

# Inside Kabbalah —

## a conversation with Daniel Matt

By JENNIE COHEN

*The following is a never-before-published interview I did with Daniel Matt in approximately December of 1989. I have kept it exactly as it was, even the bio, which is quite outdated. (He has authored several books since then.) To read the reason why it was not published until now, read my editorial on page NAT 2.*

*What attracted you to study Kabbalah?*

I was influenced by my father who was a rabbi. Even though he didn't teach me Kabbalah per se, I always felt a genuine spirituality when praying and studying with him. I looked for sources that would convey that dimension of Judaism.

*How has this knowledge changed your perception of the world?*

I see a unity, a oneness, a unifying element in life and people, behind the apparent multiplicity. That is a mystical teaching one finds in almost all traditions. From Hasidism I've picked up a certain joyfulness in the everyday. Also that everything is potentially holy. It's up to us to "raise the sparks," to actualize that potential.

*What is Kabbalah?*

Kabbalah means tradition, literally, that which is received. Originally Kabbalah referred to parts of the Bible. In the Talmud it often means the *Ketuvim* and *Nevi'im* (Prophets and Writings). Later it meant Oral Torah, Mishnah, and Talmud, or simply oral traditions. In the 13th century it took on a more restricted meaning, the esoteric or secret teachings within Judaism, which themselves had been oral teachings to a great extent.

Since then Kabbalah designates a mystical movement within Judaism, an entire system of thought and genre of literature. Its most creative period was the 13th-17th centuries. Two innovative ideas of Kabbalah are: humans have an effect on God, and Shekhinah, the feminine aspect of God.

*What is Hasidism and how does it relate to Kabbalah?*

Hasidism began as a revivalist movement within Judaism in the 18th century. It reached out to the masses, popularizing some of the teachings of Kabbalah and challenging the rabbinic and communal power structures. It taught that anyone can come close to God, can discover God within nature, within other people, within one's soul.

*I have heard one needs to be 40 years old before one can study Kabbalah. Do you agree?*

These teachings were considered powerful and, to a certain extent, dangerous. It was felt that people had to prove themselves before they would be ready for this knowledge. The Mishnah puts down certain restrictions. It says only one or two people at a time can be taught and only if the student shows he has an understanding of these matters.

Later on the tradition of having to be a certain age comes from the Islamic world. At first it applied to philosophy and then extended to mysticism. One Kabbalist in the 16th century said that the age

was 20. The point is not any one fixed restriction but that the student should "keep his feet on the ground." He must be involved in the everyday world or in a business activity and have family responsibilities so he won't lose touch with material reality.

*Why the renewed interest in Kabbalah?*

From the 16th to the 18th centuries Kabbalah represented the secret philosophy of Judaism. Even though only a small percentage of Jews were immersed in the study of Kabbalah, the vast majority believed it represented the deepest teaching of Judaism, and they had great respect for it. Then, as a result of the European enlightenment, the rise of rationalism, and the emancipation of the Jews, things changed.

Partly because Jews wanted to be accepted by European society and partly because they believed in the insights of the age of reason, Jews became critical of their tradition, especially the irrational or superstitious elements. These they considered outdated. They regarded Kabbalah as the crystallization of irrationality. Reform Judaism developed at this time, presenting Judaism as an enlightened religion of reason with a rejection of the mystical.

For two centuries a large percentage of the Western Jewish world ignored Kabbalah and Hasidism. Now, because of the writings and influence of Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem, the resurgence of Jewish identity, pride, and independence (State of Israel), Jews feel they don't have to be apologetic about their tradition. They can say, whatever is Jewish is at least worth exploring, not that it necessarily should be totally accepted.

I encourage Jews to be critical about the mystical tradition while they are looking at its riches. Today we can judge in an objective way what is worth retaining and revising from the mystical teachings and help use that to balance the rational side of the tradition. The rise of interest in mysticism is not just in the Jewish world

*What are the similarities and the differences between Jewish mysticism and other types of mysticism?*

All mystics share a unified view of the universe and a belief in the possibility of direct contact with God. They are not satisfied with the idea of "Father in heaven" or some ruler removed from us. They try to find God in a more immediate way. A good example of how the mystical tradition in Judaism goes back to the Bible is the verse from Isaiah: "The whole world is filled with God's presence." In the Talmud there are many teachings about the Shekhinah (divine presence), such as "There is no place on earth empty of Shekhinah." Kabbalah develops and enhances these insights.



Jewish mysticism emphasizes life in this world. In some other mystical traditions one sees the desire to leave the material realm, to go off and meditate. In Judaism and Jewish mysticism, community participation and cooperation are mandatory. An example of this is *davening* in a *minyan*. The regimen of Torah and the *mitzvot* helps the individual to stay rooted.

*Why do some people associate Kabbalah with evil or the occult?*

One reason Kabbalah was successful is that it was willing to take up the problem of evil. The most that the philosophers would say about evil was: "It is the absence of good." That did not satisfy people's yearning for understanding suffering, personal crisis, and catastrophes.

Kabbalists tried to relate evil to a divine plan. They said evil was a result of an imbalance in the divine world. There are certain divine qualities or attributes. If these are out of balance, the world can suffer. What brings about the balance or imbalance is to a great extent human activity. If we act in righteous ways, we will reap the rewards; if not, we cause imbalance, and we will suffer the consequences.

There were people who had an interest in Kabbalah who wanted to know how to bring about a certain result on earth. That would be associated with magic. Also there were Christians who had the material interpreted for them, and they combined it with other occult systems. That is why Tarot is parallel to some imagery in Kabbalah. In my study I concentrate on the non-occult and non-magical elements.

*What is the Zohar?*

The Zohar is the main text of Kabbalah and of all Jewish mysticism. It is a mystical commentary on the Torah and other books as well. Written in Aramaic, the Kabbalists claim that it goes back to the second century, composed in the circle of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, who was a famous teacher of the Mishnah. Modern scholarship is convinced that it was a product of medieval Jewry written in Spain in the 13th century.

The author, Moses de Leon, attributed it to the ancient figure in part because he feared that otherwise it would not be accepted. Also he probably felt he was in touch with ancient mystical teachers in a meditative or trance state. One way to understand this is to think of a poet or any creative artist. If one asks, "Did you create this poem?" he will answer, "I didn't create it, it came through me. I just wrote it down." The poet realizes there is something beyond his normal consciousness which contributed to the work.

The Zohar is different than almost all other commentaries on the Torah. It is lyrical and poetical. The author ties together Midrash, material from the Bible, philosophy, and his own mystical interpretations. One of the innovations of the Zohar is the Shekhinah. In the Talmud, Shekhinah refers to the divine presence. In the Zohar, Shekhinah becomes the feminine aspect of God. The Zohar is one of the most beautiful books in Judaism. For Jews it provides a way to personalize the tradition.

*How could the study of Kabbalah benefit Jews and non-Jews?*

For Jews it provides a way to personalize the tradition. It enables one to see the tradition as not only a set of laws and a set of records about the past, but as an opportunity to have a direct religious experience. For non-Jews it can overcome their preconceptions or misconceptions about Judaism. Kabbalah shows how the Jewish God is not a harsh God somehow removed from the world.

*Can you think of any ways to bring Kabbalah back into modern day Judaism?*

The *siddur* itself has many mystical elements. Prayers like the *Kedushah*, *Aleynu*, and *El Adon* come from mystical sources. For many Jews the only contact they have with Judaism is the prayer services. To call attention to the sources and to leave room for silent meditation as part of the Jewish prayer service – this would be a great addition to Jewish religion and culture.

*Can one study Kabbalah casually?*

Kabbalah is a very intricate system. In many ways Hasidism is easier to approach because it has more common elements. To study Jewish mysticism in any depth requires knowledge of Hebrew, Torah, Midrash, Talmud, Kabbalah, and even some philosophy. The translations I've done from the Zohar give a glimpse into Kabbalah. It's not impossible for someone to rediscover the tradition by plunging right into the mystical, but one really needs a commitment to trace things back to their origin.

*What books would you recommend to someone interested in learning more?*

*Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, by Moses Idel, *Meditation and Kabbalah and Jewish Meditation*, by Aryeh Kaplan, *On The Kabbalah And Its Symbolism and Major Trends In Jewish Mysticism*, by Gershom Scholem, *Hasidism And Modern Man and Tales Of The Hasidism*, by Martin Buber, *Your Word Is Fire*, edited and translated by Arthur Green and Barry Holtz, *Tormented Master*, by Arthur Green, and *Back To The Sources*, edited by Barry Holtz.

*Where would one find classes on Kabbalah?*

Contact a local rabbi, Hillel, Chabad, department of Jewish studies, or religion department of a university

*If Moses de Leon were alive today, what would his opinion be about abortion, intermarriage, and who is a Jew?*

In general the Kabbalists are traditionalists. I wouldn't necessarily be guided by what they would say about current situations. I think they would agree with the extreme right-wing religious views in Israel.

My view is a progressive one on most of these questions. I wouldn't say that comes out of a mystical approach. There's a way to make mysticism more open and less fundamental.

*Daniel Matt is an associate professor of Jewish studies at the Center for Jewish Studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, Calif. He received his Ph.D. from Brandeis University and has worked with Gershom Scholem. His volume of translations from the Zohar, titled "Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment," was published by Paulist Press in 1983.*