

What I Learn from Kabbalah:

An Introduction to Jewish Mysticism

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Jewish mysticism can be traced back to late biblical times. But the form of Jewish mysticism known as Kabbalah emerged in the Jewish community of Spain in the 13th century. For many years, both Jewish and Christian scholars thought of Kabbalah as an aberration of Jewish expression. In the early 20th century, however, Jewish scholars came to understand that Kabbalah was a hugely influential spiritual force in the Jewish world in the 14th through the 16th centuries. Indeed, in some communities, Kabbalah was considered the normative form of Judaism. Kabbalah was considered by its devotees to be an esoteric, secret tradition. How ironic that in the 21st century Kabbalah has become so widely disseminated and popular.

I would now like to share with you six things we can learn from Kabbalah:

1) *What we can learn from Kabbalah is that God is the universe and everything that exists within the universe is also God*

We have been taught that God is an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all good being; a being that can be likened to a person, especially a human father. Kabbalah teaches that God is not a person at all. God is the force, the energy, the process, the light that powers the universe and its ongoing evolution. Jewish mysticism teaches that God, “as the innermost heart of reality,” cannot be described as a person or for that matter, as any kind of noun, for that would be inadequate and insufficient. The mystics teach that God is process, God is motion, God is best understood as a verb. In the parlance of our own day, I would say that the mystics conceptualize God as a cosmic ecosystem, an ecosystem to which we all belong.

We have been taught of many distinctions between what is God and what is not God. Light is Godly; dark is not. What is good is Godly; what is bad is not. Jewish mysticism does away with all such distinctions. The mystics teach “there

is no place devoid of God.” The Chassidic Rebbes teach, “The whole earth is filled with God’s glory.”

What these maxims are meant to convey is that everything is God. Kabbalah teaches an acceptance that all that is, is God. This alternative way of conceptualizing God requires a big mental adjustment on our part. Perhaps this statement by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner can help us get there:

“...it’s not that there is a world and God is everywhere within it. It’s that there is a God and the world is everywhere within God. There is nothing, absolutely nothing that is not already God. It’s all God. You, me, the trees, the murders, the children, the sewers, the blossoms of springtime, the toxic waste dumps, the tabernacle – it’s all God. At the end of job, God says, in effect, I’m the whole kazoo. Not just the sunshine and bluebirds, but even the lions tearing gazelles, the vultures eating carrion. Everything. Everywhere. God. God. God.”

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner

2) What we can learn from Kabbalah is that God is closer to us than we think

We have been taught that God is up above, and we are down here below. We have been taught there is a vast chasm, a great distance between God and humanity. The belief in such distinctions and barriers between God and world, between self and other, is called dualism. Kabbalah teaches that none of it is true. Jewish mysticism teaches non-dualism. God is not separate or distant from us at all. There are no barriers. God is within us and all around us. Once we take away the false consciousness of dualism, the mystics say we will recognize we are more connected to God, and God to us, than we had ever realized before. As our patriarch Jacob once exclaimed, “surely Adonai is present in this place, and I did not know it.” The mystics teach that “to become a ‘spiritually conscious’ or “religious” person is to become aware of the fact that you are more connected to God’s life and God is more connected to your life than you might ordinarily realize” (Kushner, *the invisible chariot*, p. 76).

3) What we can learn from Kabbalah is a completely different way of thinking about what it means to be human

We have been taught that each of us is a separate being, a separate self. As a result, our experience of life is also one of separateness, of boundaries, of disconnection from the other. Kabbalah teaches that our notion of separate self is

not true. In fact, it is an illusion. Jewish mysticism teaches that each of us is a part of the totality of God. Each of us is a spark within the flame of God. Each of us is a wave within the ocean of God. To be a human being is to be interconnected with each other and interdependent upon each other in ways that we can scarcely imagine. We are more connected to each other than we realize.

As 21st century moderns, we pride ourselves on our belief in the reality of separate self. Yet Kabbalah says the way to truth is by letting go of self, diminishing our sense of ego. What might it feel like to see the world through mystic eyes? Let's read this passage from Rabbi Ted Falcon:

The essential spiritual teaching is that all is one: we are one, expressing one life, sharing one being. Everything is interconnected, and each of us belongs. Because we are connected to all life, we ourselves are impacted by how we treat another. We are affected by the pain of any being, and we are moved by the joy of any being. To open our hearts in love allows more love to be available for all beings. To close our hearts in vengeance decreases the love available to us all. Let us celebrate the one being we share. Let us love the one we are. In other words, "each of us is an expression of an inner core of oneness, that the same one manifest in you is also present in me, and that our task is to find and be in touch with that one within ourselves and within one another" (green, "Judaism for the post-modern era," p. 6).

4) What we can learn from Kabbalah is that the way to get closer to God is not by looking outside myself but by journeying deeper within ourselves

We have been taught that God dwells in the heavens above and we dwell here on earth below. As a result, we believe that the way to God is to look upward or outward, to search outside ourselves. Kabbalah teaches that this vertical image of the quest for God has been misunderstood. These images of verticality, of upper and lower, are really metaphors for inward events. The narrative of Moses climbing to the top of Mt. Sinai intends to convey that Moses reached new depths of spiritual insight. Jewish mysticism teaches "spiritual growth is a matter of uncovering new depths rather than attaining new heights." Jewish mysticism teaches that we find God by journeying deeper and deeper within. Finding God is primarily an inward activity.

5) What we can learn from Kabbalah is to live in harmony with the natural world and to seek to shape a society that appreciates more and destroys/consumes less.

We live in the shadow of environmental catastrophe. Modern Jewish mysticism hears that our planet is suffering and deeply and urgently in need of healing. Let us listen to the words of Rabbi Arthur Green:

One of the most important roles of religion in the coming generations will be to affect our behavior with regard to the natural world and its resources. Humanity's very survival demands a reeducation regarding consumption, population control, and a host of other issues –all having to do with our place in the fast-changing balances of the biosphere within which we exist. This conversation will perforce return us to the question of our place in the natural order and the process that led us to our now inescapable responsibility of stewardship over the existence of much more than our own species.

6) What we can learn from Kabbalah is that one great purpose of humanity is to create harmony in the world

In the 16th century, Rabbi Isaac Luria, a Kabbalist living in Safed, Israel, attempted to explain through a parable/allegory why there is so much evil in the world. In order to make the human world, God had to contract; to withdraw into God's self, to make a space, a void, where God is not. Into that space where God is not, the place of the human world, the void, God put bowl-like vessels intended to hold divine light, so that God would be present in the human world. So God poured divine light into creation, but the vessels could not contain the power of the light. The vessels shattered in a great explosion, like the big bang, and the divine light scattered sparks in all directions.

Some of the divine light returned to God. But most of the divine light became trapped in the shards of the vessels, that is, in the world as we know it. This was Rabbi Luria's metaphor for why the world is the way it is: fragmented, flawed, and chaotic. And he called the solution to this tragedy *tikkun olam*, mending the world.

Our human task is to free the divine sparks that are trapped within the material world and within ourselves and return them to God. That is, our task is to see the Godliness in everything. Our task is to restore harmony in the world. Our task is to put the pieces of the world back together.

Permit me to conclude with this wonderful poem about Luria's parable of contraction by Naomi Newman:

In the beginning
Before there were any beginnings or endings,
There was no place that was not already God.
And we shall call this unimaginable openness
Ein sof
Being without end, world without end,
Ein sof.

Then came the urge to give life
To our world and us.
But there was no place that was not already God.
So ein sof breathed in to make room
As a father steps back
So his child will walk to him.
And we call this withdrawing
Tzimtzum

Into the emptiness ein sof put vessels
And began to fill them with divine light
As a mother places bowls
In which to pour her delicious soup.
And we call these vessels
Keyim

As the light poured forth
A perfect world was being created.
Think of it, a world without greed
And cruelty and violence.
But then something happened.
The keylim shattered.
No one knows why.
Perhaps the bowls were too frail,
Perhaps the light too intense,
Perhaps ein sof was learning.
After all, no one makes perfect the first time.

With the shattering of the bowls

The divine sparks flew everywhere,
Some rushing back to ein sof,
Some falling, falling,
Trapped in the broken pieces
To become our world and us.

Though this is hard to believe,
The perfect world is all around us
But broken into jagged pieces
Like a puzzle thrown to the floor,
The picture lost
Each piece without meaning
Until someone puts them back together again.

We are that someone,
There is no one else.
We are the ones who can find the broken shards,
Remember how they fit together
And rejoin them.
And we call this repair of the world
Tikkun olam

In every moment, with every act
We can heal our world and us.
We are all holy sparks dulled by separation.
But when we meet and talk and eat
When we work and play and disagree
With holiness in our eyes
Seeing ein sof everywhere,
Our brokenness will end.

Then our bowls will be strong enough to hold the light,
And our light gentle enough to fill the bowls.
As we repair the world together
We will learn
That there is no place
That is not
God