

Context

In earlier generations of Reform Judaism, Talmud was rarely studied. In our time, it is regularly taught in our synagogues, and is a fundamental aspect of rabbinic training. We came to understand that all of our texts are part of our rich literary inheritance, and all can be a source of inspiration and meaning if we develop the skills to access them. The last few years have seen a similar increase in interest in Kabbalah, which now finds itself firmly within the mainstream of Jewish culture as we seek to engage with new and old routes to spirituality.

*As **Rabbi Larry Tabick**, rabbi at Shir Hayim/Hampstead Reform, lecturer in Kabbalah & Hasidism at the Leo Baeck College, and author of *The Aura of Torah* (JPSA 2014) explains, this is new ground for Reform Judaism. He is leading the way in thinking about how we, as Progressive Jews, can engage with these texts and ideas.*

Content

Kabbalah is like Marmite: You either love it, or you hate it. For some, it is pure superstition, not worthy of our interest. For others, it is a *treif* (unkosher) import into Judaism. I suspect neither group has ever studied it. Both are wrong. Kabbalah is not superstitious at its heart, though it contains much that is, and Kabbalah, while historically open to 'foreign' ideas (as Judaism generally was), is largely home-grown.

Our Reform founders would have been horrified to learn that Kabbalah is now taught openly in Reform rabbinic training colleges and in congregations. To them, it represented all the medievalism and superstition they were trying to remove from Judaism. (Previous authors on British Reform Judaism, such as Rabbis Dow Marmor and Jonathan Romain, never mention the subject.) And yet, as the academic study of Kabbalah became more acceptable, primarily through the efforts of Professor Gershom Scholem and his students, it became almost inevitable that progressive rabbinic institutions would follow suit. Rabbinic colleges were slow to do so, however, and at first, there was little suggestion that such an esoteric subject would find its way into the sermons produced by their graduates, or into adult study programmes. This situation is now changed, so that all the non-orthodox rabbinic training institutions, including our own Leo Baeck College, offer courses in Kabbalah with the pulpit and adult classroom in mind.

For the uninitiated, what is Kabbalah? Kabbalah is the Jewish esoteric and mystical tradition. Its primary expression is the Zohar, a product of the late 13th century Jewish community of Spain, but it encompasses a vast literature that precedes and follows the Zohar itself. Why should we Reform Jews study it? I suggest five reasons.

1. **History.** Though it arose in elitist study groups, Kabbalah was the dominant ideology of Judaism from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, and in some circles, still is. It has given us many elements of our liturgy, most notably the songs *L'cha Dodi* and *Y'did Nefesh*, and the *Kabbalat Shabbat* portion of the Friday evening service.
2. **Descriptive.** The great German-Jewish thinker Franz Rosenzweig taught that the aim of Jewish education was to create Jews for whom nothing Jewish was foreign. Surely, this definition means that Kabbalah has to be covered, as part of our broader Jewish learning.
3. **Prescriptive.** For some, Kabbalah will prove fascinating. They will wish to delve further into it, to use its insights to deepen their understanding of Judaism and its practice, to take kabbalistic meditations to heart. The vast literature of Kabbalah, and especially that of its offshoot Hasidism, is also a rich source of sermon material.

- Ethical. Kabbalah teaches that all that is, the earth and all its inhabitants, are not only created *by* God, but are manifestations *of* God. Therefore, the environment and other human beings, no matter their background or culture, are worthy of our respect and indeed, our reverence.
- Demography and leadership. There is a small but significant minority of young Jewish people who are hungry for spirituality. If we offered more Kabbalah, that might help to keep them with us. Otherwise, we run the risk of losing them to Chabad, Aish, the Kabbalah Center, Buddhism, whatever. If they feel that Reform Judaism meets their spiritual needs, they could be our leaders and rabbis of the future.

Reform Judaism must, as it does with all Jewish sources, bring a critical attitude to the study of Kabbalah. In particular, we need to steer a careful course between conflicting demands.

We have to be aware of academic work on the subject, because Kabbalah arose and came to prominence in particular historical periods whose concerns and focus might not be the same as our own. This would help us avoid ahistorical fallacies. (For example, the Zohar is not the product of second century Palestine, but of thirteenth century Spain.)

Our knowledge must be grounded in traditional texts, to preserve our Jewish authenticity and keep us far from a trendy, but shallow, spirituality.

We have to be critical of the ethics and morality taught by our mystical tradition. It may be fine to learn to give a lower priority to our material desires and a greater one to our spiritual needs, and to the needs of others, but Kabbalah also contains much that is sexist by our standards, or disparaging of other peoples and faiths.

We must therefore be outward looking. Mysticism is a common feature of many human societies, each with its own approach and practices. Kabbalah is a uniquely Jewish path, but respect must be accorded paths because they too are deeply human, and may contain lessons for us.

Kabbalah presents serious challenges to Reform Jews. It challenges us to be more ritually observant, to help us keep our high ethical principles in mind at all times. It urges us to be mindful of God in all that we do. It stimulates us to think beyond the emotional and rational categories that normally govern our lives, and to go beyond literalism in our understanding of our prayers and our Scriptures.

Here is one tiny example of how the insights of Kabbalah might deepen our spiritual understanding and ethical practice, from a work attributed to Hayyim Vital (1542-1620):

‘The Infinite is internal to all the worlds and external to all the worlds.’ⁱ

All things that exist, you, me, the numberless things that fill the universe, all contain something of the Infinite, of God. In modern terms, the universe is a fractal in which every part, as it were, contains the whole. This implies that every moment presents us with a revelation, that every creature and every person is worthy of our respect. All we need to do is: pay attention. What could be more profound, more Jewish, more spiritual and more progressive than that?

Contemplation

Reform Judaism classically understood itself to be an approach to Jewish practice and literature that emphasised rationality over what it called ‘superstition’. We now understand that religious life must accommodate both reason and a search for spirituality. As we begin to bring Kabbalistic writing into our Jewish library, and to make space for a productive mysticism, we face the personal challenge of doing so without compromising our integrity – how do we use the language and ideas of Kabbalah to enhance our understanding of the world without compromising our reason?

ⁱ Arba Me’ot Shekel Kesef (Four Hundred Shekels of Silver [Genesis 23:15,16]) (Crakow, 1886), p. 9c.

My thanks to Student Rabbi Roberta Harris for drawing my attention to the ramifications of this passage.