



Can Anyone Study Kabbalah? **By Sarah Yehudit (Susan) Schneider**

Kabbalah is the mystical interpretation of the Torah and its precepts. It explores God's deepest intentions for creation. What purpose does the universe serve? Why did the Creator fashion it this way and not another? What is the point of each detail and how does it support the larger vision? If God is good and perfect then why isn't the universe? What is the significance of the 613 religious practices that God requests from the Jewish people? What is God communicating by each turn of events in our personal and collective histories? What does it mean that human beings are created in the image of God? The questions unfold, and reduce to one, single-pointed quest: How do I bring body, heart, mind, and soul into perfect harmony with spiritual law?

Kabbalah derives its answer to this question (and the others) from its extremely detailed and complex description of the universe. Just as physics explains how the world works based on its vast database of patiently acquired technical knowledge about natural law and physical structure; so is this true for Kabbalah, which is a meta-physics in the most literal sense of the word. The parallels between these two pursuits are numerous.

Kabbalah examines the most subtle patterns of the spiritual world with mathematical precision. And, just as science evolved a specialized lexicon of formulas and terminology to describe its observations, so is this true for its mystical counterpart.

Kabbalah is advanced study. Just as a physicist must invest at least ten years of undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate training to master the knowledge base of his or her chosen specialty; this is also true for Kabbalah. It, too, requires decades of patient effort to begin to crack its codes and extract a hint of sweetness from its abstract formulations; and further effort still to enjoy practical benefit from its teachings.

Preparing the Vessel

All these preliminaries are designed to prepare the student's vessel of mind and personality to hold the intensely powerful lights that are pulled down through its meditation practices. The student's motivation for "unlocking the secrets" must be God-serving instead of self-serving, and this intention must be integrated into every layer of his or her being. The "higher" one goes, the more exacting the standards of purity. There's an old Talmudic story about the four rabbis whose group-meditation penetrated to the innermost chambers of mystery. The lights they unlocked were too great for three of them to bear, and they were permanently damaged by their experience.

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Based on these dangers, traditionally one was forbidden from delving into kabbalistic mysteries before the age of forty. Its prerequisites were fulfilled through life-experience as well as scholarship. Do these criteria still apply today? Is it appropriate for a novice to study Kabbalah?

There are different kinds of novices: 1) One who is religiously observant but young, 2) A baal teshuva, a beginner in the process of becoming observant who is already a mature adult, 3) One with no background in Jewish practice and no interest in it, who is just studying its mysticism.

Concerning the first two categories: There are reasons to permit and reasons to be cautious. On one hand, the gap between secular knowledge and kabalistic wisdom has narrowed significantly in our generation. Our minds, stretched by their daily interaction with science and technology, are more equipped to handle the intensely sophisticated teachings of Kabbalah and not be shattered by them. When Kabbalah describes a holographic universe, or the "angelic" transmission of forces, or the multidimensional nature of reality, models exist in science to ground those ideas. In addition, most souls today have passed through numerous incarnations. Many a person is young in years but wise by a long chain of previous life experiences.

On the other hand, Kabbalah deals with extremely subtle truths that require a delicacy of interpretation and capacity to bear paradox that generally only comes with the ripening of years. The dangers of Kabbalah today are more ethical than intellectual. In the wrong hands, its delicate truths, twisted just slightly, can justify a whole range of behaviors that are unsanctioned within the tradition.

Fortunately, built into normative Kabbalah is a self-selecting mechanism that, at least theoretically, screens its candidates. Only dedicated students will persist through the incessant hurdles that mark its road to mastery. Each step forward in knowledge and power requires a further surrender of ego. Hopefully, this assures that kabbalistic masters do their inner work. Concerning the third category, Kabbalah is really just the deeper meaning behind the written Torah and its ancient tradition of religious observance. Kabbalah is the theory; Judaism is the practice. Studying Kabbalah out of context, divorced from its roots in observance, diminishes it profoundly in soul and substance.



An Opportunity for Experience

In practice, the most important thing is that one who decides to study Kabbalah should do so prayerfully. This means that their meditations should be an expression of their sincere desire to know and cleave to God. This capacity for honest self-reflection is the most important preparation for mystical experience.

One powerful practice is to recite a prayer before study that expresses one's intentions. For example:

Master of the Universe. I enter into this study to draw close to you. For the sake of holy service, and to fulfill Your will for me, and for all of Israel, and for this entire planet. Please assist my efforts and guide my understandings. Let me internalize your Torah to the depths of my being such that I become transformed by Your will and its truths. Let neither myself or anyone else come into stumbling as a result of this study. "Open my eyes that I will behold the wonders of Your Torah. (Psalms 119:18)"

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