

What is Kabbalah and The Prerequisites for its Study

Kabbalah seems to be in style today, along with all sorts of Eastern spirituality, mysticisms, and various forms of meditation. Many people are left wondering about the authenticity of Kabbalah, about whether or not it offers a way to circumvent the strictures of adhering to a Torah lifestyle, and whether or not it is indeed a real part of the Jewish tradition.

There are three Morasha shiurim on Kabbalah. This first class addresses the definition of Kabbalah, its authenticity, and the prerequisites for its study. The shiur also discusses how the revealed Torah offers tremendous depth and opportunity for personal and spiritual development without the study of Kabbalah. Finally, two books are suggested for students seeking to study introductory Kabbalah with a qualified mentor. The second and third Morasha classes explore the primary topics addressed by Kabbalah.

In this class we will address the following questions:

- ❧ Is Kabbalah an authentic expression of Judaism? Is it a recent development or is it part of the Sinai transmission?
- ❧ Who were the primary teachers of Kabbalah and what texts did they write?
- ❧ How can one differentiate real Kabbalah from pseudo-Kabbalah?
- ❧ How does one become a Kabbalist? What are the prerequisites?
- ❧ Is it necessary to study Kabbalah to establish a connection to spirituality and enable personal development?

Class Outline:

- Section I. Introduction: What Kabbalah Is, and What It Isn't

- Section II. The Authenticity of Kabbalah
 - Part A. A Multi-faceted Torah
 - Part B. A Secret Tradition
 - Part C. The Tradition Rediscovered and Verified

- Section III. Prerequisites for the Study of Kabbalah
 - Part A. The Necessity for Adequate Preparation
 - Part B. Knowledge and Observance of the Revealed Torah
 - Part C. Greatness of Wisdom and Intellect
 - Part D. Purity of Intent
 - Part E. A Mentor

- Section IV. Finding Depth and Spirituality in the Revealed Torah

SECTION I. WHAT KABBALAH IS, AND WHAT IT ISN'T

The popularity of Kabbalah today has led to much confusion about what Kabbalah really is and what it is not. The proliferation of Kabbalah centers with their high profile clientele makes Kabbalah attractive to some and debunks it for others.

Kabbalah is not the hazy approach to spirituality that some might perceive. It is a rigid scientific discipline that studies the true spiritual roots of everything that we see in the world.

1. **Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Introduction to Kabbalah, Simpletoremember.com – Kabbalah is the study of how the physical world is a manifestation of a deeper spiritual reality.**

Judaism sees the physical world as a manifestation of a deeper, spiritual idea. Kabbalah refers to the connection between the physical reality and the spiritual essence that lies behind that physical reality. For this reason, Kabbalah is often translated as mysticism, which the Oxford dictionary defines as that which is spiritually allegorical. Kabbalah is the study of the hidden, underlying spiritual essence of the world.

It is important to realize from the start that the wisdom of Kabbalah is exceedingly deep, but its esoteric vocabulary lends itself to misuse and misunderstanding.

2. **Rabbi Shimon Leiberman, “What is Kabbalah?” from aish.com – One must be careful not to relate too superficially to the metaphorical language of Kabbalah.**

In order to understand what Kabbalah is and what it isn't, let us use the following illustration.

A researcher sits in his lab examining all sorts of atomic phenomena. He smashes atoms at great speeds, and records what he sees happening. He is very meticulous in his work, and may even draw some immediate conclusions from the data at hand. But he leaves it at that.

A great scientist picks up these notes, reads them and ponders their meaning. He begins to construct a mega-picture. He tries to envision what the entire system may be like. He knows that there are no instruments, nor can there be, to actually see the particles he imagines, and therefore he gropes for metaphors that will accurately connect the bits of data that the physicist collected. Thus, he begins to speak of “super strings,” “atomic tunnels,” “energy bridges,” and “ten dimensions.”

A third person, who has a highly fertile mind but with no sense of science, is eavesdropping. His imagination has been fired and, in no time at all, he is carrying forth about people that have mysteriously disappeared in “atomic tunnels,” and unlimited sources of energy contained in various of the “ten dimensions.”

These three people illustrate the different approaches to Kabbalah.

The “data” or facts that Kabbalah deals with are the narrative of the Torah, and its entire body of religious law. The “researcher” represents a person who sees the laws and narrative as they are, understands their immediate meaning, but does not get the larger picture.

The “great scientist” represents the Kabbalist who sees the various local points and then begins to get a feel for the greater picture. He needs metaphors to describe the abstract unity he perceives, and he is aware that this tool is likely to be vague and only approaching the understanding that he has acquired. Although limited by the tools at his disposal, the complex picture the great scientist communicates can still give us a sense of the reality that he is grappling with.

And then there is the pseudo-Kabbalist – “the eavesdropper” – whose Kabbalah is basically unrelated to Torah, except perhaps as a springboard for his imagination. He has discovered “sources of energies,” “divine emanations,” and ways to “expand consciousness,” but it all stems from his fanciful illusions.

In reality, Kabbalah is the science of God, a systematic attempt to describe the most we know about how God creates, sustains, and directs His creation.

3. **Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto), Kuf Lamed Ches Pischei Chachmah (138 Openings of Wisdom) 30:1 – The goal of Kabbalah is to understand the purpose of Creation and how God is guiding it toward its ultimate perfection.**

The entire wisdom of the Kabbalah is only to understand how the Supreme Will governs, for what purpose He created all these different creatures, what He wants from them, what will come at the end of all the cycles of the universe, and how all these strange cycles are to be explained. For the Supreme Will Himself already calculated the entire cycle of governance ending with complete perfection. These calculations and measures are what we are explaining when we speak about the *sefirot* (channels of Divine energy) and the worlds.

כל חכמת הקבלה היא לדעת הנהגתו של הרצון העליון,
על מה ברא כל הבריות האלה, ומה הוא רוצה בהם,
ומה יהיה סוף כל סיבובי העולם, ואיך מתפרשים
כל הגלגולים האלה אשר בעולם, שהם כ"כ זרים, כי
כבר שיער הרצון העליון בעצמו סיבוב ההנהגה הזאת
הגומרת בשלמות הגמור, ואלה השיעורים הם מה
שאנו מפרשים סוד הספירות והעולמות.

Oftentimes, the language of Kabbalah may seem cryptic, and its contents may be referred to in an oblique and even confusing fashion. This is a result of the very nature of Kabbalah. Due to the sublime nature of its subject matter, the language of Kabbalah is the language of allegory.

4. **Mordechai Becher, Introduction to Kabbalah, Simpletoremember.com – Kabbalistic wisdom is called *sod*, or “secret” because it is taught by allusion rather than being explained directly.**

In Hebrew, Kabbalah is referred to as *sod*, meaning “secret.” What is secretive about Kabbalah? After all, many people are familiar with it. Kabbalah is called a “secret” because its subject matter is discussed only in hints and allusions. The true content of Kabbalistic wisdom is not openly discussed; rather, it is taught obliquely, through allegory. This is due to the spiritually elevated nature of the wisdom of Kabbalah. It cannot be expressed properly in the language of the material world, and if the Torah were to discuss these concepts directly, it would lower our concept of spirituality.

It is important to recognize that the true nature of Kabbalah is not connected to many of the practices and gimmicks that have achieved popular fame as “Kabbalistic” devices. Kabbalah is a form of science, the study of the spiritual reality of the world. How can we understand that such a spiritual reality exists? Quite simply, the same way that we understand that our senses perceive only an infinitesimal percentage of the physical world.

Beyond the earth and its immediate environs, which we can see with our eyes or instruments, scientists have told us that there is a vast universe containing untold billions of stars, planets, galaxies, etc. Similarly, beyond the reality that we can perceive with both our eyes and our scientific instruments, there are untold degrees of depth. Every object that we perceive can be broken down into countless microscopic particles, which in turn consist of particles that are much smaller. Thus, the physical world itself contains infinite worlds of depth beyond what we can perceive. And the deepest level of each “world” of reality is also the most superficial level of the “world” beyond it. The deepest level of the reality

that we can perceive is the most superficial level of the microscopic world, and the deepest level of that world is the most superficial level of the next “world” of depth.

As Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner explains in his work Nefesh HaChaim, the same is true in the realm of spirituality. There are untold layers of spiritual reality in our world, and the deepest level of spirituality in each “world” or layer represents the most superficial level of the world beyond it. Judaism demands of us to look beyond the surface, beyond the physical reality, and see the inner essence of the world and the realm of spirituality, which is defined by “purpose.”

The American poet Ogden Nash once said that a person can look at a drop of water and, by analyzing its chemical composition, determine that it is a teardrop. However, no amount of scientific testing can ever determine if it was a tear of sorrow or a tear of joy.

Similarly, we can understand the physical reality around us on one level, but there is a deeper level of spirituality and purpose which can never be penetrated by the tools of physical perception alone. This is the level of the inner essence of reality, which is the subject matter of Kabbalah. (From Mordechai Becher, Introduction to Kabbalah, Simpletoremember.com.)

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ≈ We start our discussion about Kabbalah with the awareness that not everyone who speaks in the name of Kabbalah understands what they are talking about. The fascinating expressions introduced by Kabbalah as metaphors for spiritual realities are much easier to say than they are to actually understand.
- ≈ It is important to realize from the start that the wisdom of Kabbalah is exceedingly deep yet its esoteric vocabulary lends itself to misuse and misunderstanding.
- ≈ Kabbalistic wisdom is called *sod*, or “secret” because it is taught by allusion rather than being explained directly.

SECTION II. THE AUTHENTICITY OF KABBALAH

In this section we will show that Kabbalah is not a separate religion or even a separate discipline from the Torah with which we are already familiar. Rather it is a study of the same Torah but on a different plane.

The fact that most people do not realize that Kabbalah is an intrinsic element of Judaism is because it remained a secret form of wisdom throughout most of Jewish history. Here we will trace the developments by which Kabbalah has come more and more into the limelight.

PART A. A MULTI-FACETED TORAH

The Kabbalah, along with all of the Torah’s levels of meaning, was transmitted by God to Moses at Mt. Sinai. It accompanies the rest of the Torah in an unbroken chain of transmission. It has, however, remained with the Jewish people with relatively limited public exposure.

In the third Morasha shiur on Kabbalah, we will illustrate how the words of the Torah contain many layers of meaning. Our Sages tell us that the Torah has seventy facets of meaning (Bamidbar Rabbah 13:15). The

Ramchal writes in *Derech Eitz Chaim* that there are no fewer than 600,000 possible interpretations of every verse in the Torah! There are four main categories of interpretations of the Torah, each of which encompasses numerous interpretations of every verse (*Sifsei Chaim*, *Emunah U'Bechirah*, Vol. II, p. 257).

1. **Vilna Gaon, commentary to Mishlei (1:20) – The Torah has many levels of meaning.**

The Torah has two general levels of meaning. One is *p'shat*, or the simple meaning, the other is *sod*, or the secrets hiding beneath the surface. *Sod* includes a sub-level, *remez*, meaning hinting or insinuation. This includes various forms of codes or other indications that there is indeed something beneath the surface. *Remez* is thus the gateway to *sod*. *P'shat* also includes a sublevel, *drash*.

התורה נחלקת לשנים שהם ארבע. והם פשט וסוד,
ובכל אחד שנים. בסוד: סודות עצמן ורמז הוא פתח
השער לסודות. ובפשט: דרש ופשט.

The four levels can be understood as follows:

פשט – (P'shat) – The straightforward explanation or literal meaning of the text.

דרש – (Drash) – Deeper explanations of the text based on established exegetical principles known from tradition.

רמז – (Remez) – The word *remez* literally means a hint or allusion. In essence, *remez* is a lower level of the profound understanding of the Torah represented by *sod*.

סוד – (Sod) – Kabbalistic, secret or mystical explanations of the text.

2. **Rabbi Mordechai Kornfeld, Kollolel Iyun HaDaf, Jerusalem, – The four levels of Torah explanation are symbolized by the Pardes explored by the Sages.**

These four levels of understanding are often represented by the acronym פר"ם (Pardes, the Hebrew word for orchard). Even though the level of *remez* technically comes after the level of *drash*, the letters are reversed in the acronym. According to the Arizal, this is the significance of the "orchard" that the four Talmudic Sages entered, described in *Chagigah* 14b (*Sefer Likutim*, *Ki Setzei* on the mitzvah of *ma'akeh*; *Drush Arba Nichnesu Lpardes* in *Sha'ar Ruach HaKodesh*) [see also below, Section III, Part A, Source 1].

See the *Morasha shiur*, *Kabbalah III*, which illustrates the four levels of "Pardes."

3. **Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Introduction to Kabbalah, Simpletoremember.com – The Kabbalah is another dimension of meaning of the Torah, which was given to Moshe at Sinai.**

When God gave Moshe (Moses) the Torah at Mount Sinai, He dictated the Written Torah to Moshe and gave him instructions as to how to carry out its precepts. Those instructions were eventually written down as the *Mishnah*. God also gave Moshe an oral tradition regarding the meaning of the Written Torah on a spiritual level. Much of this tradition was eventually recorded in the form of the *Zohar*, the basic Kabbalistic text.

4. **Ramchal, Daas Tevunos (The Understanding Heart) p. 331, Gloss of Rabbi Chaim Friedlander – Far from being an independent discipline, Kabbalah is one of the many levels of meaning of the Torah itself.**

The discipline of Kabbalah was given at Sinai as one of the levels of interpretation of the Torah. It was passed on from one generation to the next. Immediately following the destruction of the (Second) Temple, at the beginning of the dark exile which we are presently in, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai received Divine inspiration which enabled him to create a systematic exposition of the concepts of Kabbalah. His teachings were composed by his disciples into the book of the Zohar. However, even after this was committed to writing, only a select few people in each generation had access to it; it was not publicized to the masses. Even after it was revealed some six hundred years ago, it still remained a closed book to all but the most spiritually refined people. About four hundred years ago God sent the Jewish people an exceedingly great man – namely Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, known as the Ari (or Arizal). This man is considered until today the chief expositor of the Zohar, and his teachings exposed the depth and breadth of this discipline in all its detail.

חכמת האמת ניתנה בימינו כאחת מדרכי הבנת התורה ונמסרה מדור לדור. לאחר חורבן הבית, בראשית גלות חשוכה זו, שרתה החכמה הפנימית על רבי שמעון בר יוחאי ז"ל, ונערכו יסודותיה בספר הזהר הקדוש על ידי תלמידיו ותלמידיו תלמידיו במשך דורות רק יחידי סגולה הצניעוהו באוצרותיהם. ואף משבאה שעת גילוי הזהר הקדוש לפני כשש מאות שנה, עדיין נשארו דבריו סתומים וחתומים, ונהירים רק לבני עלייה יחידים. לפני כארבע מאות שנה שלח לנו השי"ת עיר וקדיש, רבנו יצחק אשכנזי – האר"י ז"ל, ממנו פינה ממנו יסוד בגילוי עומק ורוחב חכמה זו, כלליה ופרטיה...

PART B. A SECRET TRADITION

The sources that follow, spread over hundreds of years of Rabbinic literature, indicate the existence of a secret tradition of Torah wisdom. We start from the Mishnah, the authoritative text of the Oral Torah, which makes mention of two bodies of wisdom: One is *Ma'aseh Bereishit*, literally "the account of Genesis," and the other is *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, literally "the account of the Chariot." The latter is a reference to the vision seen by Ezekiel, in which he apprehended God's chariot and entourage, so to speak. This vision is understood to contain many basic spiritual secrets.

1. **Mishnah, Chagigah 11b – There are secret bodies of Torah wisdom.**

Do not expound on *Ma'aseh Bereishit* to two students, or on *Ma'aseh Merkavah* even to one student, unless he is a wise person who is able to intuit the concepts on his own.

אין דורשין במעשה בראשית בשנים ולא במרכבה ביחיד אלא אם כן היה חכם ומבין מדעתו.

2. **Meiri, Chagigah 11b – There is a body of knowledge of things beyond true human comprehension.**

Ma'aseh Bereishit includes the wisdom of the physical world, like astronomy and cosmology, while *Ma'aseh Merkavah* involves metaphysical

וענין מעשה בראשית הוא ידיעת חכמת הטבע ונכלל בה ידיעת שני עולמות ר"ל עולם היסודות ועולם הגלגלים, ומעשה מרכבה האמור במשנה זו הוא ידיעת

phenomena, like the world of angels and understanding God's existence and His unique Oneness. The true understanding of the concepts of Ma'aseh Merkavah are above human comprehension; even angels cannot understand spiritual levels of worlds above them, but each one attains an exalted level of knowledge and understanding of God's existence in accordance with his own level.

מה שאחר הטבע והוא עולם מלאכים ר"ל ידיעת אמתת מציאותם וידיעת מציאותו ית' ואחדותו, לא שתהיה הכוונה בהשגת הדברים על אמיתתם שאף הם לא ישיגו על בוריה מה שלמעלה מהם בעליונות מעלה, אבל ישיגו מאמתתו יתברך דעה גדולה והשגה עצומה כל אחת כפי מעלתה.

While Ma'aseh Bereishit refers to the physical sciences, Ma'aseh Merkavah refers to the science of God and other spiritual things. Thus, this Mishnah represents a clear indication in the Oral Torah that there was some form of esoteric wisdom not contained within the standard corpus of Torah literature. The following two excerpts demonstrate that certain great Sages, who lived centuries ago, were familiar with this body of wisdom.

3. **Rabbi Moshe Cordevero, Pardes Rimonim, Sha'ar HaTzachtzochot – Writing in the 15th century, Rabbi Cordevero cites the text of a responsum written by the most prominent Rabbinic figure of the 10th century, Rabbi Hai Gaon, which gives clear indication that he was aware of and intimately involved in the study of Kabbalah.**

Please enlighten us, our master: On the one hand, our Sages discuss the thirteen attributes of God that were revealed to Moses. On the other hand, in the book that is ascribed to our patriarch, Abraham, we find the concept of the ten *sefirot*. Are these two concepts one and the same?

Reply: The answer to this question is lengthy; its elaboration would take not a day and not two, for it is bound up in the ropes of the hidden wisdom, that which is concealed in the prophecies and oral transmissions of the wise men ... (Rabbi Hai then goes on to provide an answer to the question.)

ילמדנו רבנו כי מצינו לרבתינו י"ג מידות... ולאברהם אבינו בספר יחסוהו רבותינו על שמו, ספר יצירה, מונה שם עשר ספירות, ואנחנו צריכין ללמוד מפיו אם י"ג מידות הם עשר ספירות...

תשובת שאילה זו צריכה לפני ולפני ולפני... והפירוש ארוך לא יום ולא יומיים עד היותו אחוז בחבלי החכמה הנעלמת הגנוזה בחדרי הנבואות ובמסורת החכמים בעלי רשומות...

4. **Ramban (Nachmanides), Introduction to Commentary on the Torah – The eminent 13th century Biblical and Talmudic commentator, perhaps the greatest rabbinic figure of his time, includes innumerable Kabbalistic insights throughout his commentary on the Torah.**

I hereby enter the reader into a covenant wherein he undertakes not to philosophize and hypothesize about anything I write that has to do with the secrets of the Torah ...

ואני הנני מביא בברית נאמנת והיא הנותנת עצה הוגנת לכל מסתכל בספר הזה לבל יסבור סברה ואל יחשוב מחשבות בדבר מכל הרמזים אשר אני כותב בסתרי התורה.

PART C. THE TRADITION REDISCOVERED AND VERIFIED

Although there was never a point during which the oral transmission of the secrets of the Torah vanished, the book that presently serves as the source of most Kabbalistic study was lost for hundreds of years, only to be rediscovered in the 13th century by Rabbi Moshe de Leon.

The discovery of the Zohar aroused some controversy; there were those who doubted its authenticity (although it must be stressed that no one within the Torah tradition ever questioned the authenticity of the Kabbalah in general). Eventually the debate died down and the Zohar became universally accepted by the Jewish people.

1. **Sha'arei Zohar p. 9, citing Ramak (Ohr Yakar, Tikunei Zohar, Vol. I, p. 24) – The Zohar was destined to eventually be revealed.**

The Zohar makes reference to the fact that at one point it would be revealed. This is a reference to the fact that this book was destined to be hidden from the world's eyes for many years. In fact the earlier generations knew nothing about it, until it was revealed some two hundred years ago. Even after it was found, it was not widely publicized; rather, the Sages kept it quietly amongst themselves.

”כד אתגליא האי חיבורא” היינו כדפירשתי במקום אחר שהיה עתיד ספר זה להעלם ולהסתתר מעיני היודעים, וכך היה, אין מי שיודע האיך נגנו, ולא נתפרסם כל מציאות זמן הקדמונים, שלא נתפרסם אלא זה מאתים שנה בקירוב... עם היות שנתחבר בזמנו נתעלם ונסתתר עד זמן שנתגלה, ואפילו אחר שנתגלה היה ביד חכמים בגניזה ולא היו מפרסמין אותו.

2. **Rabbi Shlomo Elyashiv, Sefer HaDei'ah, Drush 5, Siman 8 – Kabbalah is as authentic as any other area of Torah.**

Since this area of wisdom has become well-known throughout the Jewish people, one who denies its veracity is no different than one who rejects any other area of Torah; in effect he has removed himself from the belief system of the Jewish people. For ever since this wisdom became known, in the days of the Ramban, there has never been any Sage accepted by the Jewish people, including even those Sages who took a philosophical, rationalistic approach, who has rejected or failed to believe in the truth of the hidden wisdom of the Torah.

Until the Ramban's time, only a handful of people knew about it, but since then its existence has become common knowledge. All of the Torah authorities upon whom we rely in our understanding of the revealed Torah accepted it as authentic. And anyone who has merited delving into this wisdom knows that the words of the Zohar are testimony to its authenticity; just as the words of the Ari are testimony to his superlative greatness. This is indeed a general rule: The truth itself always bears the most convincing testimony to its authenticity.

כבר הוכיח קדוש עליון הרמב”ק ז”ל כי עכשיו אשר נתגלתה חכמת האמת ונתפרסם בכל חכמי ישראל, הנה כל מי שממאן ומפקפק בזה הוא יקרא כופר כי הרי הוא כופר בחלק אחד מתורה שבעל פה, ומוציא את עצמו מאמונת ישראל. כי מעת שנתפרסמה חכמה זו מימות הרמב”ן והלאה לא נמצא שום חכם מחכמי ישראל, גם מחכמי המחקר, אלא שקודם לזה היה גנוז וספון אצל יחידי סגולה שבדור וכנודע מתשובת הגאונים.

אבל מעת הרמב”ן והלאה הנה נתפרסמה בכל ישראל ולא פקפק עליה שום חכם מעולם מכל חכמי התלמוד אשר מימיהם אנו שותים בפירוש התלמוד והפוסקים. ובפרט מי שזכה אליה הרי הוא רואה שדבריהם עד לעצמם. ודברי הזוהר הקדוש הוא עד שהוא להרשב”י ודברי האריז”ל הוא עד לגבורות האריז”ל. ולעולם הוא כי האמת עצמו הוא עד על אמתתו.

In the 16th century in Safed, Israel, Kabbalah experienced a revival as the words of the Zohar were expounded by great mystical masters such as Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (Ramak), Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (Arizal), and Rabbi Chaim Vital. These Kabbalists were responsible for the spread of popular knowledge about Kabbalah in the Sephardi world.

3. [Ken Spira, Crash Course in Jewish history, #51, from aish.com – Kabbalah experiences a revival with the publication and expounding of the Zohar.](#)

The key work of Kabbalah is the Zohar – the “Book of Splendor.” The contents of this book were first revealed by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in approximately 100 CE, while he lived in a cave, hiding out from the Romans.

Rabbi Moshe de Leon (1240-1305), a Spanish rabbi, was the first to publish the Zohar, though he never claimed to be the author. Furthermore, the teachings which he published were not organized into a coherent whole and, as before, few could understand them.

Then Rabbi Moshe Cordevero of Safed (1522-1570), better known as the Ramak, entered the picture. The Ramak rationally systematized all of Kabbalistic thought up to his time, in particular the teachings of the Zohar. In his work, *Pardes Rimonim*, “The Pomegranate Orchard,” the Ramak demonstrated the underlying unity of Kabbalistic tradition by organizing the various, often seemingly contradictory, teachings into a coherent system. The core of the Ramak’s system consisted of a detailed description of how God created reality through the ten *sefirot* – channels of Divine energy. Understanding these ten forces is key in the study of Kabbalah today.

But perhaps the most famous figure in the development of Kabbalah as we know it today was Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572), popularly called the Ari.

The Ari was born in Jerusalem but subsequently relocated to Safed, arriving there on the day of the Ramak’s funeral. He lived there only two years, dying at the age of 38, but in that short period of time he revolutionized the study of Kabbalah. In fact, the Ari’s teachings – which were chiefly recorded by his disciple Rabbi Chaim Vital in the texts, *Eitz Chaim* (Tree of Life), *Pri Eitz Chaim* (Fruit of The Tree of Life) and *Shemonei Shearim* (Eight Gates – redacted by Rabbi Chaim Vital’s son, Rabbi Shmuel Vital) – virtually dictate the study of Kabbalah.

The debacle of the false Messiah, Shabtai Tzvi, in the mid 17th century was in part blamed on the influence of Kabbalah. As a result, the Kabbalistic fervor started in Safed was tempered by the European Jewish community’s fear that it had gotten out of hand.

4. [Ibid. – After Shabtai Tzvi, Kabbalah again went into hiding.](#)

As a result of what happened with Shabtai Tzvi, there was a backlash that continued for many years after his death. The opponents of the Sabbatean movement (the followers of Shabtai Tzvi during his lifetime and after his death), to whom no one had listened when Messianic fervor swept world Jewry – particularly Rabbi Tzvi Ashkenazi of Amsterdam, who was known as the Chacham Tzvi and his son, Rabbi Yaakov Emden – came out blaming [the misuse and misunderstanding of] Jewish mysticism for the fiasco. This time people listened to them.

As a result of this backlash, some brilliant Kabbalists were unfairly condemned, hounded out of town and their books burned.

One of those was the Italian rabbi, Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, known as the Ramchal (1707-1747). A great Kabbalist and a brilliant profound thinker, he wrote several books which are still intensely studied today: *Mesilat Yesharim*, “The Path of the Just”, *Derech HaShem*, “The Way of God” and *Daas Tevunos*, “The Wisdom of Understanding”. But because his mystical inclinations aroused fears of more false messianism, he was hounded out of Italy, and he came to Israel where he died at age 40.

The secrets of Kabbalah did not reach broad popularity in the European Jewish community until the explosion of the Chassidic movement in 18th and 19th centuries.

5. **Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Meditation and Kabbalah – Chassidism made Kabbalah a household name.**

The Chassidic movement was founded in the mid 1700's by Rabbi Israel, known as the Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760). By the time the movement was fifty years old, it commanded the allegiance of a majority of Eastern European Jewry, and Chassidic rabbis dominated many important communities. Many Kabbalah texts were printed under the aegis of this movement, often for the first time ... Where Kabbalah had previously been the province of only the greatest scholars, it had now become part of the popular folklore, and even the simplest individuals had become familiar with its terminology.

While the non-Chassidic Ashkenazi rabbis and leaders have themselves produced some of the greatest Kabbalists since the Arizal, the Sephardic and Chassidic communities have more broadly integrated the study of Kabbalah and the specific methods of religious observance it fosters.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ∞ The Kabbalah is not a tradition set apart from mainstream Judaism; it is rather the hidden tradition of the Torah that is just as authentic as any other aspect of the Torah's wisdom. But unlike the "revealed Torah," the "hidden Torah" was passed on through the generations by a select few scholars.
- ∞ Kabbalah was given more popular expression in the works of Ramban, the Arizal, and, more recently, Chassidism. Now that this body of knowledge has become more widely accessible, it has become no less of an authentic expression of Jewish teachings.

SECTION III. PREREQUISITES FOR THE STUDY OF KABBALAH

Just because Kabbalah has become more accessible does not mean that it has become any easier to grasp. In this section we will explore the necessary preconditions to a true understanding of Kabbalah.

PART A. THE NECESSITY FOR ADEQUATE PREPARATION

The Talmud records the following historical observation to bring home the need for adequate preparation.

1. **Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Chagigah 14b – The different effects of Kabbalah on four Talmudic Sages.**

Four Sages entered the "Orchard" (a reference to the most esoteric and lofty secrets of the Torah). They are: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, "the Other" (a reference to a Torah personality who went astray),

ת"ר ארבעה נכנסו בפרדס ואלו הן, בן עזאי ובן זומא
אחר ורבי עקיבא..., בן עזאי הצית ומת..., בן זומא הציץ
ונפגע..., אחר קיצץ בנטיעות, רבי עקיבא יצא בשלום

and Rabbi Akiva. Ben Azzai gazed and died. Ben Zoma gazed and went mad. “the Other” gazed and cut saplings (i.e., was led to heresy). Only Rabbi Akiva emerged complete.

Obviously, the sublime meaning of this Talmudic passage is cloaked in relatively simple language, which cannot be understood on a literal level. The commentators explain the meaning behind the metaphor.

2. **Maharsha, Chiddushei Aggadot ad loc. – The challenge of maintaining clarity when studying Kabbalistic secrets.**

“Ben Azzai gazed and died.” His soul was drawn with such great love and genuine attachment to the spiritual entities that it left his body ... never to return. This is an exalted level.

“Ben Zoma gazed and went mad.” He was not as solidly enough prepared nor as calm of mind as Ben Azzai, so that when he gazed at a clearer light than his mind could fathom the matters became confused in his mind and his mind was confounded like that of an injured person who does not understand things clearly ...

Alisha ben Abuya, “the Other,” thought that there were two powers [of good and evil], and that is why it says he “split saplings,” i.e. he divided things that are really unified.

Rabbi Akiva achieved perfection in many different areas, and when he reached the furthest point that human intellect can reach he restrained himself, thereby preserving his life.

בן עזאי הציץ ומת מתוך שדבקה נפשו באהבה רבה דבקות אמתי בדברים עליונים שהם יסודה... נתפרדה מן הגוף... ולא שבה עוד למקומה, וזו מעלה גדולה.

בן זומא הציץ ונפגע שלא היה שלם במעלות וביישוב הדעת כבן עזאי ומתוך שהציץ... באור בהיר יותר ממה שהיתה דעתו סובלת, נתבלבלו אצלו הדברים ונטרפה דעתו כאדם נפגע שאינו משיג הדברים על בוריין...

אלישע בן אבויה-אחר... חשב שהם ב' רשויות ולכך נקרא מקצץ בנטיעות שקצץ הדברים המיוחדים והפרידן זה מזה.

רבי עקיבא שלם בכל מיני השלימות, וכשהגיע לגבול ששכל האנושי אי אפשר להגיע אליו עמד ולא הרם לעלות אל ה'.

From this source, it is clear that the study of Kabbalah is not something to be undertaken lightly. In order to approach this body of wisdom, a person must reach a certain level of perfection. If a person attempts to study Kabbalah without the necessary preparations, he may draw incorrect and even dangerous conclusions.

What are the necessary preparations in order to approach the study of Kabbalah?

PART B. KNOWLEDGE AND OBSERVANCE OF THE REVEALED TORAH

As noted above, Kabbalah is the body of knowledge referred to as the “hidden Torah.” One cannot approach the hidden Torah without first having studied the revealed Torah, i.e., Tanach, Mishnah, the Talmud, and their commentaries. Moreover, Judaism is not to be approached “academically,” it is meant to be practiced.

1. **Ramak, Ohr Ne'erav – It is a mistake to learn Kabbalah without knowledge and observance of the Torah.**

There are some completely mistaken people,

הכת הטועה, היא קצת מבני דורינו, שאין להם מבוא

who, although they know neither the Scriptures, Mishnah, nor the Talmud, nevertheless involve themselves in the study of this discipline (i.e. Kabbalah).

לא במקרא ולא במשנה ולא בגמרא, והם עוסקים בחכמה זו, ואין ספק שהם טועים טעות גמורה, מכמה טעמי.

2. Vilna Gaon, Commentary to Mishlei, 21:17 – Without knowledge and observance of the revealed Torah, studying Kabbalah is futile.

Someone who wishes to engage in that which is above his level, that is, he wants to study Kabbalah without fulfilling and studying the laws, will not become wealthy [a metaphor for success], for the wealthy person is one who is satisfied with his lot and does not seek to access exalted levels before he fills his stomach with bread [a metaphor for the laws of the revealed Torah], which satiates man. It is impossible to penetrate the secrets of the Torah without this, and therefore he will not be wealthy, for he will have nothing.

והרוצה להלך בגדולות ונפלאות, ואינו רואה לקיים הדינים וללמוד אותם, לא יעשיר, כי איזהו עשיר השמח בחלקו ואינו הולך בגדולות ונפלאות קודם שממלא כריסו בלחם שהוא לבב אנוש יסעד ואי אפשר לבוא להסודות כי אם על ידי זה ולכן לא יעשיר שלא יהיה לו כלום.

Not only is it futile to attempt to study the hidden dimension of Torah before one has grasped the revealed Torah, it is also dangerous to do so, since one may derive incorrect and misleading conclusions, making the study of Kabbalah a source of confusion rather than clarity.

3. Rabbi Yechezkel Sarna, Daliot Yechezkel, Vol. I, p. 399 – One should not attempt to study Kabbalah until he has mastered the revealed Torah.

Until one has reached exceptional greatness of intellect and stature, he has no right to enter the gates of the hidden Torah; it may indeed prove dangerous for such an individual, since he will probably misunderstand by trying to reach that which is above his level, and the benefit [he derives from the study] will be outweighed by his loss ... The Kabbalah is for those unique individuals who have mastered the revealed Torah and who, through having done so, have already fathomed so much of the hidden Torah that there is no longer any danger of their getting confused by entering its gates directly. Only they may enter the orchard and see all the worlds revealed in their true essence.

ואין רשות לכל אדם שלא הגיע לגדלות שכלית מיוחדת ואינו בעל שיעור קומה להכנס לשערי חכמה אלה, כי יש סכנה שלא ימצא ידיו ורגליו, ויפגע מהצצה יתרה ויאבד את לבו ויצא שכרו בהפסדו... יחידי סגולה אשר מילאו כריסם בנגלה וע"י הנגלה כבר נגלה להם הנסתר בשיעור כזה עד שאין שיעור ומעצור לפניהם ויכולים להכנס לפרדס ולראות את כל העולמות בגלויים כמו שהם.

Furthermore, knowledge alone does not suffice. A proper reverence for the Torah as God's Will is a necessary precondition to study the depths of the hidden Torah. As such, a person who wishes to study Kabbalah must also be committed to the full observance of all the Torah's commandments.

4. Radak, Tehillim/Psalms 25:14 – God reveals His secrets only to those who have awe of Him.

“God’s secret is revealed to those who have awe of Him; and to them He makes known His covenant.”

Radak

God will only reveal [the secrets of the Torah] to those people who fear Him. For if a person is immersed in the pursuit of wisdom but does not have awe of God and does not fully observe His commandments, God will not reveal His secrets to him.

סוד ה' ליראיו ובריתו להודיעם.

רד"ק:

לא יגלה כי אם ליראיו כי המתעסקים בחכמה אם לא יהיו יראי ה' ושלמים במצותיו לא יגלה להם סוד האל.

A proper understanding of even the most basic Torah concepts is not accessible to those who do not observe the commandments correctly. A fortiori this applies to the study of Kabbalah!

5. Mishnas D'Rabbi Aharon, Vol. I, p. 81 – One can only have insight into Torah if one fulfills the commandments.

It seems clear that the concept of Torah entering a person to illuminate him and enabling him to attach to its existence; this is specifically when one learns the Torah in order to fulfill its precepts, for this is the framework of Torah. It is through study that one merits to attach himself to the very essence of the Torah.

However, without this approach of integrating and practicing what one studies – if someone learns Torah as one would study an academic subject, then the Torah does not influence and enlighten the one who learns it, and is regarded merely as information. When Torah is studied according to its proper framework, the wisdom enters into a person, in contrast to when it is not studied this way. Behold, when one studies Torah academically, one lacks the essential framework for true understanding and loses the ability to develop as a human being. This is clear to one who investigates and understands this matter.

ונראה ברור כי ענין כניסת התורה להאיר לאדם ולהתחבר עם מציאותה, דוהוא דוקא כשלומד ע"מ לקיים, שזהו גדרה של תורה, שע"י לימודה זוכין למציאות התורה,

אבל בלא"ה הרי שייך ללמוד התורה כלימוד וחכמה להבדיל, ואז אין בו אור תורה ח"ו רק ידיעה בעלמא, דכשהתורה נלמדת בגדריה היא נכנסת באדם, משא"כ כשאינו לומדה בגדרי התורה, הרי הלימוד הוא כשאר הידיעות, וחסר עיקר הגדר של לימוד תורה ועיקר השפעתה ופעולתה באדם עצמו, וז"ב למעמיק ומבין בדברים.

PART C. GREATNESS OF WISDOM AND INTELLECT

Even if a person has studied the revealed Torah and is deeply committed to its observance, he is not necessarily ready for the study of Kabbalah. Due to the lofty and complex matters which are addressed by Kabbalah, only a person who possesses a vast degree of wisdom and acuity can accurately grasp its meaning.

1. **Talmud Bavli, Chagigah 11b – The Sages of the Mishnah stressed that Kabbalah must not be approached by someone who is not already “wise.”**

One may not teach the hidden aspects of the Torah ... unless his student is a wise individual who can intuit what he is being taught.

אין דורשין במעשה בראשית בשנים ולא במרכבה
ביחיד אלא אם כן היה חכם ומבין מדעתו

2. **Maharshah, Chidushei Aggadot, Chagigah 13a – One should not study Kabbalah prematurely.**

This should suffice to point out the error of those individuals who spend all of their time studying Kabbalah, beginning from their youth [before they have developed the ability to understand it].

מכאן תשובה לאותן אנשים שבדור הזה שמבליים כל
ימיהם בחכמת הקבלה גם בילדותם.

3. **Rabbi Yechezkel Sarna, Daliot Yechezkel, Vol. I, p. 399 – One must have an exceptionally gifted mind to comprehend Kabbalah.**

Until one has reached exceptional greatness of intellect and stature, he has no right to enter the gates of the hidden Torah; it may indeed prove dangerous for such an individual, since he will probably misunderstand by trying to reach that which is above his level.

...ואין רשות לכל אדם שלא הגיע לגדלות שכלית
מיוחדת ואינו בעל שיעור קומה להכנס לשערי חכמה
אלה, כי יש סכנה שלא ימצא ידיו ורגליו, ויפגע מהצצה
יתרה ויאבד את לבו ויצא שכרו בהפסדו.

Not only one's intellectual level, but even one's age can play a role in determining whether one is ready to study Kabbalah.

4. **Alexandre Safran, The Wisdom of the Kabbalah, Feldheim Publishers – In general, kabbalists prefer to teach their wisdom only to students above the age of 40.**

The Sages state that it is “only at the age of 40 that the disciple is fit to understand properly the thoughts of his master,” for “40 years is the age of wisdom.” That is why, in general, the kabbalists prefer to “transmit” their teaching to disciples who are at least 40 years old. In their opinion, at that age the human soul becomes spiritually mature. The Hebrew word *neshamah*, soul, confirms this; the letters which compose it also make up the words *mem shanah*, 40 years.

The lofty and sublime nature of the study of Kabbalah is illustrated by the following quote regarding the Vilna Gaon, who was certainly well versed in Kabbalah and had a full understanding of its nature.

5. **Keter Rosh, p. 475 – Kabbalah goes beyond philosophy.**

Our master (the Vilna Gaon) said that where philosophy ends – that is where Kabbalah begins!

אמר רבינו שממוקום שמסתיים הפילוסופיא משם
ולמעלה מתחיל חכמת הקבלה.

PART D. PURITY OF INTENT

Even if all the criteria for the study of Kabbalah are fulfilled, the student of Kabbalah must make sure that every time he approaches its study, he does so with the proper intent and in the correct frame of mind. The

following interesting personal communication by a contemporary Torah personality can give us an inkling of the necessary preparation for, as well as the proper attitude toward, the study of Kabbalah:

1. **Rabbi Shmuel Vosner of Bnei Brak, Shevet HaLevi, Vol. VII, p. 2 – When is it appropriate to study Kabbalah?**

Regarding your question about the study of Kabbalistic works. You write that you feel great joy as well as a strengthening of your faith when you study these works, and you inquire as to how often as well as when this study is appropriate.

You must know that even in the previous generation – indeed even two generations ago – it was said that people are not capable of this holy pursuit because of the spiritual obstacles that have caused the world to become exceedingly materialistic. Certainly, then, that is the case in our generation, where our minds are so unsettled! Indeed, everything going on before our eyes is the opposite of the necessary conditions for studying Kabbalah.

Nevertheless, every once in a while, when one finds himself calm, refreshed and joyful, and his heart is burning with pure fear of God, and he has invested his energy mainly in the revealed parts of Torah such as Talmud and Shulchan Aruch – for they are our very life! – and his hands, almost of their own accord, stretch themselves out to take one of these books and study them – this is almost as if one's soul is sending him a message, "Now is the time!" But this should only happen occasionally ... and should serve as a source of true faith and a feeling of truth. But one should not follow the example of those who constantly involve themselves in this study even when they are not on a level of purity. For those who conduct themselves thus in our day – woe to them and woe to their souls! And experience testifies only too well to the truth of this point.

ואשר שאלת בענין לימוד ספר הפרד"ס להרמ"ק זי"ע, ואתה כותב שאתה מרגיש בו שמחה יתירה בלימוד זה וכיו"ב וגם התחזקות באמונה, לא ח"ו לשם ידיעות, ואתה בסבך כמה ללמוד ומתי ללמוד.

דע לך כי גם בדורות שלפנינו ושלפני לפנינו כבר אמרו שאין הם מסוגלים כ"כ ללימוד זה כי הזוהמא התגברה מכל צד והכל מגושם, ומה נענה בתקופתנו שבלבולי המחשבות גדולים כ"כ, וכל הנעשה לפנינו בדורינו הוא היפך הסגולה ללימוד הקדוש הנ"ל.

אבל בכל זאת מזמן לזמן כשאדם מוצא עצמו שקט ורענן ובשמחה.. ולבו בוער ביראה וטהרה וגם נתן חלקו לעיקרי התורה בגפ"ת וש"ע כי הם חיינו, וכאילו מעצמו פושט את ידו לקחת ספרים אלה.... וכאילו נשמתו מעירה לו עכשיו הזמן לטעום מעץ החיים הזה, אבל זמן זה בא רק לעיתים ולא קרובות, וימי חג הסוכות מסוגלים ביותר בזה, ומשם שואבים אמונה אמיתית והרגשת אמת, ולא כאלה שעוסקים בזה תדיר אפילו לא כ"כ בטהרה, כי בזמן הזה כשעושים כן, אוי להם ואוי לנפשם, והנסיון בזה כמאה עדים.

PART E. A MENTOR

Even the advanced study of the revealed Torah coupled with a well-honed intellect is not sufficient to prepare a scholar for the study of Kabbalah. It is not a subject that can be studied independently; Kabbalah requires a qualified mentor possessing all the attributes discussed in this section: 1) adequate preparation, 2) knowledge and full observance of the revealed Torah, 3) greatness of wisdom and intellect, and 4) purity of intent.

Why not study Kabbalah without a qualified mentor? Why should it be any different than studying any other part of the Torah? As we mentioned above in Part A, if a person attempts to study Kabbalah without the requisite preparation, he may draw incorrect and even dangerous conclusions. Should a person journey to a dangerous foreign land without an experienced, qualified guide? Since Kabbalah is not an “academic” pursuit, the mentor should guide the student to increased Torah observance. In order to properly absorb and understand Kabbalah, a person must learn its teachings from a mentor, thereby attaching himself to the chain of transmission of this section of the Torah that stretches back through the centuries.

1. Ramban, Introduction to Commentary on the Torah – The study of Kabbalah must be carried out under the tutelage of a reliable mentor.

I hereby enter the reader into a covenant whereby he undertakes not to philosophize and hypothesize about anything I write that has to do with the secrets of the Torah. Let it be known that nothing of this sort can be fathomed without a received oral tradition from a wise mentor. Advancing logical explanations in these matters is pure foolishness and is harmful and counterproductive ... For someone who cannot avail himself of such a tradition, he should restrict himself to those parts of my commentary that deal with revealed aspects of the Torah, taking from them the constructive ethical lessons of our holy Sages. Do not seek out that which is greater than you; do not investigate that which is more powerful than you, do not attempt to know that which is far from you; do not ask about that which is hidden from you. Meditate upon what you have been taught for you have no business with the hidden matters.

ואני הנני מביא בברית נאמנת והיא הנותנת עצה הוגנת לכל מסתכל בספר הזה לבל יסבור סברה ואל יחשוב מחשבות בדבר מכל הרמזים אשר אני כותב בסתרי התורה כי אני מודיעו נאמנה שלא ישיגו דברי ולא יודעו כלל בשום שכל ובינה זולתי מפי מקובל חכם לאוזן מקבל מבין, והסברה בהן איוולת, מחשבה מועלת רבת הנזקין מונעת התועלת... הוא יראה את רצויי מתורתו נפלאות, אבל יחזו בפירושינו הדושים בפשטים ובמדרשים יקחו מוסר מפי רבותינו הקדושים, בגדול ממוך אל תדרוש בחזק ממוך בל תחקור, במופלא ממוך בל תדע, במכוסה ממוך בל תשאל, במה שהורשית התבונן שאין לך עסק בנסתרות.

The need for a mentor to transmit the ideas of Kabbalah is such a fundamental part of its study that the very name *Kabbalah* alludes to it.

2. Mordechai Becher, Introduction to Kabbalah, Simpletoremember.com – The word *kabbalah* is derived from the term *lekabel*, to receive, because Kabbalah is something that must be received from a mentor; a person cannot develop an understanding of Kabbalah on his own.

The word *kabbalah* stems from the root *lekabel*, to receive. The entire Torah really is something that is received from a chain of transmission stretching back to Moshe, so why is Kabbalah specifically referred to in this way? The rest of the Torah does have elements that a person can figure out on his own, from observation, etc., but the science of Kabbalah is something that can be derived only from tradition and transmission. It is not possible for a person to come to understand Kabbalah on his own.

In addition, the term for *Kabbalah* refers to receiving because the only way to understand Kabbalah is to be receptive to spiritual ideas. A person whose perception of the world is limited to material terms will not be able to effectively absorb the concepts of Kabbalah.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

- ⌘ Real Kabbalah is powerful and potent material not to be toyed with by those insufficiently prepared for it. The discipline of delving into the secrets of the Torah demand a full knowledge and commitment to the areas of Torah already revealed. Without knowledge of Tanach, Talmud, and their relevant commentaries, attempting to delve any deeper is pointless and doomed to failure. God will not reveal the secrets of His Torah to someone not yet ready to grasp them.
- ⌘ Aside from the necessary erudition and religious commitment, one must also possess intellectual prowess to attempt to learn Kabbalah. Even then, the study must be accompanied by a mentor who has himself already undergone the necessary growth and training in the discipline of Kabbalah. The study itself must be approached with the appropriate purity of intent.

SECTION IV. FINDING DEPTH AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE REVEALED TORAH

We have seen that the study of Kabbalah is not something to be undertaken lightly, and certainly not as a person's initial foray into Torah study. In fact, based on the previous sources, one might conclude that the study of Kabbalah is completely inaccessible to most people in our generation. This revelation might be disappointing to anyone who had pinned their hopes on Kabbalah as a source of much-needed spirituality.

However, it is an unfortunate misconception that spiritual uplift is only available through Kabbalah. The revealed Torah itself is replete with depth and meaning, and affords the very spiritual and personal development that we desire.

1. **Rabbi Binyamin Zilber, Az Nidberu, Vol. 14, p. 147 – There are hidden Torah secrets found in the revealed Torah as well.**

If we neglect the in-depth study of the morals, ethics, and values of the Torah (*Mussar*) – that which is in reality the hidden part of the revealed Torah – how can we imagine that we are ready to study hidden aspects of the Torah? ...After all, one generally begins from something easy and works his way up. The revealed parts of the Torah are prerequisites and preparation for the concealed aspects!

אם אנו מזניחין לימוד המוסר וחכמת המוסר, שזה הנסתר שבנגלה כידוע, איך נרחיב עוז בנפשנו לומר שאנו מוכנים להנסתר... והלא הדרך הוא להתחיל מהקל, והנגלה הוא הכנה להנסתר.

One area of the revealed Torah that can open up an understanding of Kabbalah is the Aggadah. The Talmud contains two types of teachings, which are easily distinguishable from each other even though they appear side-by-side without any clear break between the two. One is the Halachic or legal teachings of the Talmud, which pertain to the details of Jewish law. The other is the Aggadah or philosophy, which consists of stories and statements of the Sages, some of which are extraordinarily cryptic while others have a superficially straightforward appearance but embody great depth. The Aggadah hints at fundamental principles of Judaism, as well as important concepts of *Mussar* (moral and ethical lessons), all of which are cloaked in language and terms that are often mysterious or esoteric. (Based on "An Overview of Aggadata" in *The Juggler and the King*, Rabbi Aharon Feldman, Feldheim Publishers.) As the following source indicates, the Aggadah also alludes to the type of mystical concepts that would emerge from a study of Kabbalah.

2. **Rabbi Yechezkel Sarna, Daliot Yechezkel, Vol. 1, p. 399 – One may perceive in the Aggadic sections of Talmud and Midrash the same sorts of secrets dealt with by Kabbalah.**

The tradition that I have received from my mentors teaches that the revealed portion of the Torah also contains all of the secrets of the Torah ... including Ma'aseh Merkavah and Ma'aseh Bereishit. Our Sages, in their wisdom, revealed the amount that every person can grasp, but if a person invests great effort and toil into the study of the holy Torah and its interpretation in the Oral Torah, and if he is cautious not to make interpretations according to his own whim, the Torah itself will raise him to an exalted level, and he will understand much of the hidden Torah from his study of the revealed Torah. As the Sages advise us – if you wish to recognize God Who brought the world into existence, study Aggadah and you will recognize Him.

Now, in order to recognize God one must comprehend the secrets of Creation, the secrets of how God relates to the world, the essence and greatness of man, as well as the essence and greatness of Creation [all of which are the subjects of Kabbalah]. Thus, if the Sages tell us that we can come to know God through Aggadah, they are teaching us that all of the secrets of the Torah are available through the study of Aggadah...

ומקובלני שגם בחלק הנגלה של דברי חכמינו במדרשיהם ובאגדותיהם צפונים כל סתרי הקבלה... גם מעשה מרכבה ומעשה בראשית, אלא שחז"ל בחכמתם גילו לנו בדבריהם שיעור שיכול לעמוד עליו כל אדם מיישראל, ואם יעמול ויגע בתורה הקדושה ובפירושה בתושבע"פ, ויזהר מלגלות בה פנים ככל אשר יעלה על רוחו, רק יעמיק בדברי חכמינו ז"ל, אז בסלסולו בתורה תרוממנהו אל מרומי על ויעמוד על מצפוני התורה גם מתוך דברים הנגלים. וכמ"ש בספרי רצונך להכיר מי שאמר והיה העולם למוד הגדה שמתוכה אתה מכיר את מי שאמר והיה העולם.

והרי א"א להכיר את מי שאמר היה העולם מבלי להכיר את מעשה בראשית ואת מעשה מרכבה ואת מעלת האדם וגדולתו ואת מעלת העולם וערכו, והרי שכל זה אפשר להכיר וללמוד מתוך האגדה הנגלית, כי גם בה כלול כל הנסתר ומצפוני החכמה...

It would be a mistake, however, to “skip” the study of the surface meaning of Aggadah in order to delve into its deeper, more mystical side. The level of depth and meaning on the surface of Aggadah is enough to provide ample spiritual uplift and inspiration, via a clear understanding of the Torah’s moral and ethical standards. Moreover, such study will ultimately teach us about God and His interaction with the world, which is a major topic of Kabbalah.

3. **Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Sher, Leket Sichot Mussar, Vol. II, p. 337 – Even the study of Aggadah, however, should begin with the study of its revealed aspect.**

The Aggadic section of Torah can itself be divided into two sub-categories: revealed and hidden information. There are some areas of Torah that speak openly about accessible topics, such as understanding the human psyche or a more general understanding of God’s involvement in this world. There are also those parts of Torah that deal with secrets of the Torah, including the finer points of God’s connection to the world. The Sages have informed us that through the study of Aggadah one can attain “knowledge of

חלק האגדה שבתורה כולל אף הוא שני מיני ידיעות: ידיעת הנגלה וידיעת הנסתר. ישנם אגדות בתורה המדברות בדרכי הנגלות ודרכי הנפש, וכללי ההשגחה המפורסמות, וישנם אגדות המדברות בסתרי התורה בסודות ההשגחה ודרכי ה'. והנה מצינו לחז"ל שלימדונו שעל ידי לימוד האגדה יכול האדם להכיר את דרכי ה', כמבואר בספרי, רצונך להכיר מי שאמר והיה העולם למוד הגדה שמתוכה אתה מכיר את מי שאמר והיה העולם.

God,” as it is written, “If you wish to recognize God, study Aggadah ...”

Many people mistakenly think that this refers to the concealed aspects of the Aggadah. They therefore study these parts of Torah assiduously before they have any comprehension. They also study them without the guidance of a mentor who understands the secrets contained within the words of the Kabbalah. Thus, they distort the Aggadah and delve into it with contrived understandings of their own invention, which have nothing to do with Torah. Needless to say, this type of “study” does not bring them any closer to recognizing God ...

This is not the way to recognize the One Who created the world. What the Sages meant is that we must engage in the study of the revealed part of the Aggadah, which we are capable of clearly understanding, and from this we can come to an understanding of God ... If we study Aggadah properly, taking care to adhere to the guidelines of Torah study, we can begin to appreciate the Godliness that pervades the Torah’s wisdom, including understanding more and more about God’s attributes, His interaction with the world, and the nature of our own psyche. In our terms, this area of study is known as “the study of Mussar,” or the in-depth investigation of the ethics, morals, and the values of the Torah.

אמנם העולם טועה בזה שהם סבורים שכוונת חז"ל באומרם למוד הגדה היינו החלק הנסתר שבאגדה, שמתוך כך הם יכולים להכיר את מי שאמר והיה העולם. ולכן הם מתעסקים באגדות המדברות בסתרי תורה, בעוד שאין להם בהם שום הבנה. והם אינם לומדים אותם מפי רב מובהק היודע בבירור את הסודות והתעלומות ההם, וכך הם שונים את ההגדות ומעמיקים חקר בהם, בסברות עצם הבדויות מחזיון רוחם, שלא על פי רוח התורה. וכמובן שע"י לימוד כזה לא השיגו מאומה בהכרת ה'...

לא זו הדרך להכיר מי שאמר והיה העולם, אלא עלינו לעסוק בחלק הנגלה שבאגדה, אשר אותו אנו יכולים להבין באר היטב, ומתוכו לבוא להכרת ה'. ... ומתוך שנעסוק בחלק האגדה כראוי מתוך השתעבדות מוחלטת לכל כללי לימוד התורה, נוכל להשיג את חכמת התורה באלקותו ית' שמו, לדעת תוארי השי"ת ודרכי ההשגחה העליונה וכלי הנפש וסודות היצירה... ובלשונו נקרא החלק הזה "החלק המוסרי שבתורה".

It is a fundamental principle of Judaism that spirituality exists in the material world in which we live. If we study Torah properly, we should not need to devote great effort to the study of mysticism in order to feel spiritually uplifted and connected to God. The world itself contains so many opportunities for spirituality – whether by recognizing God in His Creation, studying Torah, or by performing the commandments – that a person can achieve a sense of spirituality even without the study of mystical matters.

4. **Rabbi Binyamin Zilber, Az Nidberu, Vol. 14, p. 147 – If we are sufficiently unimpressed with the marvels of God’s world to the point that we are “searching for spirituality,” something is wrong!**

If we are so accustomed to living superficially that we fail to recognize the Godly in the world, how will turning to the hidden things for inspiration help us internalize our knowledge of God?!

...ואם ההרגל לחיות באופן שטחי גוזל מאתנו ההרגשים בכל פעם שאו עיניכם וראו מי ברא אלה, איך נשלה עצמינו שע"י התעסקות בדברים שהם למעלה מהשמש נקיים יותר "והשבות אל לבבך"!

Once all is said and done, however, the study of Kabbalah should not be seen as an area that is totally out of reach. Works of philosophy such as Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s Derech Hashem and Daat Tevunot

with the commentary of Rabbi Chaim Friedlander provide a comprehensive treatment of many fundamental principles of Kabbalah. A person who desires to pursue an understanding of Kabbalah is encouraged to find a qualified mentor (as discussed in Section III above) and study these texts.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV:

- ∞ One need not delve into the secret matters of the hidden Torah to experience the Jewish mystical tradition. There is plenty of it already available in the revealed elements of the Torah. In fact, a serious study of Midrash and Aggadah provides the background and framework toward building up to Kabbalah itself.
- ∞ Between contemplating the wonders of the physical world around us, and the marvels of the ethical, moral, and spiritual world within us, discovered through serious, deep Torah study, there is more than enough spirituality for us to access.

CLASS SUMMARY:

IS KABBALAH AN AUTHENTIC EXPRESSION OF JUDAISM? IS IT A RECENT DEVELOPMENT OR IS IT PART OF THE SINAI TRANSMISSION?

Kabbalah is one of the many dimensions of meaning of the Torah. As such, the Kabbalah was transmitted from God to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai, along with the other levels of meaning of the Torah. Even though the tradition of Kabbalah was hidden from a vast majority of the Jewish people for many years, it was still known to a select few, and when the tradition was ultimately revealed to the Jewish people as a whole, its authenticity was fully verified.

WHO WERE THE PRIMARY TEACHERS OF KABBALAH AND WHAT TEXTS DID THEY WRITE?

The teachings of Kabbalah were first organized systematically by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a great Sage who lived shortly after the destruction of the Second Temple and received Divine inspiration that enabled him to transmit the teachings of Kabbalah in a systematic, organized fashion. His teachings were compiled by his disciples, in a work known as the Zohar. The Zohar was lost for several centuries, however, during which period the secrets of Kabbalah were transmitted from generation to generation through a select group of scholars; but they were nearly unknown to the public. Ultimately, the Zohar was published in the 13th century by Rabbi Moshe de Leon in Spain.

Subsequently, Rabbi Moshe Cordevero of Safed, known as the Ramak, rationally systematized all of Kabbalistic thought up to his time, organizing Kabbalistic teachings, particularly in his work *Pardes Rimonim*.

Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, who is known as the Ari, was perhaps one of the most significant teachers of Kabbalah. The Ari's teachings – which were chiefly recorded by his disciple Rabbi Chaim Vital in the texts, *Eitz Chaim* (Tree of Life), *Pri Eitz Chaim* (Fruit of The Tree of Life) and *Shemonei Shearim* (Eight Gates – redacted by Rabbi Chaim Vital's son, Rabbi Shmuel Vital) – virtually dictate the study of Kabbalah.

HOW CAN ONE DIFFERENTIATE REAL KABBALAH FROM PSEUDO-KABBALAH?

Real Kabbalah is a rigorous scientific discipline dedicated to the study of what we know about God and how He runs the world. Pseudo-Kabbalah is the pursuit of gimmicks and various devices that are claimed to have spiritual benefits, such as “red strings” or “holy water.” Real Kabbalah does not rely on such gimmicks, nor does it promise instant spirituality to those who pursue it. Rather, intensive study of Kabbalistic wisdom will result in a familiarity with the exceedingly deep science of Kabbalah.

One who studies Kabbalah must have a clearly expressed and demonstrated commitment to observing the commandments in all their details. If one does not observe the commandments, then there is absolutely no purpose in studying Kabbalah.

HOW DOES ONE BECOME A KABBALIST? WHAT ARE THE PREREQUISITES?

It is impossible to study Kabbalah without first engaging in the necessary preparation. In order to absorb the teachings of Kabbalah and avoid distorting them, a person must reach a certain spiritual level. He must be knowledgeable in the revealed portion of the Torah and committed to observing all of its dictates. Furthermore, he must possess the wisdom and intellectual acuity that are necessary in order to grasp the esoteric concepts of Kabbalah. Kabbalah must also be learned from a qualified mentor; a person cannot study the wisdom of Kabbalah on his own, for he will not be able to achieve a proper understanding of its meaning. Finally, whenever a person approaches the study of Kabbalah, he must do so with the proper purity of intent, to use the wisdom of Kabbalah as a source of faith and spiritual strength.

IS IT NECESSARY TO STUDY KABBALAH IN ORDER TO ESTABLISH A CONNECTION TO SPIRITUALITY AND ENABLE PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT?

Tremendous opportunity for spirituality and personal growth exists in the world in which we live. Through Torah study and performing the commandments we become spiritually uplifted and connected to God – without the study of Kabbalah. Those who seek an introduction to Kabbalah can study Derech Hashem and Daat Tevunot with a qualified mentor.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING & SOURCES

Siftei Chaim, Emunah u'Bechirah Vol. II - Mamarei Pardes HaTorah

Jewish Mysticism: Questions & Secrets by Rabbi Y. Branfman & Rabbi A. Tatz in Rabbi Simcha (Wasserman) Speaks, ArtScroll Publishers, and on www.innernet.co.il