

**JEWISH LITERACY**  
**Jewish Mysticism: Kabbalah & Zohar**  
**Rabbi Michael Lotker**

1. Spirituality

- “*Ruchniyut*” רִיחַנִּיּוּת
- How do you define spirituality: connectedness, whole, introspective, sense of transcendent, gentleness, peace, grateful, awareness, honesty, tolerant, sense of the beautiful, giving (altruistic), wonderment and awe, openness, humility, sense of being channel for God, centeredness, balance, integration/integrity.

2. Classically, Spirituality is a Christian concept, no word in classic Hebrew for Spirituality.

- In search for Spirituality, 9 out of 10 times, Jews start with sacred scripture (Bible, Talmud, Midrash, and Zohar)
- Christians start with wanting to be connected with Jesus
- Jewish spirituality unlike Christian and New Age in that spirituality brings you immediately to Mitzvot to ethical obligations.

3. For me, spirituality is liberating you right brain -- your ability to have a relationship with God - passionate feelings about God and religion

- the question is **not whether you believe in God** -- that's an intellectual question --- a logical problem. (most people who don't believe in God have given it 25 sec to 5 minutes thought)
- the question is **whether you have a relationship with God**
- What is your relationship with God?
- Start out with the assumption that **all the old lies (well at least some of them) might be true!**
- **Let yourself fall in love with God -- it means you will care, you will have fights, you will be angry, disappointed, jealous, fearful, and ecstatic. You will be aroused and excited and will want to lose yourself in your lover. You will want to sing with God and dance with God. You may feel a little embarrassed.**
- It's sad but today we live in a world where it's not OK to be openly affectionate to God. It's a bit like having a gay relationship used to be -- you can't show it and you become afraid to even feel it.

4. Kabbalah – Intro – (is it Ka-BAH-lah or Ka-bah-LAH? – both – the first is the Ashkenazic and the second the Sephardic pronunciation)
- a. Meaning= “the received (tradition)”
    - i. In modern Hebrew, “receipt” or “reception desk”
  - b. Goal: desire to get closer, even cleave to God.
  - c. Built on top of Judaism
    - i. Not an easy alternative to Judaism
    - ii. Practitioners of Kabbalah are/were serious observant Jews who know, Hebrew, Aramaic, Jewish practice. There is no practice of Kabbalah per se, only the deep Kabbalistic practice of Judaism.
    - iii. Pop Kabbalah is pop spirituality,
      1. Magic – means we control God rather than wanting God to control us.
      2. Pop Kabbalah is like thinking that wearing a white jacket and a stethoscope makes you a doctor.

#### 5 Kabbalah – Some Basic Ideas

- d. Studied by observant males over 40 (others say 20), high moral standards, prior rabbinic learning, mental and emotional stability and married so they would not leave this planet.
- e. Traditionally taught “one on one” so concepts will not be misunderstood
- f. Significance of mitzvot in healing/repairing creation.
  - i. Both ethical and ritual
  - ii. It goes without saying that practitioners of Kabbalah are observant Jews. To do God’s will, must start with the obvious *mitzvot/halacha*
- g. Focus on God and the understanding of God
  - i. Understood as a journey within rather than a journey up there.
    1. Importance of spiritual discipline and prayer
    2. Two diagrams of God-me relationship
  - ii. Hidden name of God Y-H-W-H
  - iii. Recognition that everything is God – everything is connected
  - iv. Desire to understand the nature and structure of God
    1. and the reason and nature of evil
    2. Other extreme from Rambam – from no image of God to a multitude of images
    3. We are created in God’s image – this tells us something about God and about us
- h. Focus on Hebrew
  - i. Gematria [example of Tallit]
- i. Focus on Torah as divine plan for the universe
- j. Sexual imagery unique in Western mysticisms

6. Kabbalah – History
  - a. Exclusively male – there were NO female kabbalists in history
  - b. Begins in 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple times with contemplation of God’s throne (as described in Ezekiel & the chariot (*Merkabah*)
    - i. Remnant – chanting *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh* (Isa. 6:3)
  - c. Hasidism in Mediaeval Germany: 1150-1250
    - i. Idealization of the Hasid (ascetic, serene, and altruistic)
    - ii. Christian influence – deprivation – sitting in snow
    - iii. But never promoted sexual abstinence
  - d. *Sefer Ha-Zohar* – the Book of Splendor
    - i. Pseudepigraphia – written by Moshe deLeon (and/or his school) in 13<sup>th</sup> century Spain but attributed to 2<sup>nd</sup> century Mishna teacher and disciple of Rabbi Akibah, Shimon bar Yochai.
    - ii. Commentary on Torah
    - iii. Form, wandering mystics in the Galilee
    - iv. Written in 2<sup>nd</sup> century Aramaic (but can see hint of 13<sup>th</sup> century Hebrew – and even Mediaeval Spanish)
    - v. Only now is a good annotated translation into English becoming available
    - vi. Introduces the 10 *Sefirot*
    - vii. Provides structure to the study and practice of Kabbalah
  - e. Isaac Luria and his School
    - i. Expulsion from Spain
    - ii. Messianic influence
    - iii. Luria taught in Safed only 2.5 years before dying in an epidemic in 1572 at age 38.
      1. H-Ari – “the Lion” “the divine Rabbi Isaac”
      2. Wrote almost nothing
    - iv. Creation story: *Tzimtzum, shevirat kelim, klippot, tikkun*
      1. *Shevirah* is responsible for evil/chaos/brokenness of the world
      2. Divine light remains a sparks
        - a. Our job to liberate the sparks
        - b. Kafka: “the Messiah will come when he is no longer necessary; he will come only on the day after his arrival.
      3. Messiah as end of *tikkun*
    - v. 4 Worlds (Scholem p. 272)
      1. *Atsilut* – emanation and divinity
      2. *Beriah* – creation – the throne and the highest angels
      3. *Yetsirah* – formation – the domain of the angels
      4. *Aisyah* – making
    - vi. Transmigration of souls – reincarnation

- f. Shabbtai Zvi (1625-1676)
  - i. Nathan of Gaza = his Paul
  - ii. Forced to convert to Islam
    - 1. appeals to Marrano mind
    - 2. Theology of descent into evil
- g. Chasidism as a non-Messianic response
  - i. Begins with the Baal Shem Tov in the 1700s
  - ii. Radical “reform” of the Judaism of the time – stressing joy and love of God rather than excessive scholarship
  - iii. Stresses the idea that you don’t need the messiah to bring about redemption
  - iv. Each of us brings about redemption via Tikkun Olam – releasing sparks
  - v. There are more than a dozen modern Chasidic Groups – Chabad is only one.

7. Ideas for Kabbalistic Things to Explore

- a. *Sefirot* – from Hebrew *safar*, to enumerate.
  - i. 10 sefirot are 10 stages of God’s emanations, each a manifest action of the various attributes of God.
  - ii. This is our Trinity!
- b. *Gematria*
  - i. *Tzitzit*
  - ii. *Chai, Hamsa*
  - iii. Etc
- c. Discussion of YHVH
- d. *Lecha Dodi*
- e. Actions below affect actions above
- f. Mitzvot for the sake of unification
  - i. God needs us to fulfill God’s work!
  - ii. Double Mitzvah Friday Night

8. Idea: Tips

- a. Talk to God
- b. Say Blessings
- c. Spiritual discipline (diet)
- d. Prayer and services

READINGS FOR NEXT TIME: THE PRAYERBOOK

LOTKER: pp. 82-83, 99-101

HANDBOOK: pp. 11-14, 47-48, 92-96, 161-2, 184-5, 202-204, 207-210, 234-5, 281-3, 294, 440-2, 449-451, 525-527, 541-559