Jew is spiritually imbalanced from not being in the right spiritual place. Mitzvot observance therefore is comparable to balancing the entire world. So it was that Talmudic learning and halakhic practice safeguarded the Jewish people and maintained our identity, protecting us from assimilation and ultimate cultural and spiritual annihilation.

In accordance with the great Kabbalistic teachings recorded in the master Kabbalistic classic, Etz Haim, by the saint Rabbi Haim Vital, Halakhic-Talmudic learning is a necessary spiritual prerequisite to the study and practice of the Kabbalistic Torah. This was always the case with any aspiring student of the Kabbalah until recently. A change

came about due to the translations of Kabbalistic works from their original Hebrew and Aramaic. People of all walks of life, bankrupt of Talmudic learning, and worse yet, those who are not observant of the commandments upon which G-d established his covenant with the Jewish people come forward and attempt to delve into the depths of the Torah. Without penetrating the surface of Torah (Bible, Mishna and Talmud study), these unprepared and foolish explorers deceive and endanger themselves by attempting to delve into the secrets of the Kabbalah. Many are totally unaware of the integral unity of the oral Torah, and do not understand that Kabbalah is an integral part of Judaism. Many have actually been deceived into believing that Kabbalah exists as a study independent of Judaism. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. It is very important to explain why this is so.

In Etz Haim, Rabbi Haim Vital explains that prior to the creation of form (corporeal or metaphysical), the light from G-d that would come forth to inhabit that form, thus giving it life, could not be too strong for that form to handle. In the primordial world of the original sefirot G-d sent forth his light to the vessels that were to receive it, however these vessels were not properly aligned; they were not strong enough to receive the abundance of the light that G-d had shone forth. The results were that when the light reached the vessel, the vessel not being strong enough to receive the light shattered and broke, entrapping within it fragments of the light. These broken vessels and the entrapped sparks of light therefore fell into the domain of darkness, thereby enlivening it. This was how evil originally became manifest.

The Kabbalistic Sages recognized the practical applications of this teaching. They knew that the light of G-d was the Kabbalah and that the vessels were the Halakha (Jewish law). If the vessel was not strong and properly aligned, the incoming light would damage and possibly destroy the vessel. If one's mind was not properly trained in Talmudic logic and one's being not properly refined through proper Halakhic observance, then the study of Kabbalah, instead of elevating the soul, would instead damn the soul and cause its descent into the pits of hell. Throughout Jewish history this fact has been proven time and time again. Whenever a teacher arose who proclaimed Kabbalistic truths but failed to properly bind them in the vessel of correct Halakhic learning and practice, that teacher and his poor unfortunate students were led astray, eventually taking them outside of Torah and Judaism into the oblivion of assimilation and loss of connection to G-d. Such was the case with Rabbi Elisha Aher, the Talmudic Sage who had gone astray, as well as the 16th century false messiah Shabtai Tzvi, as well as others both before Aher and after Tzvi.

This matter is explained in detail by Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen.¹⁸ The following translation was originally published in my book, Yikrah B'Shmi - Call Upon My Name (2nd edition)

¹⁸ This translation is taken from Sefer Limud Sodot HaTorah, page 254-255.

Chap. 10, pages 66-67. This teaching is applicable to Aher, Shabtai Tzvi and all those so-called Rabbi-Kabbalists who claim that Jewish law is not as important as Kabbalah.

"Regarding Elisha Ben Abuya (Aher) who was considered one of the greatest Sages, yet he made a grievous error, this being the relationship between the "Yihud Elyon", the supernal unity, and the "Yihud HaTahtone", the lower unity. He thought that they were two separate ways of Divine providence. He thought that the entire Torah and all the mitzvot are given (only) to those who have not yet perceived the "Yihud Elyon", but only the "Yihud HaTahtone". For he thought "there is no King without a people" who would serve Him (G-d) to do as He wishes. However, the one who been able to perceive the "Yihud Elyon" [knows] that there is nothing in existence other than G-d, and that all is nullified before Him. Therefore there is no place for Torah and mitzvot, for there really isn't any free will (to merit reward or punishment). Thus he rebelled, meaning he thought that he now had the permission to violate the entire Torah, thinking that he was clinging to the "Yihud Elyon". Even those actions which are the opposite of HaShem's Will, Elisha did not consider to be evil, for he already "knew" that all, already is HaShem, and there is none beside Him. This mistaken view of his, which he considered turning the evil into good, is called "katzitz b'niti'yot" which means to "cut down the young saplings". What he "cut" was the union of the "Yihud Elyon" and the "Yihud Tahtone". He thought them to be two separate ways of Divine providence, and the one who perceives the one cannot perceive (observe) the other. Elisha made a separation between the aspect of the Divine providence which flows necessarily because His Kingdom is in all places and which is the sustenance of the manifested planes, and between the "Yihud Elyon" that all is in Him and nullified before Him, because He is the Source. Yet, this separation is not HaShem's will, for in reality they are both one. This subject is very deep and profound, how sustenance and nullification are really one and the same".

Why Talmud Study Must Come Before Kabbalah

Since the medieval revelation of the Kabbalistic literature, the Rabbis who were both Talmudic Sages and prophetic Kabbalists have warned that prior to the study of Kabbalah students should have "filled their bellies with meat and wine" meaning that one should have at least learned those areas of Halakhic practice that one is required to know. No one is more insistent upon this than Rabbi Haim Vital. In his Introduction to Sha'ar HaHakdamot (also printed as the introduction to his Etz Haim 2A), Rabbi Vital writes, "One should not say that he will go study the wisdom of the Kabbalah prior to studying the Bible, Mishna and Talmud. For our Sages have already taught that one must not enter the garden (Pardes, the word used to describe metaphysical speculations) until one's belly is full with meat and wine. For this would be similar to a soul without a body, there is no merit, no activity and no value [to Kabbalistic study] until the soul is united with the body completely, rectified by the 613 commandments of the Torah." He goes on to say that everyone wishing to study Kabbalah must first study

Talmud for at least five years. Only then can one begin the study of Kabbalah. Rabbi Vital also recognizes that not everyone can refine their minds to become experts in Talmudic thinking. Therefore he states that if one has a hard time studying Talmud after five years, one can still begin the study of Kabbalah. However, the commentators to Etz Haim point out that this does not mean that after five years one is exempt from continuing Talmudic study. On the contrary, Rabbi Vital continues in his Introduction and writes that one who is able to understand Talmud must study it, or the lack of such study will blemish the soul. Simply put, the aspiring Kabbalist must continue his Talmudic studies. The only difference is that he does not have to learn the Talmud as intensely as the one who is more suited to do so.

The study of Torah is considered one of the greatest commandments that G-d gave the Jewish people. The Mishna (Peah 1:1) says that "Talmud Torah K'neged Kulam" (the study of Torah is as important as all the other commandments combined). Torah study is one of the 613 commandments that every Jew is commanded to fulfill. The Ari'zal¹⁹ comments on this and says that the commandment to study Torah includes the requirement to study Kabbalah. After all, Kabbalah is an essential part of the Torah. The Ari explains that each and every Jewish soul is required to fulfill all 613 commandments, and if this is not accomplished in one's lifetime, G-d will return that person's soul to earth in order to make up those commandments that are lacking from the previous life. Kabbalah study, the Ari says, is one of those commandments that if a person did not fulfill in his lifetime will he be reincarnated to fulfill. Therefore just as one is required to study Bible, Mishna and Talmud, so is one required to study Kabbalah. Only in this way, the Ari says, does a person properly fulfill the most important commandment of Torah study.

Recognizing the importance of all areas of Torah study, our holy Sages have outlined for us directives on what and how is a proper course of study. The Talmud (Kidushin 30A) states, "a person should divide his life in three [portions], in the first a person should study Bible, in the second a person should study Mishna, and in the third a person should study Talmud." This Talmudic directive is quoted in the Shulkhan Arukh (Y. D. 246:4) giving it the force of law. However, as with every aspect of law, its meaning is subject to interpretation.

One of the great Hasidic Sages, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Eichenstein, also known as the Admor of Zidatchov,²⁰ picks up the discussion in the Talmud as to the meaning of "dividing one's life into thirds". The Talmud asks, "does a person know how long he will live, that he can divide up his days?" Being that no one can know when a third of his life

¹⁹ Sha'ar HaMitzvot 1A

²⁰ Sefer Limud Sodot HaTorah (Israel 1992) page 21

is over, the Talmudic commentator Rashi offers a suggestion that this division be based on a weekly cycle, meaning that each and every week a person should spend two days studying Bible, two days studying Mishna and finally two days studying Talmud. The second Talmudic commentary, Tosefot, questions the logic of Rashi's answer with the same question of the Talmud. A person does not know how long his days are. Not only can one not plan for a lifetime, but even a week at a time might be interrupted. The Admor of Zidatchov then comes and offers his own suggestion. He says that rather than interpret the threefold division on a lifetime or even on a weekly basis, a person should rather divide each and every day in this manner. Each day a person should set aside a portion of time to first study Bible, then Mishna and finally Talmud. The Admor continues and says this is also how he and his students study Kabbalah, after they have "filled their bellies with meat and wine", meaning after they fulfilled their daily responsibility of devoting at least one hour for Bible, a second hour for Mishna and a third hour for Talmud, they can now come and study Kabbalah "on a full stomach" as the holy Sages have required. This practice of a daily division of study was also practiced by the master Kabbalist Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzato,²¹ and is practiced today by many.

What we learn from this is quite profound. A student can come and study Kabbalah, as long as he is involved with a comprehensive study of the rest of Judaism. There are of course certain conditions and criteria related to this. The first and foremost is that every aspiring student must be completely observant of the commandments. The Shulkhan Arukh (Code of Jewish Law Y. D. 246:7) states, "It is forbidden to teach Torah (any subject) to an unworthy student. First the person must return to what is good (i.e., repent of a secular life and accept upon himself G-d's covenant along with the commandments). We then direct him and test him, only then may he enter into the Yeshiva and begin to study."

From a Kabbalistic point of view this law is most accurate. For if a person comes to study Torah (any subject) and is already full of ideas, beliefs and practices from the secular world, where then is there room in the person's life and soul for the light of G-d to enter? A person must have first created a space, an emptiness in his soul so that G-d's light can come and fill him. This teaching echoes one of the most profound Kabbalistic teachings: the Tzimtzum.

Surrender Before G-d

In the beginning when G-d wished to create the universe, there was no "place" wherein which a universe could be formed, for all was G-d. G-d therefore "contracted a part of Himself into Himself" thus creating an empty space, a vacuum wherein which His light

²¹ Rabbi Luzzato is the author of "Derekh HaShem" (The Way of G-d). This book, available in English translation is one of the best introductions into Judaism that combines Kabbalistic and halakhic insights.

could reenter and thus form creation. The topic of the Tzimtzum contraction is a very involved discussion in Kabbalistic literature and far too involved to discuss here. The point that must be learned from this is that prior to receiving G-d's light there has to be a space, a vacuum that is ready and willing to receive it. Without this "vessel" the light cannot come, for it will have no place to dwell. So it is with us. Only when we create a space for G-d in our minds and souls can there be a place for Him to enter.

Nowhere more than at Mt. Sinai was this act of openness to G-d seen. At the mountain G-d called out to His people and together in a single voice the people cried out, "All that G-d has said, Na'aseh v'Nishma (we will do and we will hear)." (Ex. 24:7). The commentators note that the "doing" is mentioned even prior to the "hearing". They ask about this curious language, how can the people "do" before they "hear" what to do. The answer is as I have explained. The people were saying that they are in a state of complete surrender to do whatever G-d would wish of them. They are willing to "do". It doesn't matter what G-d will command them, they surrender their wills to His. They are ready to "do" whatever He commands. So they are ready to "hear" whatever He has to say. It is this act of surrender before G-d that the Talmudic Sage spoke of when he said "Nullify your will before His, so that He will nullify the will of others before you" (Avot 2:24). Step one, therefore, in the study of Kabbalah (and the rest of Judaism) is accepting a spirit of surrender before G-d.²² Nowhere does this become more visible than in accepting upon oneself the observance of the Torah commandments.

When one studies the commandments, one quickly realizes that they make a lot of sense. Therefore, many choose to observe because they believe this to be a wise choice for themselves. But choosing to become observant for this reason is not necessarily done for the sake of G-d, but rather because the person himself believes in what he is doing. What if this person would learn a commandment that he did not agree with or was inconvenient to observe, would he do it? Where is the "Na'aseh" (the "we will do" i.e., the spirit of surrender) in this person?

Many times people approach me and wish to study with me. I ask them why? They usually respond because they wish to know the secrets of the Torah. Fine, I say, that is a commendable aspiration. However, I inform them, "you must be willing to walk the right path if you wish to arrive at the right place". I say, you must first become observant of the commandments, observe the Shabat, keep kosher and all the rest. Usually I am met with a spirit of resentment and the question, "why should I change my life, just to study Kabbalah?" I respond by saying, "when you have the answer to that question, then you will be ready to begin study."

²² In Kabbalistic and Hasidic literature this state of surrender is referred to as "bitul hayesh" (the nullification of self).

Taking upon oneself the commandments, when one doesn't know the depths of what they mean, and especially when one has personal objections for whatever reason, shows that the person is willing to put aside his own feelings and desires and submit to the higher will of Torah. This is one who will "Na'aseh" (do). Such a student is open and thus is ready and able to learn Torah, be it Bible, Mishna, Talmud and Kabbalah. With such students I begin to teach them all of these areas together, one after the other, making sure that the student receives a full, rounded and grounded Jewish education. To teach Kabbalah alone without the rest of Judaism is fine for someone already learned but can be deadly for one who is not. The light of Kabbalah might be too much for the person unable to digest it with the skill of Talmudic logic. This is why many a Kabbalist have warned people against undirected study, they can literally lose sense of rational awareness and slip into a psychotic state. Kabbalists, aware of this danger, are very careful whom they pick as students.

Age and Marital Status

For this reason also, students are required to be of a certain age and marital status. Students of the Kabbalah are supposed to be married. Some will claim that the reason for this is because the language in many Kabbalistic texts uses a symbolism that sounds somewhat sexual. It is not wise to expose single men to this type of language, fearing it might lead them to improper thoughts. However, others will say that a married man is very aware of the responsibilities that he has in the world, providing for his wife and children, and working hard to make a living. This grounded mentality is also what is cultivated with Talmudic study and is the essential mind set for beginning Kabbalistic study. Being that Kabbalah deals with the abstract metaphysical worlds, there is a danger that one who is not firmly grounded in this world can become lost in the metaphysical maze, fulfilling the old saying of "becoming so heavenly minded that you become no earthly good." This is how a person begins to lose his mind, the beginning of psychosis. This is a real and present danger for anyone who is not properly grounded in the physical world and attempts to ascend on high. When one is married, his psyche is by necessity drawn into the physical world. One has to deal with the feelings of his wife and the screaming of young babies. Believe it or not these things actually help settle a man's mind and enable him to mature. All this is necessary at the outset of Kabbalistic study. Without an anchor a ship can float aimlessly at sea. Without focus of consciousness the mind can easily be overcome by the stormy tides of the unconscious.

How old a person is to be before beginning the study of Kabbalah has been misunderstood in many circles. The age old admonition is that a person must first reach the age of forty before beginning Kabbalistic study. Thank G-d the Ari'zal never listened to that advice or he would never have become the master of master Kabbalists that he is. The Ari'zal died in 1572 at the age of only 38. Yet this admonition, although disagreed with by many, still has a very firm foundation in Jewish law.

Maimonides, in his major law code the Mishneh Torah (Yesodei Torah 4:13), writes that a person should not enter into the Pardes until one reaches a certain level of mental stability. This is traditionally understood to be the age of 40, as the Mishna (Avot 5:24) teaches, “40 is [the age when] understanding is achieved.” Maimonides, however, never mentions this or any other age limitations in relation to the descent into the holy Pardes. As to what Maimonides meant when he referred to the Pardes, he himself says (ibid.) that the Pardes is the study of Ma’aseh Bereshit and the study of Ma’aseh Merkava.²³ Scholars have argued if by referring to these subjects Maimonides was referring to Kabbalah, or simply philosophy. This debate continues to this day. For in Maimonides’ day the Kabbalah was still concealed. The fact that he never mentions anything specifically about Kabbalah has led many a scholar to believe that Maimonides was not aware of the secret traditions. Whether he was or not is still a matter of disagreement among the Sages. The Kabbalists, however, call Maimonides one of their own.²⁴ In spite of the fact that Maimonides makes no mention of any age limitations regarding any aspects of study, his name is incorrectly associated with the belief that one has to be 40 before one can study Kabbalah.

Rabbi Moshe Isserles, in his additions to Rabbi Karo’s Shulkhan Arukh (Y.D. 246:4), quotes a number of Sages who say that one should not be studying matters outside of the realm of Judaism at all. All, of course, agree with this. However, Rabbi Shabtai Cohen in his commentary Sifte Cohen (ibid. note 6) (the Shakh) comments on this law of Rabbi Isserles and condemns a view that attempts to include the Kabbalah among these “outside learnings.” Nonetheless, the Shakh then proceeds to quote Maimonides and applies Maimonides’ words of admonition regarding the Pardes to the study of the Kabbalah and concludes that one should not enter the Pardes of Kabbalah study until one has reached the age of forty. Again, Maimonides did not say this. In no way did Maimonides apply an age prohibition to the study of Kabbalah. Only the Shakh does this. His authority for this decision is a statement that “some say” Kabbalah should not be studied until 40. Who these “some” are is not recorded.

Rabbi Cohen (the Shakh) was a halakhic authority in the Ashkenazi communities in the 1650’s and 1660’s. His words are revered and held authoritative by most communities in almost all cases. However, this rule of Kabbalah study is not accepted by all. Even the great Kabbalist and expert in Jewish law, Rabbi Eliyahu, the famous Gra, the Gaon (prodigy) of Vilna, writes in his commentary on the Shulkhan Arukh (ibid. note 18) with

²³ Ma’aseh Bereshit is the study of creation. Ma’aseh Merkava is the study of G-d, the author of creation. The first four chapters of Maimonides’ code of law deals with these topics. Maimonides says these areas are required study. For more information regarding this, I refer you to my tape series on Yesodei Torah.

²⁴ See my Panu Derekh, Issue #7 for an article showing that Maimonides was indeed aware of the Kabbalah.

very harsh language that both Rabbi Cohen and Maimonides have never seen the Pardes and have no idea as to what it really is.

The Gaon of Vilna himself did not accept the opinion of the Siftei Cohen. It is a well known story²⁵ about the Gaon that he began Kabbalistic study at the ripe old age of nine. By this time however, as a child prodigy, young Eliyahu was already well versed in the Bible, Mishna and Talmud.

According to the Kabbalistic Sages²⁶ one must be at least twenty years old before beginning a studying of Kabbalah. This opinion is the accepted law in Sephardic circles and the great Sage of our generation, the Rishon L'Tzion, the Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef has written concerning this in his responsa, Yehaveh Da'at (Vol. 4 Sec. 47). In this work Rabbi Yosef also sternly warns against studying Kabbalah from unqualified teachers, as well as study by unqualified students.

Relationship Between Kabbalistic Practice and Halakha

As within many cultures and countries, the final say on what is law is not decided by divine or monarchical decree. Rather a decision is usually a compromise of precedence and previous judgments. Jewish law operates according to the same principle. By the time Rabbi Karo wrote his law code, literally dozens of other codes had been written before his. Each of these codes decided matters of Jewish law differently from one another, based upon the precedents that had been established in each of their communities. Rabbi Karo was guided by Heaven to write a law code that would include all of the various precedents from all of the previous codes and to decide between them, resulting in a comprehensive code for all communities.²⁷ In this endeavor, he did succeed.

²⁵ The Vilna Gaon, by Betzalel Landau, Artscroll History Series, (Mesorah, N.Y. 1994) page 118. The Artscroll series has excellent works in English on all types of Jewish learning. Their biography series includes works on the lives of the Vilna Gaon, the Ari'zal and Rabbi Yosef Karo. The authors have beautifully documented the Kabbalistic involvements of these saintly Rabbis. Artscroll is a Haredi publishing house and all their works are worthy investments.

²⁶ The age of twenty to study Kabbalah is agreed to by the following Kabbalistic giants: Rabbi Meir Paprish (Ohr Tzadikim 22, 30); Rabbi Matzliah Mazuz (Ohr Torah, 10th year, 81, page 299); Rabbi Ya'aqob Sofer (Kaf HaHaim 155, 12); Rabbi Haim Palaji (Torah v'Haim, letter Kof #259); Rabbi Ovadiah Hadaya (Yaskil Ovdi, Vol. 1 Deah v'haSekhel, 1) and many others including Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef himself. For more information on this point of Jewish law, I recommend you to Rabbi Yosef's work Yehaveh Da'at 4, 47.

²⁷ With the inclusion of the insertions (haga) of Rabbi Moshe Isserles, which added a number of Ashkenazi opinions that Rabbi Karo did not include, the Shulkhan Arukh has been accepted as the final authority in Jewish law. Although many law codes have been written since, these are additions and expansions to Rabbi Karo's Shulkhan Arukh and not detractions or replacements.

By the time Rabbi Karo wrote his law code, the Zohar was known in every Jewish circle and universally accepted as the work of the 2nd century Sage Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai. This gave the Zohar an unusual precedent of authority in the eyes of the Rabbis. The Zohar, while describing metaphysical worlds, also describes how these worlds interact with this our physical world. The Zohar therefore proscribes Halakha, law based upon what the Zohar reveals as the spiritually right way. In all due respect to the Zohar, which was hidden for a very long time, in the interim other law codes had been written and other traditions had long been practiced. The question then arose as to the authority of the Zohar to change legal practice and custom in a place where another law had long been in effect. Rabbi Karo's answer was very straightforward. His legal opinion on the relationship between Jewish Law and Kabbalistic tradition is recorded in his great legal law commentary the Beit Yosef (O.H. 141, Tur, Vol. 1 123B). He writes "regarding [a law that] is not clearly stated in the Talmud, we do not put aside the words of the Zohar in favor of those of the Halakhic authorities (poskim)."

Since the days of the Ari'zal (died 1572), many Sephardic Sages throughout the Middle East and North Africa have accepted the words of the Ari'zal and the Zohar as the final word in Jewish law. Even Rabbi Yosef Karo, who completed his Shulchan Arukh only months before meeting the Ari'zal (they lived in the same town and prayed in the same Synagogue), decided Jewish law in accordance to the Zohar even against the majority views of the earlier Sages. With the exception of Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, almost all of the Sephardic Rabbis today have completely merged Kabbalah with Jewish law. Most of the practices of Sephardic Jewry today, especially regarding the order of prayer, are all in strict accordance to the teachings of the Kabbalists. Even Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef agrees with this.

Ashkenazi communities, while having adopted many Kabbalistic practices, do not accept the obligation of changing their ancient traditions in favor of the Kabbalah. Ashkenazi Sages leave that decision to be an option of the individual Rabbis of each community to decide what each believes to be right. This view is as Kabbalistically correct as is the Sephardic view. For from the vantage point of Heaven we all practice and study Torah in accordance to the source of our soul in the supernal worlds above. Therefore, there is never just one right way. There are always many ways in the service of G-d, as long as they are a part of His holy Torah.

The Great Sephardic Sages

Within the last two hundred years, among Sephardic Rabbis there has been a giant step forward in the dissemination of Kabbalistic knowledge. Within the communities throughout the Middle East, from Morocco to Baghdad, Sephardic Rabbis have incorporated Kabbalistic teachings and practices into most law codes and especially prayer books. In the 1700's a society of Kabbalists was formed in Jerusalem called

“Ahavat Shalom”.²⁸ Among its members were two giants, Rabbi Shalom Sharabi and Rabbi Haim David Azulai. Rabbi Sharabi expanded Kabbalistic study and fine tuned all that the Ari’zal and Rabbi Haim Vital had left unfinished. Rabbi Sharabi’s work, Nahar Shalom, is published in every edition of Rabbi Vital’s Etz Haim and is considered its natural extension. Nahar Shalom deals mainly with the Kabbalistic meditations within the prayers. A special three volume siddur known as the Siddur HaRashash outlines these Kabbalistic meditations. Mind you this siddur cannot be simply picked up and used by the uninitiated. The meditations within prayer are highly technical and require extended study and practice in order to be used correctly. Rabbi Sharabi’s siddur is nonetheless used today by many trained Kabbalists within the Kabbalistic yeshivas in Jerusalem and throughout the world. Although the siddur itself is far too advanced for anyone layman or Rabbi alike who is untrained in the true depths of Kabbalistic meditation, Rabbi Sharabi’s traditions and laws regarding prayer have been printed in most Sephardic prayer books to this day.

Rabbi Sharabi’s closest friend in the Ahavat Shalom society was the great Sage Rabbi Haim David Azulai. He was not only a master Kabbalist, he was equally an expert in Jewish law and has written a number of law code commentaries which emphasized the importance of Kabbalistic practices. To this day his traditions are still observed in many Sephardic communities, especially those of North Africa. Rabbi Azulai set the stage for all proceeding Sephardic Rabbis to fully integrate Kabbalistic traditions within the realms of Jewish law.

In the 1860’s there arose to prominence one of the greatest Sephardic/Kabbalistic luminaries ever to have lived. This was Rabbi Yosef Haim of Baghdad, known by the name of the most famous of his over sixty books, the Ben Ish Hai. This was a man who had within him not only Divine inspiration, but also the spirit of prophecy. It was well known in Baghdad of the late 1800’s that Rabbi Yosef Haim would on Saturday nights ascend alone to the attic of his home and there study the secrets of the Kabbalah, as outlined by the Ari’zal, Rabbi Haim Vital and Rabbi Sharabi. However, although it was known that Rabbi Yosef was alone in his attic, more than one voice was always heard from up there. It soon became clear that Rabbi Yosef was learning Torah from none other than the transfigured immortal prophet Elijah himself.

Rabbi Yosef’s special blend of Kabbalah and halakha endeared him greatly to world Judaism and especially to his native community in Baghdad. The Sages of Eretz Israel held him in such high esteem that they offered him the position of Hakham Bashi (Chief Sephardic Rabbi). Rabbi Yosef humbly turned them down. To this day it is Rabbi Yosef’s law codes and prayer books that are the final word among the Sephardic Kabbalists. The Sephardic siddur of the Ben Ish Hai has incorporated within it the

²⁸ This old Jerusalem group of Kabbalists has no connection to the Yeshiva of the same name presently in Jerusalem.

traditions of the Rashash, Rabbi Azulai and the Ari'zal. Today there are many different prayer books in print (some with English translation) that follow the traditions of the Ben Ish Hai and include the laws of prayer in accordance to Kabbalistic traditions as well as basic Kabbalistic meditations from the Siddur HaRashash.

Even the book the Ben Ish Hai has recently been translated into English. The translator, however, thought that the sections of the book that explain the Kabbalistic meanings of the commandments would not be suitable for the English speaking audience. Those sections were unfortunately left out of the translation. I have never agreed with what I view as a censoring of Rabbi Yosef's Kabbalistic teachings. I therefore have been translating the Kabbalistic sections of the Ben Ish Hai and publishing them here in Panu Derekh. Interested readers should check out the back issues.

The greatest Sephardic Sage of our generation, Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, is unfortunately not a Kabbalist. Rav Ovadiah (as those of us who know him refer to him) is, however, a walking and living computer of Torah and halakhic knowledge. Reading one of his opinions on a point of Jewish law is itself an education, even for already learned and trained Rabbis. Rav Ovadiah's views, however, contradict those of the Sephardic Kabbalistic school, and this has caused Rav Ovadiah to lose some support in those circles. Rav Ovadiah is of the opinion, and rightly so I might add, that in spite of the holiness of Kabbalistic traditions, it is not required by Torah law to enforce the practices of the Ari'zal and the Rashash upon those who do not wish to observe them. Anything that Rabbi Yosef Karo did not write in his Shulchan Arukh, however sublime and holy, is still not required practice according to Jewish law. Based upon this very correct point of view, Rav Ovadiah has tried to return Sephardic practices to their original ways as taught and ordained by Rabbi Yosef Karo.

This endeavor of Rav Ovadiah has been long overdue for the major change in Sephardic practice since the days of Rabbi Karo has not been due to the influence of the Kabbalah, but rather due to the influx of Ashkenazi laws and practices into the Sephardic lifestyle. Even in Rabbi Yosef Haim's work, the Ben Ish Hai, alongside the most sublime Kabbalistic teachings are often quoted opinions of Jewish law that are more strict than what Rabbi Yosef Karo ordained, and these stricter opinions all come from European Ashkenazi sources. This was not the intent of Rabbi Yosef Karo and his Shulchan Arukh.

In all his written and oral teachings, Rav Ovadiah goes into great detail to prove that while we most certainly highly respect these other traditions, we still are not required to practice Jewish law in accordance to them, specifically meaning the Ashkenazi practices. Unfortunately, while peeling off layer upon layer of superfluous extra traditions, Rav Ovadiah has also peeled away many of the Kabbalistic practices and has thus separated a large section of the Sephardic community from studying and applying the Kabbalistic

traditions. Today, therefore, there are actually two standards of Sephardic practice, one for the layman and one for the Kabbalist. Rav Ovadiah and all of his students acknowledge this and teach it. So when someone wishes to know what the law is on a certain matter, it is important that it be specified if the answer sought is to be in accordance to Rabbi Yosef Karo, or in accordance with the Kabbalah.

Today, the final authority for Kabbalistic practice is a commentary on the first two sections of Rabbi Karo's Shulchan Arukh entitled the "Kaf HaHaim", authored by the Jerusalem Kabbalist, Rabbi Ya'aqob Haim Sofer. Rabbi Sofer was a student of the Ben Ish Hai and often quotes him as an authority. The "Kaf HaHaim" very strictly brings down all the traditions of the Ari'zal and the Rashash without any compromise. This eight volume work (on Orakh Haim) is a monumental work revered and respected by Sephardi and Ashkenazi Rabbis alike. Prior to his death in 1939, Rabbi Sofer began his Kaf HaHaim commentary on the second part of the Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh Deah (the kosher laws). Before he could finish, he passed away. The final section that he was working on when he passed away was finished by an up and coming scholar, who even at a young age was highly revered for his learning and piety. This was Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef.

From the Kabbalistic point of view, one thing is most certain: in all those areas of Jewish law which the Kabbalah is not applicable, the Halakha most certainly should be followed as the Sephardic Sages have meant it to be. Rav Ovadiah Yosef has toiled hard to make clear to today's Sephardic world what our Halakha is. This is how I myself decide matters of Jewish law. When the issue is related to the Kabbalah, I decide in accordance with the Kaf HaHaim. When the Kabbalah is not involved, I decide most matters in accordance with Rav Ovadiah Yosef.²⁹ I suggest this as a course of action for all my students as well.

²⁹ Rav Ovadiah, while being the leader of the Sephardic Sages today is still not the only one. There are others who are of equal stature whose Halakhic opinions also should be consulted and known prior to making any final decision on a matter of Jewish law. Two of the great Sages today who are contemporaries with Rav Ovadiah (and who are both master Kabbalists) are Rabbi Ben Tzion Abba Shaul of Yeshivat Porat Yosef and Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu of the Supreme Beit Din. Both of these Sages have written works on Jewish law which sometimes disagree with the law as decided by Rav Ovadiah, especially regarding those matters not covered by Rabbi Yosef Karo in his Shulchan Arukh. Any sincere aspirant of Kabbalistic knowledge should pursue interest in Halakhic studies of this nature so as to, like the Ari'zal, remove the husks of darkness that cause separation. Mind you, all of these great Sages have the warmest relationships with one another. They do not allow their different legal opinions to interfere with their fulfillment of the commandment to "love one another." (Lev. 19:18).

Kabbalah Study & The Coming of Mashiah

The reason why it is important to integrate Kabbalah with Jewish law, as I have already mentioned, is to properly unite the physical and metaphysical worlds. According to the Kabbalistic teachings, the reason why this alignment is so important is that when the alignment is complete, and thus all the fallen sparks of holiness have been elevated, the results will be the coming of our long awaited Mashiah.³⁰

Many of the Sages have documented that it is only in merit of the study of Kabbalah will Mashiah come.³¹ This is one of the few Kabbalistic teachings that all the different Kabbalistic and Hasidic schools agree upon. Therefore, Kabbalistic study takes on a great significance and importance for the future of Judaism and the Jewish people.

The Zohar was the first to state (3, 124B) that in merit of studying it would Mashiah come. The Ari'zal, the Ba'al Shem Tov and others have repeated this a number of times and called for widespread Kabbalah study by all G-d fearing Jews.³² The Ari'zal recognized, as did all later Kabbalists that the study of Kabbalah fills a person with awe, fear and love for the Master of the universe. Maimonides himself writes in his Mishneh Torah that one is to study the topics of Pardes (the realm of metaphysics, i.e. Kabbalah) just for this reason: so that one will cultivate the awe, fear and love of G-d; each of these are commandments of the holy Torah. This awe, fear and love of G-d makes our relationship with Him something real and experiential and not just a philosophical, intellectual acknowledgment.³³ This awareness and expansion of our consciousness is what opens the psychic doors that enables the Mashiah to come.

³⁰ Sha'ar HaGilgulim of the Ari'zal, Hakdamah 15, quoting the Zohar, Pekudei.

³¹ "Any delay in the coming of the Mashiah is due to not studying the secrets of Torah. How many times have we proclaimed this, for the rectifications of all the worlds depend on it". Rabi Natan Tzvi Kaenig Torat Natan, Introduction, #24

"The one who clings to (the Zohar) is called one who has fled from the Other Side. In truth (the Zohar) is a great benefit, it has the power to save one from the travails of the Mashiah." Rabi Moshe Haim Luzzato Adir BaMarom, Part 1

³² "In this generation, in the travails of the coming of Mashiah, the Ari'zal (and others) say it is a mitzvah to reveal the concealed Torah, and the supernal secrets; only in this way can we remove the thorns from the garden." Ba'al Shem Tov S.B.S.T. V'et'hanan 67. Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the founder of Lubavitch, also quotes these same sentiments in his Tanya, Igeret HaKodesh, 26.

³³ "The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom is TO KNOW that there is a Primary Being . . . When a person meditates (hitbonenut) [on] His wondrous and great deeds . . . he will immediately love, praise and glorify [Him] . . . I will explain more important principles regarding the deeds of the Master of the worlds to provide a foothold for the person of understanding . . . In this manner, you will recognize He who spoke and [thus] brought the world into being. RaMBaM, Hilkhot Yesodei Torah "We can understand why the RaMBaM explains "important principles regarding the deeds of the Master of the worlds" . . . the Mishneh Torah is a book of law and does not include philosophical and metaphysical principles unless they are halakhot (laws), directives for practical behavior. Hence, the

Public Study or Private Study

The necessity for widespread Kabbalah study has led some unscrupulous teachers to take this to extremes which violate the laws of Judaism. Although Kabbalah must be studied by all, never did any of the authentic Kabbalistic teachers ever say that Kabbalah should be taught to anyone, anywhere at any time.³⁴ As we have learned this actually violates the laws of Judaism and the traditions of the Kabbalah. Kabbalah study is still called “the secrets of the Torah”. The Mishna (Hagigah 2,1)³⁵ clearly states that Kabbalah is not to be taught in large classes, but rather only in small groups. This law has not changed! Granted every G-d fearing Jew should be studying Kabbalah side by side with his other Torah learning, but Kabbalah study, unlike other Torah learning, is to be pursued in private.

Kabbalah study can be compared to the physical intimacy between a husband and wife. By law (and desire) a couple is required to practice marital relations and fulfill the commandment to procreate, but it is by all means inappropriate and wrong for them to perform this conduct in public, even though it is a mitzvah. Kabbalah study is the same. It must be done by everyone, but only under the right circumstances. Only in this way will the benefits of the Kabbalistic study thus be received by the individual and by collective Israel.

When I was pursuing my studies in Jerusalem, I had the opportunity to study with some of the greatest Kabbalistic masters of our generation, and in every class which I participated or witnessed, the number of students was always small, rarely more than ten. Rabbi Shalom Hadaya, the head Rabbi of the Kabbalistic yeshiva Beit El (Geulah) taught a class in Sha’ar HaKavanot weekday mornings. We had maybe six or seven regular attendees. In the afternoons, Rav Caduri and Rabbi Shmuel Darsi would give a lesson in the Etz Haim. Sometimes this lesson was attended by about a dozen students. When I studied with my Rabbi and teacher, his honor, Rabbi Meir Levi, we studied privately, one on one. I have seen that the master Kabbalists still to this day prefer to teach in only small groups. The special methods they use to instruct the students are

statement that it is necessary to contemplate G-d’s greatness to achieve love would appear sufficient. Nevertheless, the RaMBaM continues, elaborating on Ma’aseh Merkava and Ma’aseh Bereshit . . . because the knowledge of G-d attained through the study of these halakhot (laws) constitutes the fulfillment of the commandment of loving G-d.” Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, Commentary to Mishna Torah, Hilkhoh Melakhim, quoting Likutei Sichot, Va’ethanan 5748

³⁴ “One who reveals the secrets of Torah to the wicked (i.e., those who disobey the law of Torah) is like one who commits incest.” Tikunei Zohar, Zohar Hadash 149A

³⁵ “The secrets of Arayot are not discussed in groups larger than three, nor Ma’aseh Bereshit in groups larger than two, nor Ma’aseh Merkava to groups larger than one, and even then, this one must be wise and understand things by himself.” Hagigah 11B

only applicable when used in groups this size. Therefore, I myself when teaching those of my students who are ready to learn the real Kabbalah, only teach in small groups or individually. The only exception to this rule that I make is when I am involved in outreach.

The Role of Women in the Study of Kabbalah

To some, this topic is most controversial. Yet, the role of women in the study of Torah (and thus Kabbalah) is covered under Jewish law, and in spite of anyone's personal opinions on the matter, it is the letter of the law that decides Jewish course of action in this (and every) matter.

Throughout Jewish history women have achieved equal spiritual stature with men. Our Sages teach us that Sarah was even a greater prophetess than Avraham was a prophet.³⁶ Miriam, the sister of Moses, was also a prophetess, as was the judge Devorah. In the days of Jeremiah there lived the prophetess Hulda, who according to 2 Kings 22:14 (Targum and Rashi's commentary) publicly taught the citizens of Jerusalem the secrets of the Torah. It appears from the language of Rashi that Hulda was a female Rosh Yeshiva (head of the yeshiva). This is a very prestigious position for a woman to hold in Biblical Israel.

The spiritual stature of women has never been a question in Judaism. Our Sages have recorded in the ancient teachings of Elijah³⁷ that a woman, similar to a man, and a gentile, similar to a Jew, can receive Ruah HaKodesh (divine inspiration) all in accordance to what a person does. There have been special women of spiritual stature throughout Talmudic times and even in modern times. There was even a Hasidic "Rebbe" who was a woman, Chana Rochel Werbermacher, the Maiden of Ludomir.³⁸

Rabbi Yosef Karo in the Shulkhan Arukh (Y.D. 246:6) writes specifically what are a woman's obligations regarding the study of Torah. He begins by stating that a woman is not obligated to study Torah in the same way as a man. (The reasons for this are most profound according to the Kabbalah). Rabbi Karo also quotes the Talmudic edict advising men from teaching their daughters Torah for fear that they will not take their studies seriously. Being that women are not required to study in the same way men are,

³⁶ Rashi's Torah commentary to Bereshit (Genesis) 21:12.

³⁷ Tana d'Vei Eliyahu, Eliyahu Rabbah, Chapter 9. Elijah is quoted as saying, "Heaven and Earth will bare witness to me, be it a man or woman, Jew or Gentile all can receive the holy spirit. It all depends upon one's actions."

³⁸ The story of her life has been published in "They Call Her Rebbe" by Gershon Winkler (Judaica Press, N.Y. 1991).

for them to be placed in the same role as is a man might lead to resentment and therefore disrespect for the learning of Torah. However, nowhere is it written that a woman by herself should not study Torah if she so wishes, nor (G-d forbid) is there any word saying that a woman is forbidden to study any aspect of Torah. Rabbi Isserles (ibid) specifically states that a woman must study those laws which are applicable to her, such as the laws of Sabbath observance. Within this requirement a woman also has the obligations to know and bond with G-d;³⁹ therefore, how can she fulfill her duty unless she studies those areas of Torah that enable her to do so. Therefore, a woman most definitely can study Kabbalah, as long as she meets the necessary requirements of being fully observant of the laws of Torah and is previously learned in all those areas of Bible and Jewish law that she is required to know.

My Rabbi and teacher, his honor, Rabbi Meir Levi told me that even his teacher, the head Kabbalist of Jerusalem, Rabbi Mordechai Sharabi would, after his Kabbalah class with the men, allow a separate group of women to enter into his study and would there answer their Kabbalistic questions. Based upon the authority of my teachers, I also will allow women into my classes. I do, however, prefer separate groups of men and women, and when I do have a mixed group I insist upon separate seating even as our holy laws demand.

The Role of the Gentile in the Study of Kabbalah

This is another of those areas which is most controversial and can only be addressed through proper clarification of Jewish law in this matter.

First, we must differentiate between two types of gentiles: those who have abandoned the ways of idolatry and immorality and live their lives by those commandments that G-d gave to all mankind to observe, and those who do none of these things. These commandments are known as the Sheva Mitzvot of Benei Noah (the seven Noahide laws). A gentile who observes these laws is called a "righteous" gentile. Those who do not observe them are idolaters. Idolaters are those who do not recognize the sovereignty of the One True G-d of the universe and in turn worship, nourish and support other deities, spirits and stars. Idolaters have no business studying any portion of Torah. Righteous gentiles on the other hand are different. It is regarding them that I speak here.

The laws of the righteous gentile⁴⁰ are outlined by Maimonides in his Laws of Kings (chapters 9-10). These laws (originally documented in the Talmud, San. 59A) also include a rule that the righteous gentile is not to attempt to imitate the Jew. If the gentile

³⁹ Maimonides, Yesodei Torah 1:1

⁴⁰ For a full outline of the laws of the righteous gentile, please reference Panu Derekh #7.

wishes to observe the commandments of the Jewish Torah, he is invited to convert. But this is not a necessary step for righteous gentiles to take in order to fulfill their spiritual destinies.

Rabbi Chaim Clorfene in his book "The Path of the Righteous Gentile"⁴¹ explains the relationship of the righteous gentile to the Torah. "Although the Children of Noah are commanded only concerning the Seven Universal Commandments, they are permitted to observe any of the 613 Commandments of the Torah for the sake of receiving divine reward. The exceptions to this are as follows: . . .c) Studying those parts of Torah that do not apply to the Noahites' service of G-d . . . Note: A prime purpose of the Seven Universal Laws is to teach the Children of Noah about the Oneness of G-d, and therefore those parts of Torah that pertain to this knowledge are entirely permissible for him to study . . . Also, the study of any part of the Torah that brings one to greater knowledge concerning the performance of the Seven Noahide Commandments is permissible. But Talmudic or Halakhic study of subjects that pertain exclusively to the Jew's service of G-d is forbidden."

The Talmudic commentator Meiri writes (on San. 59A) that by no means are the laws of the righteous gentile a small and simple thing. The seven laws of the righteous gentile, similar to the 613 laws for the Jew, have many different levels of understanding and many details of application. Most aspects of the Torah are therefore included within them.

The gentile, like the Jew, is required to know and serve G-d. How then can the gentile fulfill his obligation to do this unless he studies legitimate Torah sources. Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, in his commentary to Maimonides Mishneh Torah (Laws of Kings 10:9), writes regarding this, "in order to observe the prohibition against the worship of false gods correctly, one must become aware of G-d's unity. Accordingly, a number of contemporary Sages have suggested the translation of certain basic Chassidic and Kabbalistic texts into English with the intent that they be studied by gentiles".

Even within the Talmud, we find that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was dearest friends with the Roman (gentile) governor, Antoninus, and taught him the secrets of the Torah. Surely what greater example can we ask for than that of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi himself.

The Tana d'Vei Eliyahu, quoted above regarding women, specifically states that a gentile like a Jew can receive Ruah HaKodesh (divine inspiration) in accordance to his actions. Therefore, being that a gentile can receive holiness, being that he is required to know and serve G-d, and seeing that some contemporary Sages encourage teaching gentiles those matters of Torah metaphysics (Kabbalah) which they need to know to fulfill their spiritual obligations, I believe that I can correctly draw the following conclusions: It is

⁴¹ "The Path of the Righteous Gentile" (Targum, Southfield MI. 1987) page 41-42

most certainly permissible, even required, for a Jew to teach gentiles how to cultivate holiness and spirituality. Within this requirement is the necessity of teaching certain Kabbalistic principles and practices that are applicable to the righteous gentile. As long as the gentile has abandoned idolatry and lives by the covenant that G-d has made with the children of Noah, then whatever aspects of the secrets of the Torah that assist him in fulfilling his obligations are open to him. As Rabbi Meir is quoted in the Talmud (Baba Kama 38A, A.Z. 3A), "a gentile who studies Torah is like a High Priest."

Kosher Kabbalah Versus Non-Kosher Kabbalah

As the dawn of the true Messianic era draws ever closer, the forces of evil have grown very strong over the last few generations. More and more people are totally unaware of what true Torah Judaism is all about. With the advent of actual Kabbalistic cults, more and more people are being fed a diet of spiritual junk food which makes it very difficult for them to accept the need for a truly balanced and healthy spiritual diet. By this I mean, of course, that one "fill their bellies with meat and wine" which is a comprehensive Jewish education. Under the dire circumstances faced by the Rabbis and Kabbalists who are charged by G-d to safeguard His Torah, many, including myself, now feel that there is no other choice but to reveal certain aspects of the Kabbalistic Torah which we feel are necessary in order to hold back the tide of assimilation and false information. For years Kabbalists have objected to translating materials for serious Kabbalistic research. The Ben Ish Hai (in his Rav Pa'alim) specifically wrote not to do this. However, due to the increasing needs of the Rabbis involved with outreach, much of Kabbalistic and Hasidic literature has had to be translated. For although today's Torah audiences are mainly ignorant of true Torah teachings, this does not mean that the people are spiritually ignorant. Many people today have been exposed to many different spiritual paths. They are very well aware of metaphysical teachings. Many an unscrupulous Jew has even written books comparing Jewish metaphysical teachings (Kabbalah) to these foreign paths. In their lack of expertise and true understanding of Judaism, Torah and Kabbalah, these so-called Rabbis and teachers have written things in the name of the Kabbalah which are totally foreign and opposite to that which Kabbalah teaches. Due to their own limited understandings of real Kabbalah, instead of helping people come closer to Torah, they are actually taking them further away. May G-d enlighten our eyes and save us from these "wise in their own eyes" teachers.

The Ari'zal and the Ba'al Shem Tov have warned us that not everyone can teach Kabbalah. Those who do teach Kabbalah have an obligation to teach only that which they received from their teachers. And most important, a Kabbalist must be able to document the source of all his teachings in order for them to be received as legitimate and correct.

The Kaf HaHaim, Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef and others have given public warnings about studying Kabbalah from unqualified teachers. The definition of an unqualified teacher is one who does not teach authentic and legitimate Kabbalah and one who teaches people who themselves are unqualified to learn in accordance to Jewish law. These criteria are not my own. This is the definition agreed to by the Kaf HaHaim and Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef.

As necessary as outreach is, one cannot cut corners and violate the laws of Torah for the supposed sake of bringing someone closer to Torah. This type of argument is simply a lie.

The only way for a person to find G-d is in that way which G-d, Himself has outlined in His Torah and in the words that He has revealed to His servants, the Rabbis.

As I had mentioned in my introduction, this is a topic which is most important to cover, yet the topic I enjoy least. I must comment on many different things that are today believed to be Kabbalistic, but in fact have no part in the true Kabbalah. I know that I stand the chance of alienating some people who cherish certain beliefs and practices. I most certainly do not wish to hurt their feelings or confuse their minds. Nonetheless, I, as an authentic Rabbi, an Orthodox one, have a responsibility to tell the Torah truth with the hope that maybe some of those who are involved with groups or teachings that they should not be, might listen to what I will document here for you as legitimate Kabbalistic teachings.

Ta'arubot- Forbidden Mixtures

Today people have exposure to a wide variety of different spiritual material. Many Jews seeking an ecstatic "mystical" experience of G-d have gone outside of the realms of Judaism to find it. This is usually because the Jewish education that these individuals have received is less than poor, and they had no idea that Judaism (and Kabbalah) has a very rich, deep and profoundly ecstatic meditative system. Many of these Jews who had ended up practicing meditative forms from the eastern religions have, after some years, attempted to reidentify with their Jewishness in some form or another, without full surrender to G-d and full acceptance of the commandments of His Torah and their applications as outlined by our holy Sages. Due to a lack of a comprehensive Jewish education, a number of so-called teachers have introduced other Jews to one form or another of strange mixture of Jewish Kabbalistic meditation coupled with aspects of eastern meditation. I choose to believe (and I pray that I am not deceiving myself) that these so-called teachers of "Jewish" spirituality are sincere and not aware of the Kabbalistic fact that what they are doing is forbidden by Torah, all the more so condemned by the real, authentic Kabbalah.

Rabbi Abba himself in the 2nd century writes in the holy Zohar regarding the relationship of Torah Judaism to eastern religions. It must be remembered that there have been connections between the Sages of Israel and eastern religious leader since Biblical times.⁴⁴ In the Zohar (1, 99B-100B), Rabbi Abba writes, "I once found myself in a town inhabited by descendants of the "children of the East", and they imparted to me some of the wisdom of antiquity with which they were acquainted." Rabbi Abba proceeds with a small discourse on what he learned from these eastern mystics. This episode might be construed as a proof text to support a camaraderie between Judaism and eastern religions. However, Rabbi Abba concludes his discourse on eastern religions with these words, speaking to his students, he says, "My children, all of this is similar to what we learn in our Torah, nevertheless you should keep away from these books so that your hearts should not be led astray after idolatrous services and after those "sides" [forces of evil] mentioned therein. Be on your guard lest, G-d forbid, you be led astray from the worship of the Holy One, since all these books mislead mankind."

I have seen so many books on Kabbalah, written by so-called rabbis and "meditation teachers" that take eastern religious teachings and attempt to cloak them under Jewish forms. Such an integration is not only forbidden by Torah law, it is an insult and a bastardization of both systems. Instead of reaping the benefits of either one, the combination of the two cause the benefits of both to be lost. One cannot delve into the depths of two mutually exclusive teaching systems. One cannot practice eastern religious techniques and expect to experience the G-d of Israel, anymore than a Torah observant Kabbalist would expect to have an experience of a deity from an eastern religion.

Since the days of the prophetic schools in the Bible there have been systems and techniques of meditation within Judaism. Many of these are quite profound, leading the practitioner into fully merging his being with G-d. Such was the case with Moses. This is why he was able to receive the Torah.

Jewish meditative practices, similar to gentile systems. include instructions in breathing techniques, visualizations and other procedures. Most of these are not in any way religious. They are mostly psychological techniques for the beginner, to quiet the mind and enable the practitioner to commune with his unconscious mind. Therefore, breathing techniques, the visualization of a protective surrounding light and similar practices have nothing to do with Judaism or religion in general. Anyone practicing these things, regardless of the source, will benefit from them for their benefits are physiological and psychological. These techniques, however, will in no way bring one closer to holiness or draw one closer to G-d. People who practice these techniques and feel themselves closer to G-d are really just experiencing the archetype of Self, spoken of in Jungian psychology. The archetype (and experience of the higher Self) is unfortunately mistaken by many, including practitioners of eastern religions, as an

experience of G-d. This is nothing more than a delusion. Unfortunate, but true. This is the problem of practicing anything that comes out of the eastern religions; there is no self referral and boundary control. Westerners performing these practices do not know from where they are coming, or to where they are going. They remain in an endless cycle of going somewhere, but never reaching G-d. G-d has revealed to us, Jew and gentile alike, how to approach Him, in Truth. If we do not listen and follow the correct path, we have no one to blame for our spiritual exile other than ourselves.

Prophetic Kabbalist meditative practice is not something exclusively for the advanced Kabbalist. Maimonides speaks about the Halakhic requirement to meditate. Even one of the most popular and recent commentaries to the Shulkhan Arukh, the Mishneh Berurah (1:4), mentions that it is required by law to visually meditate upon G-d's holy Name at all times.

Prophetic Kabbalistic manuals have been in print since the days of Abraham Abulafia. In order to assist those who have become involved in foreign forms of meditation and spiritual practice I have written my book Yikrah B'Shmi - Call Upon My Name, which is a practical workbook style guide to authoritative Jewish meditative practice (of the Ma'aseh Merkava school). I go into great detail and provide a number of different techniques and disciplines which have never been translated from the original Hebrew before. I also have my Torah Meditation tape series (one version for Jews, another for gentiles) which provides complementary information to my book. It is important that Jews remain faithful to G-d and the Torah He has given us by exclusively practicing kosher Torah meditative practices. This is what G-d has commanded of us in the Torah. This is what we must do, if we ever hope to have any authentic experience of the Divine.

Many of the so-called teachers of "Jewish" meditation and "Kabbalah" claim that all spiritual paths lead to the same conclusion, so what difference does it make what techniques are used in getting there. This teaching is most certainly untrue. Every Kabbalist knows that souls emanate from different places above in the supernal worlds. Just as the source of each soul is different, so is their path to G-d, so is their final state of spiritual accomplishment. For one to practice a path that belongs to another culture and race will only inevitably bring one to the source of that culture and race. One from another culture and race, by practicing that which belongs to another will only end up getting lost in the spiritual maze. This is a disastrous course for the soul, one that is to be avoided at all costs. This is why authentic Kabbalists view those who wish to mix Kabbalah and eastern mysticism as performing a great disservice to themselves and an even greater disservice to their students.

Even though those who practice a forbidden mixture of Judaism and some foreign religion are very content with what they do, they nonetheless do not know what they are missing. Usually these people are led astray because, like Aher and Shabtai Tzvi, they

refuse to accept upon themselves the commandments of the Torah. Without creating for themselves the proper vessel any light that they receive is blemished. Like the original fallen vessels, these people are in the wrong place spiritually and eventually will have to answer for their non-observance. The ones who I really feel sorry for are the teachers, for they, I want to believe, are sincere; yet because they reject the words of our holy Sages and do not appropriately observe the commandments, their spiritual vision is impaired. Maybe these words that I write now might assist them in opening the eyes of those who desperately want to and need to see. To them I ask, please, remember the admonition of Rabbi Abba.

The Danger in Astrology and Auspicious Times

Astrology is more popular today than it ever has been. Everybody seems to be consulting the stars. Even Nancy Reagan, when she was first lady, consulted an astrologer's advice as to how to best plan President Reagan's schedule. Astrology is by no means a stranger to Judaism.

The relationship of the Jew to astrology is spelled out for us by Rabbi Yosef Karo in the Shulkhan Arukh. He clearly states that one is prohibited from consulting one's horoscope so as to make decisions in life. Commentators have shown that the plotting of horoscopes violates the Biblical commandment against divination. "Do not learn to do the abominations of the nations. There shall not be found among you one who . . . divines auspicious times." (Deut. 18:9-10). While the Torah teaches us not to submit ourselves to the forces of the stars, it nonetheless acknowledges that the stars do indeed have power. Throughout the Talmud we have many references to astrology. In Shabat 156A, there is a classic story that outlines the relationship of the Jew to the power of the stars. The Talmud relates how the patriarch Abraham prayed before G-d (in Gen.16) asking Him who would lead his family after he died. Abraham at this time had no children so he assumed that his faithful servant Eliezer would take over. G-d said no. G-d said that Abraham would have a son to inherit him. The Talmud relates how Avraham questioned G-d by asking, "How can I have a son, I have plotted my horoscope and have seen that I am not destined to have a child." G-d responds to Abraham, "Come out from under your horoscope, there are no astrological influences for Israel."

Rabbi Yohanan (Shab. 156A) repeats this point: "Ayn Mazal L'Yisrael" (the Jewish people are not under the influence of the stars). This revolutionary teaching that there is no mazal for Israel means that the Jewish people are not subject to astrological influences because they are under the direct care and control of G-d. When G-d chose the Jewish people to be His nation, he removed them from being under the dominion of His servants, the stars, and placed them directly under Him. Therefore, every Jew who is faithful to G-d and keeps His covenant (by observing the mitzvot) places himself under The Power that is far above one's personal astrological influence. In this way does a

Jew fulfill the commandment, "You shall be perfectly faithful to HaShem your G-d." (Deut. 18:13).

Granted, G-d Himself has ordained the stars and all of their astrological influences. Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzato, in his work "Derekh HaShem, The Way of G-d"⁴⁵ explains how and why G-d uses the stars to manifest His providence. This spiritual order of the universe, however, is only applicable to those who are not connected with the Source which is above the universe. Any Jew, therefore, who wanders off outside of being under G-d's control strays out into and under the influences that govern others. As the holy Zohar (3, 216) teaches, "From the time that the Torah was given to Israel, the Jewish people were withdrawn from the rule of the stars and the planets; however, if one does not follow the ways of the Torah, he returns to be under the domain of natural influences."

Such a lost soul, therefore, becomes subject to the forces that control the destinies of others. When a Jewish soul performs this type of activity, he is called a servant of the stars and planets. In Hebrew this is an "eved l'kokavim u'mazalot". This is the Hebrew term to describe an idolater.

When one is faithful to the Torah, one is free from the deterministic influences of the stars and planets. This is part of the emancipation that G-d gave the Jewish people when we were taken out of Egypt. Although the deterministic aspects of the stars no longer are definite factors upon the Jew, this does not mean that the psychological characteristics of the signs and planets cease to be applicable. For in reality, none of the laws of astrology are suspended for the Jew, rather the Jew has a higher influence that takes precedence. Therefore, throughout Jewish history, as we see with Abraham himself, our Sages were very well aware of the power of the stars and their influences, in general and particular. Many Rabbis were actually master astrologers. What separates them from their unholy counterparts is that the holy Rabbis, while recognizing the influence of the stars on both human personality and events, recognize that if something looks bad from the view of its astrological chart, its inevitable outcome does not have to be because G-d is with us, and, through our prayers, G-d can override any negative influence.

Many Rabbis have written books on all aspects of astrology, some of which have been translated into English. The only problem with astrological study is that many people become superstitious and fearful and start to live by astrological directives and stop putting their faith in G-d. As I mentioned above, this makes one subservient to the stars and thus an idolater. Rabbi Yosef Karo recognized that even in his day people's superstitions could get the best of them. Therefore was he directed by Heaven to say that one should not consult one's horoscope. One should rather trust in G-d.

This does not mean that if one knows of a specific astrological influence that he should completely ignore it. On the contrary, Rabbi Moshe Isserles (S.A. *ibid.*) added to Rabbi Karo's words and said, "One who has heard a forecast from a competent astrologer may take this information into account, and not act contrary to the astrological influence, because one must not rely upon miracles." In other words, we are to be respectful and aware of all influences surrounding us, yet we must never be deterministic and thus fear those influences.

In order to be involved with astrology and still be faithful to G-d requires walking a real razor's edge. We must be always certain that we are trusting G-d and not giving in to superstitious fears. Kabbalists today will many a time cast horoscopes to see, for example, how fitting a potential match will be between a bride and her groom. But this only reveals personality potentials. In no way does a horoscope predict (G-d forbid) if they will have a happy or sad marriage. The couple themselves decide how to act with one another, and only G-d can decide what their life together will be like. Any use of a horoscope to predict anything (as in this case to tell a couple not to get married or to get divorced) is definitely an abuse of astrology and a violation of the laws of G-d's Torah. Being that so many people lack sufficient faith in G-d and superstition is unfortunately so wide spread, Kabbalists today are telling people to stay away from astrology.

Some groups today try to dazzle people with their ability to cast horoscopes based on Jewish astrology. One of the leading Kabbalists of our day, Rabbi Ya'aqob Hillel, has already written a book available in English entitled "Faith and Folly"⁴⁶. In it he strongly condemns the cult-like mentality of these individuals and groups which draw people into astrology and at the same time draw them away from the pure and simple faith in G-d.

All Kabbalists today heartily agree that every Jew must scrupulously fulfill the commandment, "You shall be perfectly faithful to HaShem your G-d." (Deut. 18:13), and not be concerned with nonsense such as which days are good days, bad days or neutral days. Such considerations are illegitimate and not proper for the Torah observant Jew, all the more so for the aspiring Kabbalist. As for those who wish to insist that "spiritual energy" definitely has its high and low days and wish to offer proof of this from the Sefer Yetzirah and other later Kabbalistic works, I assure you that those who make these claims are not accurately understanding what the holy texts have to say. Unfortunately, I cannot allocate more time here to elaborate on these points in the detail that they deserve. For those who wish to pursue this matter further, I recommend you to Rabbi Hillel's book "Faith and Folly". I also recommend the book "Above The Zodiac" by Rabbi Matityahu Glazerson (Yerid HaSefarim, Jerusalem, 1985). Rabbi Glazerson goes into details of authentic Torah astrology. His book is probably the best work in English on the subject.

Superstitions and Incorrect Practices

This is a topic that many people stumble over. Even within legitimate Kabbalistic literature and practice there are suggestions that by doing this or that ritual one can either solicit good, or ward off evil. One of the most well known of these myths is the wearing of a thread of red wool around one's wrist. It is said that this has the power to ward off the evil eye. This is observed by some, even in Hasidic circles. While there is no harm in this observance, one should not think that a strand of red wool has the power to save anyone from anything. Only G-d Himself protects a person. Thus if a person feels that a red strand of wool helps them, then so be it. Just remember the Source. This becomes very important when a person relies so much on their red strand that they feel that they must always have one, or they will be vulnerable to evil forces. It is this type of thinking that turns the red strand into an idol of sorts. This superstitious belief in the power of the color red is a placebo. One of a mature spiritual nature does not seek out such icons, because G-d is with him. What is there to fear?

Another superstition is the belief that by carrying around with you a volume of the holy Zohar you will be protected from all evil. This superstitious belief might be good for book sales, but all Kabbalists, great and small, do not carry with them any copy of the Zohar, Sefer Yetzirah or the like. The idea that a book will protect a person whereas G-d would not is an insulting thought. Trust in G-d is a big thing, not accomplished easily. But once one feels and knows that G-d's Hand is upon him, fear will never darken his door again.

One more practice that I must critique is not a superstition, but an actual practice of one specific group. This practice of theirs has absolutely no foundation or source in the words or practices of any Kabbalist or Kabbalistic text. I refer to the practice of scanning. Scanning simply means to visually look at the pages of a Hebrew text. It is taught by this group that one receives great merit and spiritual blessing just by what the eye sees. In other words, scanning alleges to provide the benefit of study without any comprehension whatsoever. I am sorry to have to be iconoclastic, but this practice of scanning is pure and utter nonsense. There is no benefit or value in simply what the eye sees. Although someone might be able to weave together a number of Kabbalistic and non-Kabbalistic teachings to validate this scanning practice, you must know that no legitimate Kabbalist performs this. No legitimate Kabbalist condones this. Every legitimate Kabbalist that I know (and I know a great number of them) condemns this scanning practice as a cultish sham.

Scanning books, however, while not affording one the great spiritual benefit that some promise, nonetheless is not forbidden. In reality, as long as it is understood as not being something mystical or magical, scanning is quite harmless. I view it as a waste of time. However, if someone receives pleasure from looking at pages upon pages of what to them is meaningless Hebrew, by all means enjoy yourself.

The only time scanning is absolutely forbidden is with regards to the recital of prayers or anything else that requires speech.

Regarding the recital of prayer, it is written in the holy Zohar (3, 294B), "Every prayer and supplication that a man makes before the Holy One, Blessed Be He requires that his words come forth from his mouth. For if he does not speak them out loud, his prayer is not a prayer, nor is his supplication a supplication. However, being that the words do come forth they penetrate the air and ascend . . ."

Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag, in his commentary the "Sulam"⁴⁷ writes that for a human there is no manifestation of the supernal lights (mohin) other than by what one speaks. "Even if one does not concentrate upon what comes out of his lips, being that [the words] have come forth, they have become manifest."

This Kabbalistic teaching is the same as Jewish law. I know that some people are being told that if they cannot recite their daily prayers in Hebrew, rather than recite them in the language that they understand, they should simply scan them. This teaching is horribly wrong! It does tremendous harm for it prevents a person's prayers from ever being heard by G-d. The language of the Zohar is clear on this, as is Halakha. Therefore any practice of scanning prayers is absolutely forbidden.

Regarding scanning the Zohar, Rabbi Ashlag said, "being that the words have come forth", meaning that unless there is a recital of words, there is nothing. Regarding reading the Zohar, Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef⁴⁸ has said, "The study of Zohar is above all other learning, even if you do not understand what you are reading, even if you make mistakes in your reading, it is still a great rectification for the soul." For those of you who are drawn to the Zohar, learn to read it. There are large print, voweled, easy to read editions of the Zohar available in Jewish book stores for about \$100.00. This version of the Zohar is well worth the investment. You can read it and learn it. Isn't this what owning a Zohar is all about?

The Unholy Cabbalah of the Christians and the European Occultists

The recent phenomena of the bastardization of Judaism with eastern religions is not the first time that Judaism and Kabbalah have been "adopted" and changed to fit the needs of its alleged "new owners". Ever since the revelation of the Kabbalah in medieval Spain, many Christian scholars have gone to great lengths to get their hands on the secrets of G-d's Torah. Most of these evangelically-minded anti Semites were only looking for further ways to pervert Jewish teachings to justify their own false beliefs in an attempt to take Jews away from Torah and convert them to their false religion.

Needless to say their attempts to convert Jews have failed. However, an entirely new Kabbalah arose in Europe, a Kabbalah that became the unholy counterpart to the authentic true teachings of metaphysical Judaism. This so-called "Christian Cabbalah" (usually spelled with a "C" or a "Q" instead of the traditional "K") adopted within itself all types of unclean occultic teachings very foreign to Torah. Being that the Christians did not have a secret inner tradition of their own, they created one by adopting and merging a number of different ancient teachings. This European Cabbalah blended Jewish teachings alongside teachings allegedly from ancient schools of magic originating in Egypt and Greece. The resulting system is the worst case scenario of bastardization. This European bastard gave birth to many of the modern forms of occult practice, magic and witchcraft. These are the very things which Judaism and authentic Kabbalah are pledged to fight!

This bastardized form of Cabbalah is studied widely throughout Europe to this very day. There are a number of secret societies, some very well known that claim that they have the "true teachings". The books published by members of one specific group are still popular reading today and for many an unsuspecting reader, these books of bastardized Cabbalah are their first exposure to the subject. These books then act as a poison disabling sincere seekers from ever accepting and believing the true Torah Kabbalah if and when they ever become exposed to it. Believe it or not, these Europeans, whom have become known as the "dark Kabbalists", are a very anti Semitic bunch. Granted there are a number of good apples in the bushel, nonetheless the tree from which the bushel comes is rotten.

I must be clear about one point: do not think that because these dark Kabbalists are learning from faulty source material that they have no power. On the contrary, they have tremendous power and can be quite dangerous. This is because they dabble in what is called "Kabbalah Ma'asit" (practical Kabbalah, i.e., magic). Little do they know the harm that they do to themselves, but they are very aware of the harm that they can do others.

It is important that every sincere seeker of holiness dare not attempt to intervene with the forces of nature and perform ceremonies of so-called "Qabbalistic" magic. There is no such animal, and all who practice this form are committing the worse kind of idolatry. Yes, they have power, but that power comes not from G-d. My readers, stay away from these European schools and their American counterparts.

The "Scholarly" Kabbalah of the Secularists

Since the middle of the previous century, Kabbalah, like all other Biblical and Judaic studies, was subjected to the worst kind of abuse. Outsiders would study the systems based on their own insights, starting off with the premise that the sacred writings are nothing of the sort and then draw conclusions that totally contradict everything that the

Torah (and the Kabbalah) teaches. The result of this rape was the rejection of everything holy and sacred. The agenda of the secularists was to disprove and disavow anything that comes from G-d. They didn't (and still don't) believe in Him. Under the guise of professional scholarship, these twisted, warped minds have concocted all kinds of foolish theories called the "critical approach." Starting with the basic premise that nothing in the Torah can possibly be true, these fools then proceed and attempt to use the veil of science to, in their eyes, enlighten the masses as to the scientific and scholarly "truths" of things.

The methodology of these secularists is the beginning of their faults. They begin with the basic premise that what is taught in Torah, Talmud or Kabbalah is false and thus in need of re-examination. Their results were accepted almost universally in secular society, further poisoning the minds of the uneducated in the truths of Torah.

As with all these topics, if I cover them in the depth that the subject truly deserves, I will have a much larger work than what I need produce now. I just want you, my readers, to know to stay away from the writings of the secularists who write numerous books on the subject of Kabbalah, whereas they have no formal training in the system. With the exception of one or two good people coming out of Jerusalem today, secular Kabbalistic research should be completely dismissed as having nothing to offer in the pursuit of spiritual truth.

Conclusions - The Torah of Mashiah

Throughout Jewish history there has always been the awareness that in a future time life on earth, as we know it, would be drastically changed for the better. Throughout the Torah and the other books of the Bible there are prophecies and promises which speak of a time when all the promises that G-d has made to the Jewish people would be fulfilled. More than this, the future utopia will change the course of nature. "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." (Is. 2:4). "And a wolf shall live with a lamb, and a leopard shall lie with a kid . . . a cow and a bear shall graze together . . . and an infant shall play over the hole of a snake." (Is. 11:6-8). While some interpret these prophecies metaphorically, others take them quite literally. The coming era of world peace and brotherhood where all mankind will know the true Creator and cooperate in manifesting the glory of universal spirituality is that time which we call the "Age of Mashiah", the time of the rule of the anointed, enlightened Davidic King of Israel.

The definition of what this age is to entail, and just when it is to start is a matter of much discussion in Jewish and non-Jewish circles. Messianic speculations and prophecies are not a thing of the past. On the contrary, the closer we get to the dawn of the new age, the more ancient prophecies are being fulfilled. More than this, new prophecies are

being received and fulfilled. The time approaches when mankind will meet its collective destiny.

G-d certainly works in strange, mysterious ways. At least in human eyes, G-d's ways are strange. However, in G-d's own Eyes His ways are quite legitimate, practical and just. We are amazed by G-d. I do not believe that G-d is amazed by Himself. Such an attitude is clearly a human projection onto a most superhuman entity. Nothing human can ever be accurately attributed to G-d. For that matter nothing in existence can be attributed to G-d, for He is all things. Whatever we say that He is, He most certainly is. However, G-d is not just these things that we ascribe to Him, He is all other things as well. Therefore the Sages have told us that it is impossible for a human being to fully praise G-d or ascribe to Him attributes. For even if we ascribed to G-d everything in the universe (which He created), there are still those aspects of the Divine which are beyond the boundaries of existence, human or otherwise. It will forever be impossible to ascribe unto G-d that which is beyond existence. In the realm of the infinite G-d and G-d alone exists. Nothing can ever be known of this realm for it is beyond knowledge. Yet, for G-d, it is this realm of the infinite that He can truly call "home".

In spite of what appears to be a randomness to human history, the entire human race has been following a teleological path since it's inception here upon this earth. Since the days of Charles Darwin there has been heated debate whether there exists that which he calls evolution. Those who are unaware of the secret truths of the Torah see evolution and Torah as diametrically opposed to one another. This however is not completely true. For physical evolution does not occur haphazardly, it is guided from the higher echelons of creation, directed by the Hand of almighty G-d. Physical evolution is nothing but the most external garment of an inner psychic-spiritual evolution. Mankind is thus following it's spiritual path of evolution, guided teleologically by the Higher Hand.

It is prophesied that collective mankind will together recognize our internal spiritual nature that truly binds us as a race. As a matter of fact all of human history has been orchestrated so as to teach all of it's many members the necessary truths of spirituality and of the reality of G-d.

The culmination of this phase of human history will be the coming of a man and his government who will have the power and the success to teach mankind the necessary lessons that will enable the human race to evolve to the next phase of spiritual evolution. Needless to say, this one who is to come will be opposed by those who cannot share his vision of emancipated humanity. No society can awaken to the freedom of emancipation without the previous awakening of it's individual members. The period of this awakening has long been prophesied and is referred to as the "birthpangs of Messiah".

The Messiah himself is born a man and is not a god who comes from outside of mankind. He will be born and grow like any other human child. Throughout his life he will be guided by invisible forces that will guide his destiny in accordance to the affairs of collective humanity. This man will learn throughout his life that there is more to his essence than simply being an ordinary person leading an ordinary life. He will not only be able to acknowledge that he has a higher self or soul, he will become it's master. Through the powers of his inner and higher self he will be able to dominate the forces of his physical being. He will thus be able to dominate the forces of his flesh in all ways. The Messiah will thus be a master of life and death. He will be lord over all the earth and all physical existence, through the evolution of his soul that is guided by the Hand of G-d.

Not only will this man be able to master these things for himself, he will be able to teach all people, men and women, Jew and gentile, leading us all to this level. Thus is he called the Messiah, the redeemer, the emancipator. He emancipates the human race from our collective prison in the realm of ignorance. Not only will the Messiah establish a government of wisdom that will dominate the planet, he will also teach all mankind to experience the reality of G-d. With or without the cooperation of the worlds peoples, the Messiah will teach the world from the inside out. He will start by influencing collective mankind at the unconscious level thus preparing each individual to become aware of things yet to become manifest.

When the time is right the Messiah will announce himself to the world. He will be met by those who will resist what he stands for, and he will be met by those who have long awaited both him and his message. For over two thousand years Jewish prophets have foretold the events that would surround the coming of the promised one. These same prophets were given insights into the Torah that the Messiah would teach. These have been recoded throughout Jewish history in the secret codes within the Bible, the Talmud, the writings of the Kabbalists and of the Hasidic masters. In order to understand ourselves as human beings, our collective destiny, the events in human history that are presently spiraling out of control and what is yet to come upon us, we must turn to the prophets and Sages of Israel who have been given the authority and insight to reveal that which is to come, to prepare us to usher in a new world.

The Torah of Mashiah is the Kabbalah. For this reason did our Sages admonish us that the essence of the redemption depends upon the study of Kabbalah. Kabbalah is not a subject of study. It is a method of study. All Torah needs to be studied in Kabbalistic fashion. Whether it be the Bible, Mishna, Talmud or Zohar, these are all Kabbalistic texts and they need be studied as such. When our Sages accomplish this task for themselves, they in turn will teach us. This has already begun. It is now up to us to learn.

The Secret Soul of the Mashiah

"The staff shall not depart from Yehuda, nor the scepter from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and the obedience of the people be his." Bereshit 49,10

"It has already been referred to in the Zohar, Ra'aya Mehemna, and the Tikunim that (the name) Shiloh is numerically equal to (the name) Moshe, for he is Mashiah Ben David. This is the explanation.

In accordance to what is written in Parashat Bereshit concerning the sin of Adam HaRishon (the first man), all souls were included within him. He had a NaRaN (nefesh, ruah and neshama) from the three worlds of BeYaAh (Beriah, Yetzirah and Asiyah), as well as a NaRaN and Hayah from the four Faces of Atzilut, which are Nok, Z.A., Imma and Abba. Therefore was Adam the secret of wisdom, the supernal Abba (Father) of Atzilut called the "first Man", for Z.A. is the "second Man".

Afterwards, when he had sinned, and his stature was lessened to only a "100 amot", he was called the "halah" (first offering) of the earth, as is referred to there (in the Zohar). When our teacher Moshe, upon him be peace, came, he rectified a large portion (of the souls) of Adam HaRishon. Therefore did he merit to ascend to Imma of Atzilut.

I myself am not sure exactly how I heard (this teaching) from my teacher (the Ari'zal), upon him be peace. Did he say that (Moshe) had within him all aspects that there are from the Nefesh of Asiyah up to the Ruah of Z.A. of Atzilut, yet he (Moshe) did not merit the Neshama of Atzilut? Or, did (my teacher, the Ari'zal) say that (Moshe) did achieve (the level) of the Neshama of Atzilut? It appears to me, according to my humble opinion, that this second view is the correct one.

Now, regarding Mashiah Ben David, it is written, "Behold, my servant shall be enlightened, he shall be extolled and exalted, and be elevated immensely." (Yishaya 52, 13). (He shall be) "extolled" more than Avraham, "exalted" more than Yitzhak, "elevated" more than Ya'aqob and "immensely" more than Moshe. This is the explanation, Mashiah Ben David will merit even the (aspect) of the Hayah of Abba of Atzilut, which is referred to as the Neshama of the Neshama, that which not even Moshe merited to receive.

We thus find that the first shepherd, Moshe, he himself will be the final shepherd, even as our Sages have referred to in the Midrash. This is the secret of the pasuk, "As was your going forth from the land of Mitzraim (Egypt), so will I show you wondrous things" (Mikah 7).

Therefore "Shiloh", who is the Mashiah, and Moshe add up to an equal numerical value. For they are one, (the only difference) is that the Mashiah is the Neshama of the Neshama of Moshe."

Rabi Haim Vital, Sha'ar HaPasukim, VaYigash 20B

The True Depths of Torah Study

"Rabbi Yosi says, "Truly all that G-d does in the world is done in accordance to the secret of wisdom. All is done in order to show the supernal wisdom to the children of men; that they may learn wisdom from these things. All is done accordingly. All actions follow the path of the Torah. For the paths of the Torah are the paths of the Holy One, Blessed Be He. There is nothing, no matter how small that does not contain within itself a number of these paths, channels and secrets of the supernal wisdom. Come and see how Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakai pronounced three hundred laws in the secret of the supernal wisdom from the verse, "And his wife's name was Mahitabel, the daughter of Matred Mei Zahav" (Gen. 36:39). And he revealed these only to Rabbi Eliezer who was with him. This shows how many secrets of the Torah can be found within every story and incident written in the Torah, Within each and every word there is wisdom and the doctrine of truth. Therefore all the words of Torah are holy, they reveal wondrous things as the verse says, "Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of your Torah". (Psalm 119:18)." Zohar 1, 145B