

# Chapter 1

## What Is Kabbalah?

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### *In This Chapter*

- Understanding Kabbalah as a part of Judaism
  - Delving into some of the major Kabbalistic ideas
  - Explaining the rules of Kabbalah study
  - Choosing among different Kabbalah movements
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**K**abbalah is the part of Judaism that deals with the understanding of God, Creation, the relationship between God and God's Creation, and the nature and way of the soul. Kabbalah is concerned with questions of good and evil, death and the afterlife, and the spiritual aspects of existence. It's often described as *Jewish mysticism*, but it goes far beyond the mystical aspects of Judaism. Kabbalah is central to Jewish belief and its spiritual practices.

Contrary to popular belief, Kabbalah isn't a book. I've heard that common misconception time and time again. When I worked in a bookstore years ago, when I was a librarian, and even in recent days, I've been asked if there are any good translations of the book "Kabbalah." Some people think that just like you can study the Bible, you can study the book of Kabbalah. It's not a book, but its moral, spiritual, and ethical teachings can be found in the great spiritual books of the Jewish people.

In this chapter, I define the word "Kabbalah," allow you to get some of Kabbalah's key concepts under your belt, and explore some of the ways people today are into the subject. But perhaps the most important point that this chapter establishes, and that this book is about, is that Kabbalah is best understood by *doing* Kabbalah, not just reading about it.

## Getting to Know Kabbalah, "The Received Tradition"

The word "Kabbalah," like every Hebrew word, is based on a *root*. The root usually consists of three Hebrew letters that serve as the basis for many words. Each root has a primary meaning; the meaning of the root of "Kabbalah" is "to receive."

What is the person who's engaged in the study of Kabbalah receiving? The answer is both simple and, in a sense, impossible. Kabbalists receive knowledge of God and guidance for living.

Taking the root meaning a step further, the word "Kabbalah" also means "the received tradition." I once asked one of my teachers how to perform a certain ritual. When he explained it to me, I told him that I had heard that it was done differently. He replied, "You can do it the other way too, but the way I do it is the way my teacher taught me. That's *my* Kabbalah!"



In order to receive the tradition of Kabbalah, one must open himself and make room within himself so that he's able to receive the teachings.

### Is Kabbalah Jewish mysticism?

The biggest myth about Kabbalah, and one that has remarkably snuck into the definition of Kabbalah by most writers and teachers who look at Kabbalah from the outside, not the inside, is that Kabbalah is Jewish mysticism. As Professor Joseph Dan, one of the world's leading authorities on Kabbalah explains, until the 19th century there were no "Jewish mystics."

The term "mysticism" isn't even a part of Jewish culture or language. The term mysticism was borrowed from a term found in Christian thought, that of *unio mystica*, the mystical union with God. Some scholars thought that some of the central ideas of Kabbalah were parallel to this Christian notion, and so the term "Jewish mysticism" evolved and attached itself to Kabbalah.

For example, one of the primary uses of the term "mysticism" is that it describes notions and experiences that can't be put into words or language. Because Kabbalah stresses that, ultimately, God can't be described, the use of the term "mysticism" became a common one. Mysticism is also used when referring to experiences that are beyond the senses. Here too, because Kabbalah often deals with matters of faith, it seems to be useful to say that Kabbalah is "Jewish mysticism." In this book, I barely use the term "mysticism" because the Kabbalistic literature itself never uses it.

## *Kabbalah is Jewish theology*

In a real sense, the history of Kabbalah is the history of Judaism — the two can't be separated. Throughout the centuries, the greatest sages of Judaism have been serious students of Kabbalah. You may be wondering, "If Kabbalah and Judaism are part of the same thing, what's the difference between them? Why is there even a need for the word 'Kabbalah,' let alone a book about Kabbalah? Why isn't *Kabbalah For Dummies* simply a book about Judaism?"

Throughout this chapter, I explore the idea that Kabbalah is a *theological process central to Judaism*. That is, Kabbalah is the way in which Jewish tradition tries to grasp the Infinite and tries to communicate to each generation the ways that the sages have understood that human life — in relation to the creator — should be lived.

### *Asking life's ultimate questions*

Kabbalah is concerned with life's ultimate questions. For example, when I look at the world, I see so much suffering of all kinds, and I'm left to wonder why God would have created a world with so much suffering. It often seems that good people suffer and that, too often, people who do evil thrive. The tradition within Judaism that deals with such issues and questions is Kabbalistic tradition.

When people come to realize that life is really a temporary journey and that life can end in a painful and difficult way, they're prompted to ask what this life is all about and wonder how this seemingly crazy design makes any sense. Kabbalah is the part of Jewish existence and belief that ponders such questions and offers answers to such immense riddles (see Chapters 5 and 6 for more about this).

### *Taking on the spiritual level of existence*

Kabbalah is that part of Judaism that explores the nature of life and the soul and the meaning of human existence. It comes into play when people begin to perceive that they aren't just flesh and blood but seem to have a spirit, a spark of life, an aspect that rocks and minerals don't have. Kabbalists detect that the human experience may be profoundly different from that of plants and animals thanks to free will and one's consciousness of oneself. Kabbalists also realize that, as humans, they not only have bodies that are temporary but also have souls that have a greater longevity than physical things.

Kabbalah tries to perceive the metaphysics of life and tries to teach people how to use the spiritual forces that exist and how to use them wisely. Kabbalists notice that life and human existence seem to contain some working metaphysical principles, in which some things seem good and healthy while others seem bad and destructive, and in which some things seem to lift humans to sublime heights while others seem to degrade human lives.

## *Studying Kabbalah: First do it, then understand it*



A fundamental principle among those individuals throughout the centuries who have lived their lives based on the teachings of Kabbalah is that it's impossible to grasp these teachings unless you participate in them.

Take a kiss, for example. You can read about kissing, study scientific books about kissing, understand all the facial muscles needed to form a kiss, and even watch Andy Warhol's film "Kiss," which has extreme close-ups of people kissing, but the only real way to know — to truly know — about kissing is to kiss!



The notion that one can't have external knowledge of Kabbalah goes back to a famous verse (famous among Kabbalists, that is) found in the Holy Scriptures, in the book of Exodus. The text describes Moses reading to the people the teachings that he received from God on Mount Sinai. Upon hearing the words spoken by Moses, the people said, "All that the Lord spoke we will do and we will hear" (Exodus 24:7). Jewish commentators say that this means, "We will do these things first, and afterwards we will understand them."

This approach is contrary to what people normally do; often, one first learns something and *then* does it. But not with Kabbalah. To really know Kabbalah, you have to participate.

Nevertheless, a person who wants to learn about Kabbalah can begin to study the subject without fully jumping in. But out of respect to the subject and in order to be true to its teachings, the person has to begin by acknowledging that studying about Kabbalah without participating in its teachings has its limitations.

Of course, you could say that about practically any activity. For example, you could learn quite a bit about playing chess without ever playing the game itself. But true knowledge of chess, or any subject, requires participation. Kabbalah takes this phenomenon seriously, and I feel obligated to make that point clear from the beginning.

## *Hey, What Are the Big Ideas?*

You can't adequately summarize Kabbalah in a few sentences. On the contrary, in Kabbalah you have to build ideas, putting them together to form larger

ideas. Comparing Kabbalah to math, first you learn how to add and subtract; then you learn how to multiply and divide. After that, you can start learning simple algebra, and then you can go on to advanced algebra, and so on.

The first, foremost, and central idea of Kabbalah is God. For Kabbalists, by the way, God is hardly a human idea. In fact, a Kabbalist would say that humans are an “idea” of God. How to “know” God is the primary goal of the Kabbalist. On a course of knowing, or trying to know, God are several key concepts that form the foundation of Jewish theology, known as Kabbalah.

## *Why did God create the world?*

The question often asked is “Why did God create the world?” The great sages of Kabbalah point out that God surely didn’t create the world because God needed the world. To say that God needs something implies that there’s some deficiency in God, and one of Kabbalistic tradition’s fundamental notions about God is that God is whole, perfect, flawless, and in need of nothing. By the way, according to Kabbalah, God didn’t create the world in one moment and then stop. Rather, Kabbalah teaches that God continues to create the world every moment. Creation is an ongoing divine activity. (For more on this topic, check out Chapter 4.)

Why, then, does God create the world? As a gesture of love and because God wants humans to *receive*. Kabbalists say that God wants humans to receive the greatest pleasure possible: knowledge of God.

“*Knowledge of God?*” you may be asking. “*That’s the greatest pleasure?*” The teachings of Kabbalah emphatically declare that indeed the greatest possible pleasure is to know God — to really know God.

## *The point of life is getting to know God, even if it’s impossible*

Kabbalah is the system of beliefs, ideas, and actions contained in Jewish tradition that help people truly know the Divine. If you don’t recognize a problem at this point, you should. You’ve just collided with a paradox.

Now, Kabbalah is filled with paradoxes. A *paradox* is a statement that appears to contradict itself. But a paradox isn’t an absurdity; it can contain awesome truths. So, the first paradox to consider is the Kabbalistic view that, although the greatest pleasure is to know God, knowledge of God is impossible.

Perhaps it's more accurate to say that *complete* knowledge of God is impossible. What Kabbalistic tradition provides are ways to glimpse God, and even a tiny glimpse contains profound pleasure.

One of Kabbalah's primary principles is an unbridgeable gap between God and humans. Although a person can make contact with God, ultimately this contact can't take place solely through the efforts of the person. No matter how hard a person tries, he or she can't reach God. Kabbalah teaches that the gap can indeed be crossed, but *only* by God. When that gap is crossed, it's because God reaches out.

## *It's all about receiving*

God makes the gesture to reach out to a person, and it's the person's job to receive (remember that "Kabbalah" *means* "to receive"). The rituals, customs, laws, and activities of the person who lives according to Kabbalistic tradition are intended to prepare that person to receive God, to receive knowledge of God, and to receive the greatest possible pleasure.



Kabbalah is the tradition received from the Jewish sages in order to help people perceive and live in the fullness of the presence of God.

You may say, "Knowledge of God isn't the greatest pleasure." Some people think that having lots of money is the greatest pleasure. Others may think that sex is the greatest pleasure. Still others may feel that fame or food or any number of things are among the greatest pleasures of life. But Kabbalah teaches that the most profound source of pleasure is to know God.

## *Preparing to know God*

How does one prepare to receive the knowledge of God? Many have taught that the first step is to make room for this knowledge. If one is all closed down or filled up, then knowledge of God has no way to enter and no place to reside.

If a person holds on tightly to the ideas and beliefs that he or she currently has, it's usually impossible to let new ones in. But the biblical view — first do and then understand — is a useful approach. There's no need to do everything and surely no need to do everything at once, but students of Kabbalah have found that by participating in a little study, prayer, and ritual observance, the doors begin to open, and true learning can take place.

## A few more key Kabbalah concepts

The following is a list of other major concepts which require in-depth study in order to benefit from Kabbalah as a system of daily practices:

- ✓ **God is infinite:** Kabbalah understands God to be a perfect, supreme being who's infinite and both formless and changeless. You can find out more about the infinite nature of God in Chapter 16.
- ✓ **Divine contraction:** One of the questions that Kabbalah tries to answer is "If God is infinite, where is there room for God's creation?" The Kabbalistic term for the process of God contracting in order to make room for Creation is **tzimtzum** (*tzim-tzoom*). The Kabbalistic view of creation imagines that God prompted an absence of the Divine, which resulted in a "space" for creation to happen.
- ✓ **Ten utterances:** Kabbalah teaches that God creates the world through the ten utterances, which form, by their infinite combinations, all the detail of existence. These ten utterances are also congruent with another major concept, the ten *sefirot* (see Chapter 4).

It's absolutely impossible to study Kabbalah without a grasp of the ten *sefirot*. The ten *sefirot* are ten divine powers or channels or flows of divine plenty that continuously create and nourish creation. For the Kabbalist, the mastery of the ten *sefirot* is a major life task and a major tool used to connect with God. The ten *sefirot* flow downward from God to God's creation, and human actions send the flow back "up" to the Divine.

- ✓ **The breaking of the vessels:** The Kabbalistic concept of creation includes **shevirat ha-kelim** (*sheh-vee-raht hah-kay-leem*; the breaking of the vessels). Some refer to it as the great catastrophic event that occurred when God poured infinite divine light into vessels that were unable to contain this light (see Chapter 5).

The shards produced by this shattering are the stuff of creation. The divine light is embedded within every aspect of creation, and the task of humans is to release the Divine that resides in all of creation through good deeds, righteous living, and spiritual acts.

- ✓ **Tikkun:** Following from the notion of the shattering of the vessels is the Kabbalistic concept of **Tikkun** (*tee-koon*; repair). Tikkun is the purpose of human existence and the way to come to know God. Instruction for this repair is found in the Torah and specifically in the *mitzvot*, which are guidelines for healthy living found in the Torah.
- ✓ **Halachah: Halachah** (*hah-lah-khah*; the way to walk) is the sum of the laws and instruction of the Torah that will make the necessary repairs. Humans must participate in the repairing of the world and must learn the proper ways to do so in order to separate good from evil and

ultimately extinguish the evil that exists in the universe. Every human being is required to do his or her part in perfecting of the world (see the chapters in Part III).

- ✓ **Mitzvot:** A **mitzvah** (*mitz-vah*) is a divine commandment, and “mitzvot” is the plural form of the word. These commandments are divided into two groups: positive commandments describing what one is supposed to do, and negative commandments describing what one is supposed to refrain from doing. For example, giving charity is a positive commandment; “Do not murder” is a negative commandment.

Jewish tradition teaches that 613 commandments are found in the Five Books of Moses. But as it's taught, this number is deceptive because there are actually thousands of teachings in Jewish tradition helping us align with our highest possible selves. All commandments have two purposes: to make people conscious of God as the one and only reality and to repair the world. I discuss mitzvot in the chapters of Part III.

- ✓ **Everything is for the best:** One of the most difficult and profound teachings in all Kabbalistic tradition is the view that everything that happens is for the best. (*What?? Even the Holocaust? Even the death of an innocent child?*) Kabbalists live in a paradox: On the one hand, people have an obligation to repair the world, to help relieve suffering, to work to advance medical science, to cure diseases, to fight evil, and to mourn the dead. On the other hand, people have an equal obligation to cultivate the belief that ultimately the world is in God's hands, God knows what's happening, and everything has a purpose beyond anything humans can possibly imagine. For more on this topic, turn to Chapter 5.

- ✓ **Souls:** Kabbalah teaches that humans live in two realms: the physical world and the spiritual world. Humans are unique in this way, being the only creatures that partake of both realms. The human struggle is to make sure that one's body is the tool or instrument of the soul. The body should be ruled by the spirit. Kabbalah teaches that the soul exists before the body, and after the body dies, the soul continues on its spiritual journeys — sometimes by being reincarnated into another body in order to have another go at it. I examine the nature of bodies and souls in Chapter 6 and reincarnation in Chapter 7.

## *A Constant Search for God*

The first thing Kabbalah students learn about God is that God is beyond any conception that a person can possibly imagine. As one of my teachers taught, if you think you grasp God, one thing is certain: You're wrong. In a sense, the Kabbalistic definition of God is that which is beyond any possible human conception.



Nevertheless, Kabbalah teaches that the human task in life is to look for God, reach out to God, and learn from the great spiritual masters of Jewish tradition how to undertake the search for God. Ultimately, God makes the contact with humans, but great importance lies in the human effort and reaching.

## *Missing the forest for the trees*

Within Judaism are seemingly countless practices and rituals — things to do and things to refrain from doing. To an outsider, these dos and don'ts seem almost like a petty list of unrelated commands. In fact, many Jews alienate themselves from the practices of Judaism because they seem like such senseless details. But the situation can be compared to looking at trees: If you get up close to a tree, you see a huge number of little details and details within details. However, if you focus on the details of just one tree, you miss the magnificence of the forest.

The laws of Judaism are deeply connected to Kabbalah. The most well-known and authoritative Code of Jewish Law was compiled by one of the most revered Kabbalists of Jewish history, and many people don't realize that every page of the Code of Jewish Law has a Kabbalistic commentary that spells out the spiritual meaning of each of law.

## *God is in the details*

From awakening each morning until falling asleep, through the course of the day, week, year, and one's life, the Kabbalistic lifestyle offers countless opportunities and methods to connect with a consciousness of God.

The Kabbalist wants to be aware of God at all times. Kabbalah connects a person to God while eating, working, and doing every other human activity. The goal is to constantly have God in one's mind and heart because God is the center of existence.

A Kabbalist defines his or her life as a relationship with God. All other relationships, whether they be with friends, partners, parents, children, neighbors, employers, or even Kabbalah teachers, are seen as temporary. The only permanent relationship, the only relationship that truly defines who a person is, is the relationship he or she has with God.

## *Who Can Study Kabbalah?*

Kabbalah is a Jewish tradition. In fact, Kabbalah *is* Jewish tradition. Although some have tried to represent Kabbalah as a philosophy or approach to life

that's independent of Judaism, that simply isn't accurate. And it's not only inaccurate, it's impossible.

Every great sage of Kabbalah throughout the ages has taught that Kabbalah and Jewish tradition are part of the same whole. You can certainly extract ideas from Kabbalistic tradition, separating them from anything Jewish, but what you're left holding just isn't true Kabbalah. Just as a few Buddhist teachings don't represent the rich and ancient tradition of Buddhism, the gathering of a few notions familiar to Kabbalists in past centuries doesn't make up the tradition of Kabbalah.

True, some books written by Jewish teachers and even contemporary rabbis relegate Kabbalah to some fringe of Jewish history. You can find books written by teachers who aren't Jewish that claim that Kabbalah isn't a specifically Jewish phenomenon. You also can find books and teachers who claim that one can understand Kabbalah and even be a Kabbalist without participating in Jewish life, rituals, and celebrations.

But the simple fact is that Kabbalah is the soul of Jewish life. Every great Kabbalist and authority on Kabbalah for centuries has lived life as a Jew profoundly involved in Jewish study, Jewish prayer, Jewish ritual, and Jewish life.

## *Do you have to be Jewish?*

One principle of Kabbalah is that Kabbalah and Jewish law are inextricably linked. One can't be a Kabbalist and abandon the guidelines for a Jewish life. Without that flow of rituals and practices, the container necessary for the profound insights of Kabbalah is simply missing. One cannot be a Kabbalist and ignore Jewish ritual. To the Kabbalist, Jewish ritual without Kabbalah is an empty shell, and Kabbalah without Jewish practice is incomplete and a mere splinter of something whole and complete.



Of course, you don't have to be Jewish to *study* Kabbalah. On the contrary, in today's world, the wisdom of the great spiritual traditions is, for the first time, universally available. In the past, you may have been able to find a book here or there or spend some time with an occasional teacher from a religious or spiritual tradition that wasn't your own. But now, books, Web sites, and ease of travel afford the opportunity to encounter the world's great religious and spiritual traditions. There's certainly nothing wrong with wanting to nourish oneself at the watering hole of any source of wisdom.

It's also perfectly fine to borrow an idea or integrate a piece of wisdom from Kabbalah (or any tradition, for that matter) into your own life. When someone who isn't Jewish approaches Kabbalah, expresses an interest in its wisdom, and even incorporates that wisdom into his or her life, it's a natural phenomenon.

But it's important to know that every great Kabbalist, every important book on Kabbalah, and every law, ritual, or practice of Kabbalah that exists comes from Jews who are speaking to Jews. Kabbalah and Judaism are unlike some religious traditions that teach that everyone needs to believe what they believe and unlike many spiritual traditions or teachers who think they have a monopoly on wisdom and truth. Kabbalah is a legacy of the spiritual tradition of the Jewish people, and central to the spiritual culture of the Jewish family.

## *Can an atheist be a Kabbalist?*

Although Kabbalah is primarily concerned with the human relationship to God, there's nothing inappropriate about someone who's a nonbeliever, or even a confirmed atheist, spending time trying to grasp the basic ideas of Kabbalah.

A well-known statement made to atheists is, "The God that you don't believe in, well, I don't believe in that God either." In other words, a person may state that he or she is a nonbeliever, but when a believer explores just what it is that the nonbeliever doesn't believe in, the believer finds that he or she also doesn't believe in that conception of God.

Some people grow up with an image of God as a man with a beard sitting on a heavenly throne. Others grow up with an idea of God as an angry, vengeful, strict dictator who punishes people with fire and brimstone. All kinds of ideas about God float around; humans are inherently seekers, and Kabbalists are full-time God seekers. But these conceptions of God all too often chase people away from God, and result in a wholesale rejection of the study of religion.



My teacher points out that many people who claim to be atheists are really not atheists at all. They simply reject old-fashioned and inaccurate views of God. They may not believe in an angry God or a vengeful God or the old man on the heavenly throne God, but they may have more in common with the Kabbalist and his or her beliefs about the "unknowable God" than they might think (see Chapter 16 for more on God as unknowable).

## *Different Approaches to the Study of Kabbalah*

Until recently historians, including some Jewish historians, have been downright hostile to Kabbalah, claiming that it belongs in the folklore department or as is mere superstition. Some have gone as far as to completely ignore Kabbalistic tradition in their writings.

## What is the Torah?

The answer to that question isn't simple, but it's surely worth exploring and is actually crucial to an understanding of Kabbalah itself.

The Hebrew word "Torah" has the same root as the Hebrew word **hora'ah** (hoe-rah-ah; instruction or teaching), and "Torah" is used in a number of ways.

- ✓ Torah is the Five Books of Moses, the written revelation that Moses received from God at Mount Sinai. Although one can find the text (called the **Chumash** [choo-mahsh; five]) today in printed book form, it most commonly appears in the form of a handwritten scroll of ink on parchment that's found in the sanctuaries of synagogues throughout the world.
- ✓ Torah is the Holy Scriptures of the Jewish people. Outside of the Jewish world, these Holy Scriptures are sometimes referred to as the Pentateuch (five books), or the Jewish Scriptures, and sometimes the term "Old Testament" is used by those who imply a New Testament has supplanted the original.
- ✓ Torah is the term used to refer to the entire body of Jewish spiritual literature, including well-known works such as the Talmud and the Zohar as well as the thousands of other

works written by Jewish spiritual teachers throughout the centuries. A seeker who says that he or she is studying Torah may mean the study of any work of Jewish literature that continues the endless chain of religious tradition growing out of the original revelation at Mount Sinai.

- ✓ Torah is what a Jewish spiritual teacher rooted in tradition teaches *tomorrow*. This interpretation of the word "Torah" reflects the traditional Jewish belief that Torah is timeless, eternal wisdom.

Throughout the ages, books that have been written by great sages sooner or later join the chain of Torah literature. These works don't become a part of that chain through a vote but rather by their wide acceptance among the Jewish people in general and the sages in particular.

In other words, regardless of whether the Zohar was written in the second century by the Talmudic sage Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai or in the 12th century by Rabbi Moses de Leon, the important fact is that every Kabbalist who ever lived studies the Zohar, studies commentaries on the Zohar, and in doing so connects with the chain of people who recognize the Zohar as an important Kabbalistic text.

The study of Kabbalah during the past century has been dominated by academics. (In the 20th century, the academic study of Kabbalah has centered around the work of Professor Gershom Sholem whose work has dominated the field for decades.) Academics often focus upon questions of history, such as "Who wrote this or that book?" or "Who influenced whom?" In addition, it's a general opinion that many of the academics who have studied and written about Kabbalah in recent generations have done so as scientists (from a secular perspective), not as active participants in the religious tradition of Judaism. The weakness of this approach, of course, is that Kabbalah, as I indicate earlier in this chapter, can't be adequately understood from the outside.

Traditional Jews generally aren't as interested in a scientific, scholarly study of Kabbalah. Rather, for the Kabbalist who is immersed in a traditional religious life, Kabbalah fits unconditionally into the timeless unfolding of God's revelation.

A closer look at the different ways in which Kabbalah is approached depending on one's bias can be illustrated by the question, "Who wrote the Zohar?" The Zohar, which I cover in Chapter 13, is probably the most well-known and important book of Kabbalistic teachings. Here are three different approaches to answering that question:

- ✓ Traditionalists claim that the Zohar was written by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a sage who lived in the second century and who's said to have written the book during the 13 years he spent in a cave hiding from the Romans. Many centuries of Kabbalists have accepted this view that the Zohar was written by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.
- ✓ Academic scholars say that the Zohar was written by Rabbi Moses de Leon in the 12th century. These scholars compare the writing style of the Zohar to other writing of Rabbi Moses de Leon and use additional academic tools to draw their conclusions. They reject the traditionalist approach.
- ✓ Mainly in the traditionalist camp but with a slightly different approach are those who don't care about questions of history too much and don't really know whether the author of the Zohar was Rabbi Moses de Leon or Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai or someone else. People who follow this approach simply join the countless students of Kabbalah throughout the centuries who study the Zohar without questioning its source and participate in a Kabbalistic exploration of life.

The study of Kabbalah is the study of timeless and eternal wisdom. Kabbalah is grounded in a part of a more general notion that Kabbalists call *Torah* (in the sense that a generic meaning of the word Torah is "instruction." As long as there has been a notion of Kabbalah, there has been "the study of Torah." Basically, anyone who is studying Kabbalah is actually a student of Torah and, in fact, would be more apt to state that he or she is a student of Torah than a student of Kabbalah.

## *Picking a Kabbalah that Works for You*

In the year 70 CE, a cataclysm of vast proportions occurred in Jewish history. The destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem by the Roman Empire still reverberates in Jewish life today. One of the results of this terrible event was the end of any central authority among the Jewish people.

With the destruction of the Temple came the end of the highest court in Jewish life, the Sanhedrin. This court, which was similar to the Supreme Court of the United States but with far more authority, decided major issues for the Jewish community worldwide. Among its powers was the authority to ordain rabbis. Since the fall of the Sanhedrin, there has been no accepted singular authority within Jewish life.

As a result, controversies within Jewish communal life went unresolved, splits occurred, differences of opinion and differing approaches proliferated, and significant disagreements on all kinds of matters arose. For example, Jewish life in the United States today contains four different *movements* representing, in some cases, vastly different beliefs.

Not only does Judaism have four major movements — Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform — but each movement is divided into different divisions. For instance, within the Orthodox world, one finds Hasidic Jews and non-Hasidic Jews. And the newest movement within Jewish life, Jewish Renewal, defines itself in part as a worldwide, transdenominational movement grounded in Judaism's prophetic and mystical traditions.

**Note:** In this book, I draw heavily upon Hasidism because the Hasidic movement has been, for the past few centuries, the great popularizer of Kabbalah and because it is within the Hasidic world today that the most complete form of Kabbalah is practiced. In addition, Hasidism is the most rapidly growing movement in the Jewish world, and its influence on all the other movements is clear and significant. While Hasidism is a major influence on the other movements, the opposite is not true: Hasidism is not being influenced by the other movements.

Today, those who want to pursue the study of Kabbalah have many options available.



A person who wants to study Kabbalah need not become a member of the Hasidic community or the Jewish Renewal world or pursue the offerings of the Kabbalah Centre or a university course. Many available books written for laypeople and scholars can contribute to a deep understanding of the Kabbalistic way. Nothing, however, is better than locating an authentic teacher (see Chapter 14) and becoming a student of both the theory and practice of Kabbalah.

## *Hasidism*

Founded by Rabbi Israel (known as the Baal Shem Tov; see Chapter 18) in the early 18th century, **Hasidism** (*khah-sid-ism*) is a movement within Jewish life

that seeks to bring the wisdom of Kabbalah to the masses. (The word “hasid” means pious one.) Hasidism began with its leader and his disciples, but over the generations, the movement has splintered into many Hasidic groups, each led by a leader known as a **rebbe** (*reh-bee*; spiritual mentor).

Usually, when a rebbe dies, his son, son-in-law, or another person selected by the rebbe or the community to succeed him becomes the spiritual guide of the group. Today, many Hasidic groups have headquarters or branches throughout the world, but many are found in Israel and New York City.

The Hasidic group most open to and even encouraging of newcomers is commonly known as either **Chabad** (*khah-bahd*), which is an acronym of three important terms in Kabbalah (see Chapter 3) or **Lubavitch** (*loo-bah-vitch*), after the town in Russia where the movement flowered generations ago. The lifestyles, practices, rituals, and beliefs of Chasidim today most resemble those of Kabbalists throughout the centuries.

## *Orthodox (non-Hasidic) Judaism*

Whereas Kabbalah is openly studied in Hasidic communities, many people mistakenly think that non-Hasidic Orthodox Jews don’t study Kabbalah. Actually, the average Orthodox Jew is discouraged from serious study of Kabbalah, but the most brilliant students usually are encouraged to delve into the teachings of Kabbalah. Regardless, most Orthodox Jews participate in many Kabbalistic rituals even though they may be unaware that the rituals originated among Kabbalists. More important, essentially, the basic theology accepted by Orthodox Jews is Kabbalah, although again many Orthodox Jews are unaware of its Kabbalistic roots.

## *Jewish Renewal*

Jewish Renewal was founded in 1962 by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (also known as Reb Zalman), a traditionally trained Chasidic rabbi, and led by an organization called the Aleph Alliance for Jewish Renewal.

At the heart of Jewish Renewal is the notion that the generation following the destruction of European Jewry, when one out of every three Jews in the world was murdered during the Holocaust, is a rebuilding generation. One way to rebuild, of course, is to mimic the old ways and try to duplicate what was lost. This approach has been referred to as *restorative*.

Reb Zalman's approach to rebuilding is a radical one: Rather than restore Judaism to the old ways, he suggested a *renewal* of Judaism. That is, he called for a Judaism that understands the essences of the timeless teachings and is willing to find new forms of expression for those teachings in a language and style that fits with more modern sensibilities. One major trend in Jewish Renewal, for example, is egalitarianism, in which gender roles are obliterated and both genders have equal access to communal roles and ritual practices.

The Aleph Alliance for Jewish Renewal describes itself as the core institution in the Jewish Renewal movement. In addition to its publications, conferences, and classes, Aleph trains and ordains Jewish Renewal rabbis, cantors and Rabbinic pastors many of whom draw heavily upon Kabbalistic teachings. Although the vast majority of its members as well as those who affiliate with Jewish Renewal in one way or another (taking classes, attending conferences, reading its literature, and so on.) don't not lead traditional Jewish lifestyles and aren't usually participating in the formal requirements of Jewish law, many individuals who are connected in one way or another with Jewish Renewal find themselves increasingly involved with traditional Jewish practices normal to the life of a traditional Kabbalist.

Jewish Renewal has inspired many gifted teachers and has ordained many Jewish Renewal rabbis who are devoted to grasping the teachings of Kabbalah and integrating these teachings into their lives and the lives of their students. Dozens of Jewish Renewal communities of varying sizes and levels of Jewish observance exist throughout the world.

## *The Kabbalah Centre*

The Kabbalah Centre was founded in 1969 by Rabbi Philip Berg, author of many introductory books on Kabbalah, and his wife Karen.

Drawing upon the wisdom of Kabbalah, the Kabbalah Centre and its teachers have generated a program of publishing and classes that urge Jews and others to drink from the waters of Kabbalistic tradition.

The Kabbalah Centre has received much publicity in recent years, due in large part to several high-profile celebrities (most notably the singer and actress Madonna) who have affiliated with the Kabbalah Centre and allow it to be known that they are students of Rabbi Berg and his disciples.



## *University and general study*

Most major universities have Jewish studies departments, and an increasing number of those departments offer courses in Kabbalah. Of course, these classes are directed at neither the believer nor the practitioner. As I explain earlier in this chapter, from a Kabbalistic viewpoint, the limitation of an academic study of Kabbalah is that Kabbalah is bound up in the *practice* of Kabbalah.

Nevertheless, many excellent scholars have written books on various aspects of Kabbalah that surely aid the sincere student in an understanding of what Kabbalah is all about. Notable among these scholars are Joseph Dan and Moshe Idel, each of whom have contributed tremendous understanding of Kabbalah to those who dedicate themselves to studying their work.

