



Jewish Mysticism & Kabbalah

Rabbi Michael Lotker



Some Important Basics About Judaism

- The central focus is on acts and actions rather than belief.
 - Jews count 613 commandments (*mitzvot*) in the 1st 5 books of the Bible (the Torah) alone.
 - Big 10
 - Love your neighbor/stranger/God, don't eat pork, pay wages promptly, etc.
- Jewish focus is on this world rather than the next.
 - Salvation is about making this world better.



Intro to Kabbalah

- The word *Kabbalah* means “received” meaning “the received tradition”
- The goal is to get closer to and even cleave to God
- It’s built on top of Judaism
 - Not an alternative but a much deeper practice
 - Begins with Orthodox observance
- Pop Kabbalah is pop spirituality
 - Madonna, tattoos, red strings, etc.
 - Wearing a stethoscope doesn’t make you a MD



Intro to Kabbalah

- This is not supposed to be simple or easy or even quickly understandable.
- Kabbalah was traditionally studied only:
 - By married male scholars over 40 (so they wouldn't abandon their earthly responsibilities)
 - By those of high moral standards, prior rabbinic learning, and of mental and emotional stability.
 - One on one with a teacher (so that teachings would not be misunderstood)
- The goal of this talk is to provide an introduction and orientation.



Ka-BAL-ah or Ka-bal-AH?

- Both!
- Ka-BAL-ah is the Ashkenazi way of pronunciation
 - Like SHA-bes or TAH-less
 - Ashkenazim are Jews of Eastern European origin – 95% of American Jews
- Ka-bal-AH is the Sephardic way
 - Like sha-BAT or tal-EET
 - Sepharadim are Jews of Spanish and Middle Eastern origin.



Magic vs. Mystic

- ***Magic*** suggests that if I follow all the commandments perfectly, pray correctly, use ritual objects, keep kosher, etc.
 - ***I CAN GET GOD TO DO MY WILL!***
- ***Mystic*** suggests that if I follow all the commandments perfectly, pray correctly, use ritual objects, keep kosher, etc.
 - ***I CAN GET ME TO DO GOD'S WILL!***



Speaking of Magic...

The Origin of Abracadabra

- From the Aramaic
 - אברא כדברא
 - Meaning “I create as I speak”
 - The verb *bara* is only used for God’s creation (as is Gen. 1:1)
 - Maybe *Abracadabra* is God’s opening flourish to creation???



Jewish Spirituality

- Jewish spirituality begins with study of sacred texts.
 - The presumption is that our Bible and other sacred texts (Talmud, Zohar, etc.) are infinitely rich and deep in meaning.
 - Like a singular love letter from God.
 - So we read and re-read for messages from the most obvious to the most hidden.
- Let's look at some texts.

Let's Begin With the Beginning

בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ
וְהָאֶרֶץ הָיְתָה תֵהוֹ וּבְהוֹ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וּרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים
מְרַמְמֵת עַל פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אֹרֹךְ וַיְהִי אֹרֹךְ
וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאֹרֹךְ כִּי טוֹב וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹרֹךְ
וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאֹרֹךְ יוֹם וּלְחֹשֶׁךְ קָרָא לַיְלָה
וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד



The First Letter of the Bible

- Is the Hebrew letter “bet” ב
- Why begin the text with this letter?
 - To teach that you can’t ask what happened before, above, or below the Torah.
 - Physicists now say that this is also true of the Big Bang – you can’t ask what happened before it.
 - To teach that there are two Torahs:
 - Written – 1st 5 Books of the Bible
 - Oral – The Talmud



We Cannot Simply Translate the Bible

- The first two words of the bible present a grammatical problem: **בראשית ברא אלהים** “*B’raysheet bara Elohim*” – Often translated: “In the beginning, God created...”
- But if we wanted to say “in the beginning God created,” we would write **בראשונה ברא אלהים** - *B’reeshonah*...
- *B’raysheet* is half of an expression – Hebrew grammar requires the next word to be a noun – but the next word is a verb.
- Rashi teaches that God was teaching us that we can’t just translate – we must interpret.
- I think God put this lesson here (between word #1 & #2) so those of us with ADD wouldn’t miss it.



Genesis 1:26

- וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ
- “And God said ‘let Us make humanity in Our image (*b'tzal-may-nu*), after Our likeness.”
 - Note: *tzel* can mean shadow as well as image. More on this later.
 - If we are created in God’s image what does this tell us about God? About us?
 - Why “Us/Our” and not “Me/My”
 - Traditional Jewish answer: God speaking to angels.
 - Traditional Christian answer: God speaking to Trinity

Genesis 1:26

- An answer I like:
 - God was talking to the animals!
 - We have divine and animal natures.
- I believe this is a biblical proof text for evolution!





Does God Have an Image?

- The Bible's portrayal of God is very anthropomorphic.
 - God speaks, many see God (Ex. 24:10), God's nose get's red (Ex. 4:14), God takes us out of Egypt with an outstretched arm (Ex. 6:6), etc.
 - The Jewish philosophers say these are only figures of speech
 - The Kabbalists will go overboard in the opposite direction by thinking of God in scores of physical ways.



God's Physical Measurements

- God's feet: 105 million miles
- Ankle to knees 665 million miles
- Neck size: 455 million miles
- Circumference of head: >10.5 billion miles
- Length of beard: 40,250 miles
- Each finger: 105 million miles
- The black of His eye: 40,250 miles
- **Source:** *Shi'ur Qomah* (6th century) quoted in D. Matt, *Essential Kabbalah*, pg. 74



Deuteronomy 6:4

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד:

She-ma Yis-ra-el, Ah-do-nai Eh-lo-hei-nu, Ado-nai Eh-chad

Hear O Israel: Adonai is (now) our God, Adonai (will be) One.

Hear O Israel! Adonai is our God, Adonai alone.

Hear O Israel! Adonai our God, Adonai is one.

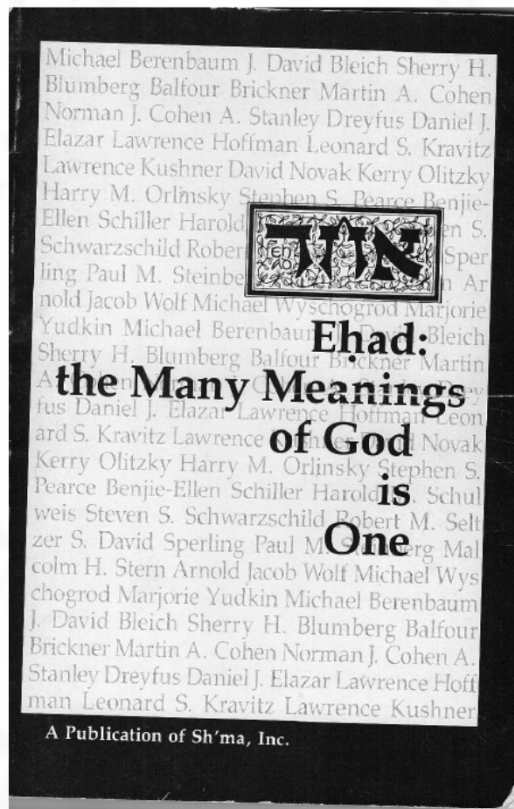
Hear O Israel! Adonai is our God, one indivisible Adonai.

Hear O Israel! Adonai our God is a unique Adonai.

Hear O Israel! Adonai our God is Ultimate.

Hear O Israel! Adonai is our God, Adonai is Unity/Everything.

The Meaning of *Echad*: 25 Essays



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The Oneness that Demands of Us 1

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Norman J. Cohen
Hearing the Voice of the One God 1

A. Stanley Dreyfus
The Sh'ma: A Reminiscence of Childhood 1

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One God's Federal Universe 1

Lawrence Hoffman
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The Meaning of *Yisrael*

ישראל

- Jacob – *Yaacov* – gets his name changed from “heel” to *Yisrael* – Israel – when he wrestles with God/angel [Gen. 32:25-33]
- *Yisrael* means one who wrestles with God.
- If you struggle with God – welcome to the club!
- Contrast with Islam – the word *Islam* mean one who submits (to God).



The Calligraphy of the *Shema*

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד
וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לִבְּךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ
וּבְכָל מַאֲדֶךָ וְהָיָה הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַו
הַיּוֹם עָל לִבְּךָ וּשְׁנֹנְתָם לְבַנְיָךְ וּדְבַרְתָּ בָם בְּשׁוֹבְרְתָךְ
בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבִלְכַתְךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכֶכְךָ וּבְקוֹמְךָ וּקְשַׁרְתָּם
לְאוֹת עָל יָדְךָ וְהָיָה לְטֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ וּכְתַבְתָּם עָל
מִזְזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעֲרֶיךָ



The Calligraphy of the *Shema*

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד:

She-ma Yis-ra-el, Ah-do-nai Eh-lo-hei-nu, Ado-nai Eh-chad

As written in the Torah, the large *Ayin* (ע) and *Daled* (ד) have two explanations:

1. Stand for the word “*Aid*” (עד) meaning “witness”
2. Large *Ayin* insures that we don’t read שמא (SHEM-ah), meaning “perhaps” and large *daled* insures that we don’t read the letter as a *resh* (ר), making the last word אחר *echar* meaning “another”



The Mystics' Interpretation of *Echad*

The mystics understand *echad* to mean unity.

- So “*Adonai echad*” means God is unity
- God is the ultimate unity of the universe
- Everything is God and God is everything
 - The separations are illusions
 - Like a wave seems to be a distinct entity but is really one with the sea
 - Like the various parts of a tree. We may give these parts separate names but the tree doesn't know where the roots end and the trunk begins, where the trunk ends and a branch begins, etc.



Where is God?

**When I count to
three, point to
God!**



Two Valid Images of God: #1: Conventional/Rational

- In this image, God is “up there” and I am “down here”
- This is reflected in conventional Jewish blessings which begin with “Blessed are You, *Adonai...*”





Two Valid Images of God: #2: Mystic/Kabbalist

- In this image, God is everywhere and everything (indicated by dashes)
- And my separation from God is an illusion (also indicated by dashes)

God



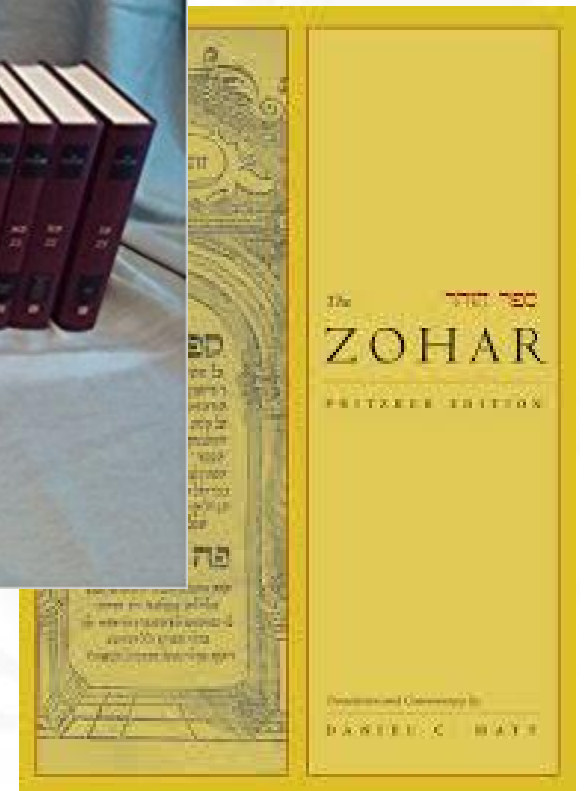
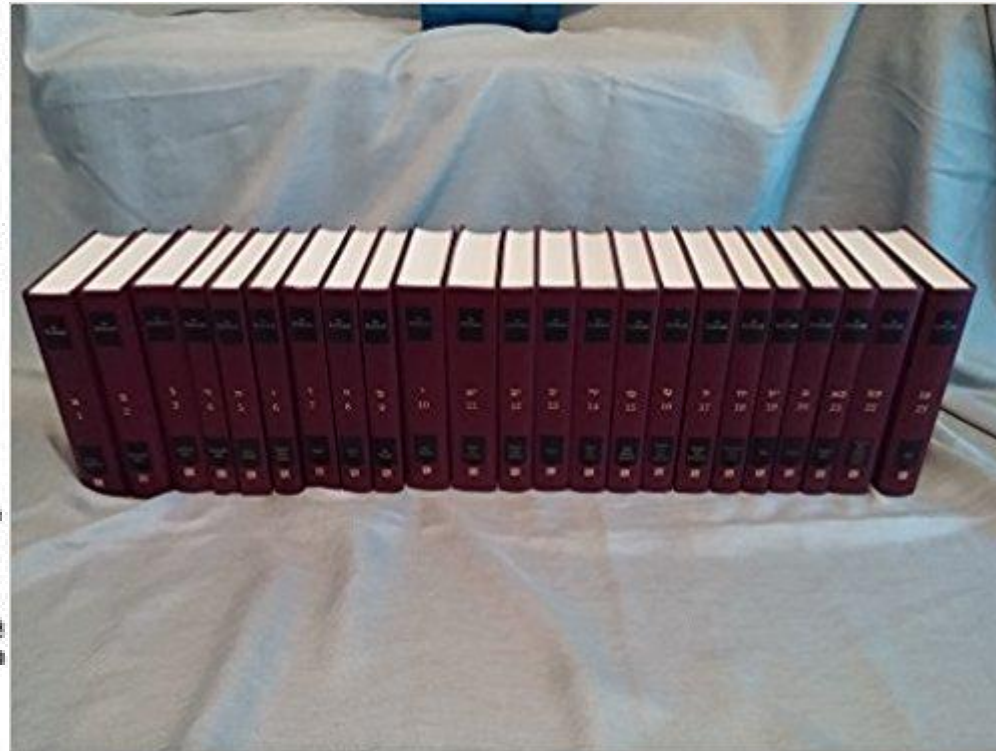


The Mystics' Understanding of Free Will

The mystics understand that since everything is God, then everything is under God's control and everything is just as it should be.

- This is a theology that should not be brought into a hospital.
 - It says that the cancer, the accident, even the war (holocaust, gas chambers, etc.) are under the control and will of God.
- I personally have great difficulty with this.

The Zohar: the Central Text of Jewish Mysticism





The Zohar: the Central Text of Jewish Mysticism

The Zohar is a work of pseudepigrapha.

- It reads as though it was written by Shimon Bar Yochai, a 2nd century CE Mishna teacher. It is written in the Aramaic of the period.
- But it was actually written in the 13th century in Spain by Moshe de Leon or his school. We see examples of 13th century Hebrew and even medieval Spanish in the text.



The Zohar

The Zohar:

- Is structured as a commentary on the Torah.
- In it, we read of a brilliant rabbi of 2,000 years ago, wandering the Galilee with his disciples (sound familiar?)
- Provides a structure to the study and practice of *Kabbalah*.
- Introduces the 10 *Sefirot*
- Is very difficult.

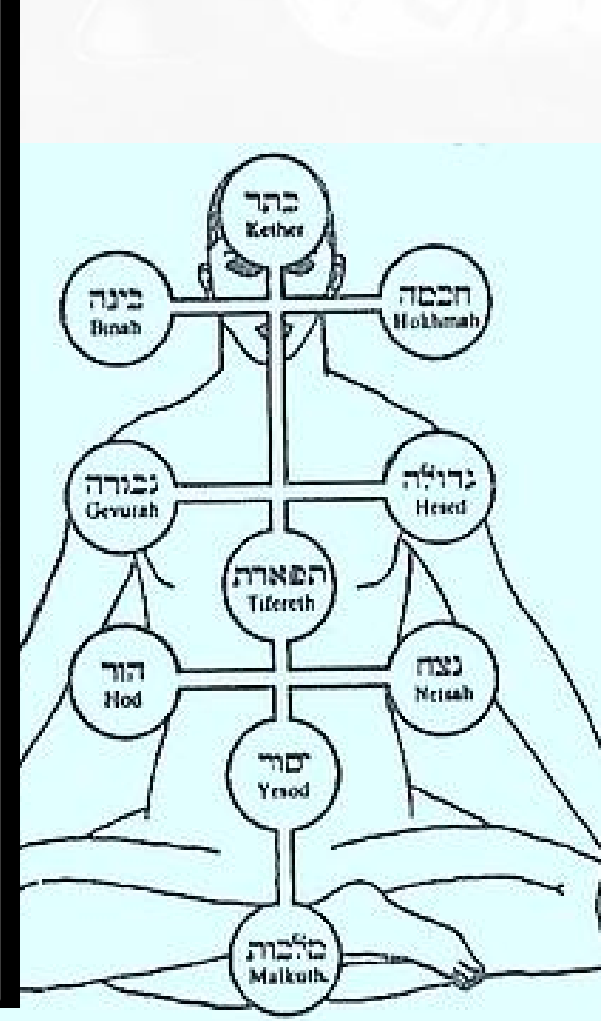
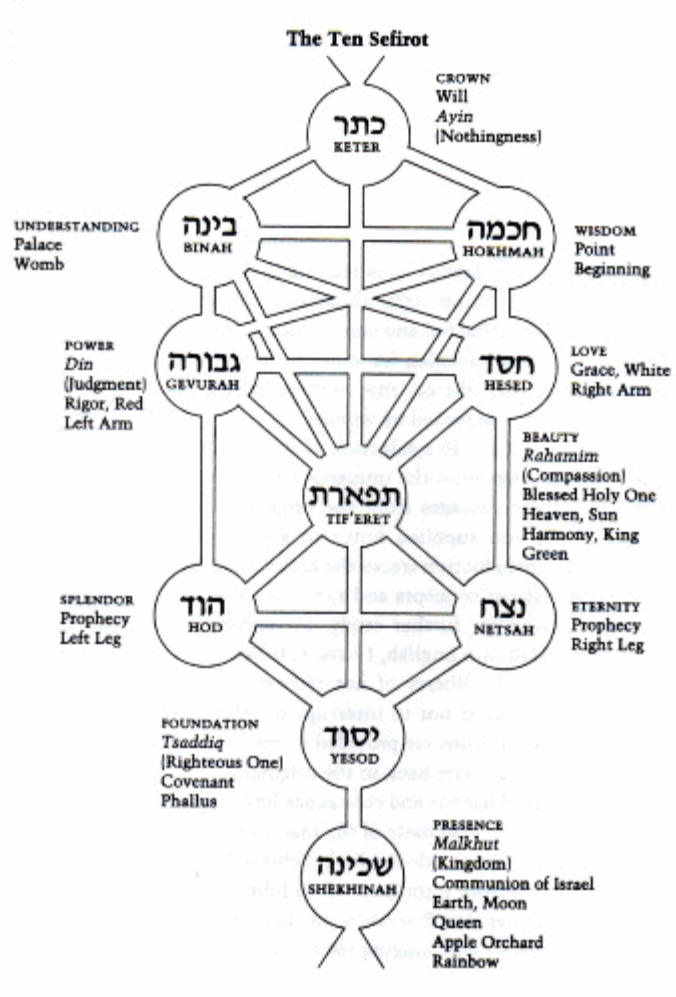


Some Zohar Text

“At the head of the potency of the King, He engraved engravings in luster on high. A spark of impenetrable darkness flashed with in the concealed of the concealed, from the head of infinity – a cluster of vapor forming in formlessness, thrust in a ring, not white, not black, not red, not green, no color at all. As a cord surveyed, it yielded radiant colors. Deep within the spark gushed a flow, splaying colors below, concealed within the concealed of the mystery of *Ein Sof*. It split and did not split its aura, was not known at all, until under the impact of splitting, a single concealed supernal point shone. Beyond that point, nothing is known, so it is called *Reshit, Beginning*, first command of all.” (*Zohar Be-Reshit*, 1:15a)

- This modern translation is accompanied by three pages of 13 footnotes.

The Sefirot

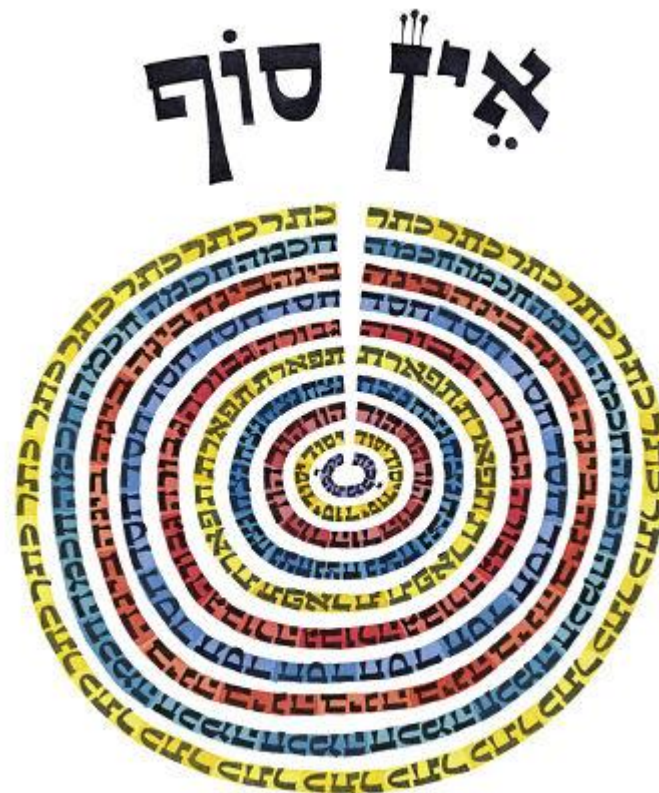
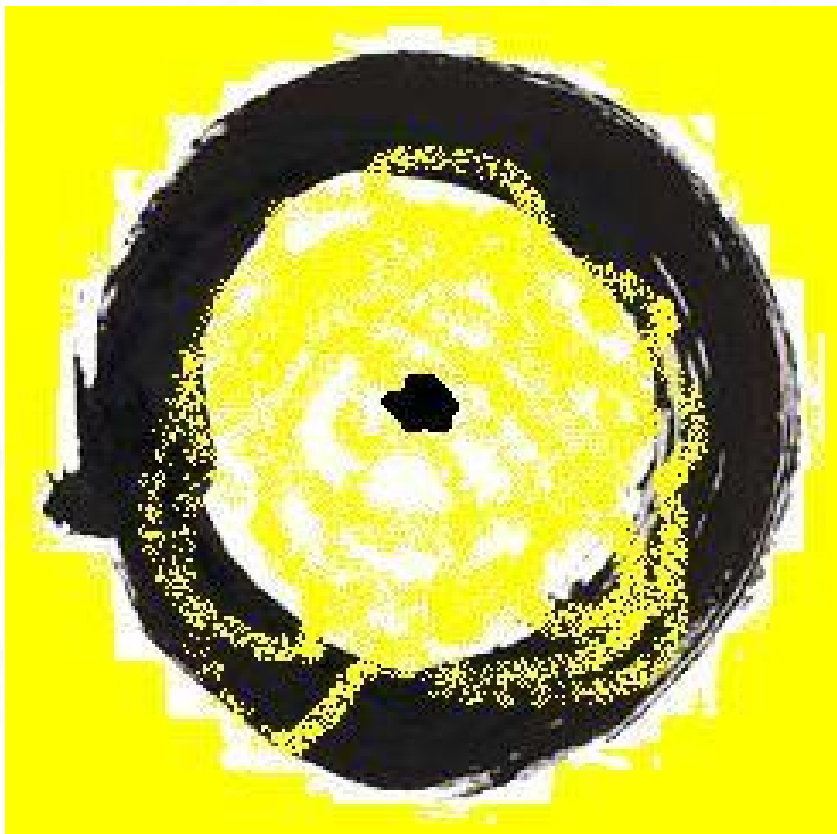




Isaac Luria and His School

- Luria's family was expelled from Spain.
- Taught in Safed only 2.5 years before dying in an epidemic in 1572
- Called "Ha-Airi" – the lion – acronym for "the Ashkenazi Rabbi Isaac"
- He wrote almost nothing but his students recorded his teachings.

Lurianic Kabbalah and Creation



The Foundation Stone *Even Ha-shteeyah*



Lurianic Kabbalah and Creation

- The Breaking of the Vessels and the release of divine sparks.
- This results in a universe that needs repair.
- Every time a mitzvah is performed, a holy spark is released and a bit of the universe is repaired.





Tikkun Olam & the Messiah

- Perhaps the most astonishing insight of Kabbalah is that God cannot repair the universe without our help.
- This repair is called *Tikkun Olam* and is the centerpiece of Reform Judaism.
- Thus, our efforts, as God's partner, are required to bring the Messiah and redemption.



Angel or Messenger?

The Hebrew word for angel is, *malach* מלאך

And the Hebrew word for messenger is מלאך

Judaism teaches that God sends us into the world to complete creation:

- Are we simple messengers or divine angels?
- Speaking Hebrew, there's no difference!



Being God's Shadow

Recall that one understanding of Gen.1:26 is that we are created as God's shadow.



- If I look at these shadows, can I tell what the people are doing?
- The shadow and its source are deeply linked.



Being God's Shadow

This leads to the mystical idea that we, God's shadows, "force" God's hands by our actions.

- So, for example, by making harmony on Earth, we make harmony in the heavens.
- And, I would add, when we do good things inspired by God and God's teachings we bring God into the world.
- Example of feeding the hungry, visiting the sick. When we, God's shadow, do this, God is doing it. And it doesn't matter if God actually exists!



Being God's Shadow

Carrying this thought to the end of life.

- When does a shadow disappear?
 - When the image and the Maker of the image touch at last.





Judaism and the Afterlife

What do Jews believe about the afterlife?

- I don't know – go ask them!

What does Judaism teach about the afterlife?

- That there is one.
- Resurrection – a mainstay teaching of the rabbis.
- Reincarnation – a key element of Kabbalah
- Communication between worlds - a Talmudic teaching.



Becoming More Spiritual

Step #1: Blessings and prayer

- The traditional blessings of Judaism:
 - “Thanks for the good stuff” blessings such as for bread, wine, and even going to the bathroom.
 - Mitzvah blessings
- Fixed liturgical prayer
 - Not because God needs our prayer
 - But because we need to pray together
- Simply talking to God.



Becoming More Spiritual

Step #2: Seeing the holy in the world.



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Becoming More Spiritual

Step #2: Seeing the holy in the world.



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Becoming More Spiritual

Step #2: Seeing the holy in the world.



God's Gift of Mustard

- If I didn't have any mustard at all, I could be happy.
- If I only had deli mustard, I would be fine.
- So how many choices of mustard do I find?



God's Gift of Mustard

One time, preparing for a sermon, I counted 39 choices of mustard at Gelson's!



God's Gift of Olive Oil

So how many choices of olive oil do you think I found at Whole Foods Market?





God's Gift of Olive Oil



But You've Got to Notice the Miracles

REVEREND FUN ©GCI, INC.



Rabbinic story of Reuven and Shimon: They never looked up to see the miracle! All they saw was the mud and the muck (*Midrash Exodus Rabbah* 24.1)

MAKE SURE YOU STOP FOR A SECOND, MOSES, AND REALIZE JUST HOW AMAZINGLY COOL THIS IS



Becoming More Spiritual

Step #2: Seeing the holy in the world.

The point:

- Notice the miracles in your life!
- Notice when you've been blessed!
- The “thank you card” for these gifts is to share your blessings with God's children.
- A gift without acknowledgement is a theft!



Becoming More Spiritual

Step #3: Religious New Year's Resolutions.

- Resolve to take on one new spiritual practice each year.
 - Prayer
 - Dietary
 - Good deeds
- Don't let the best be the enemy of the good!

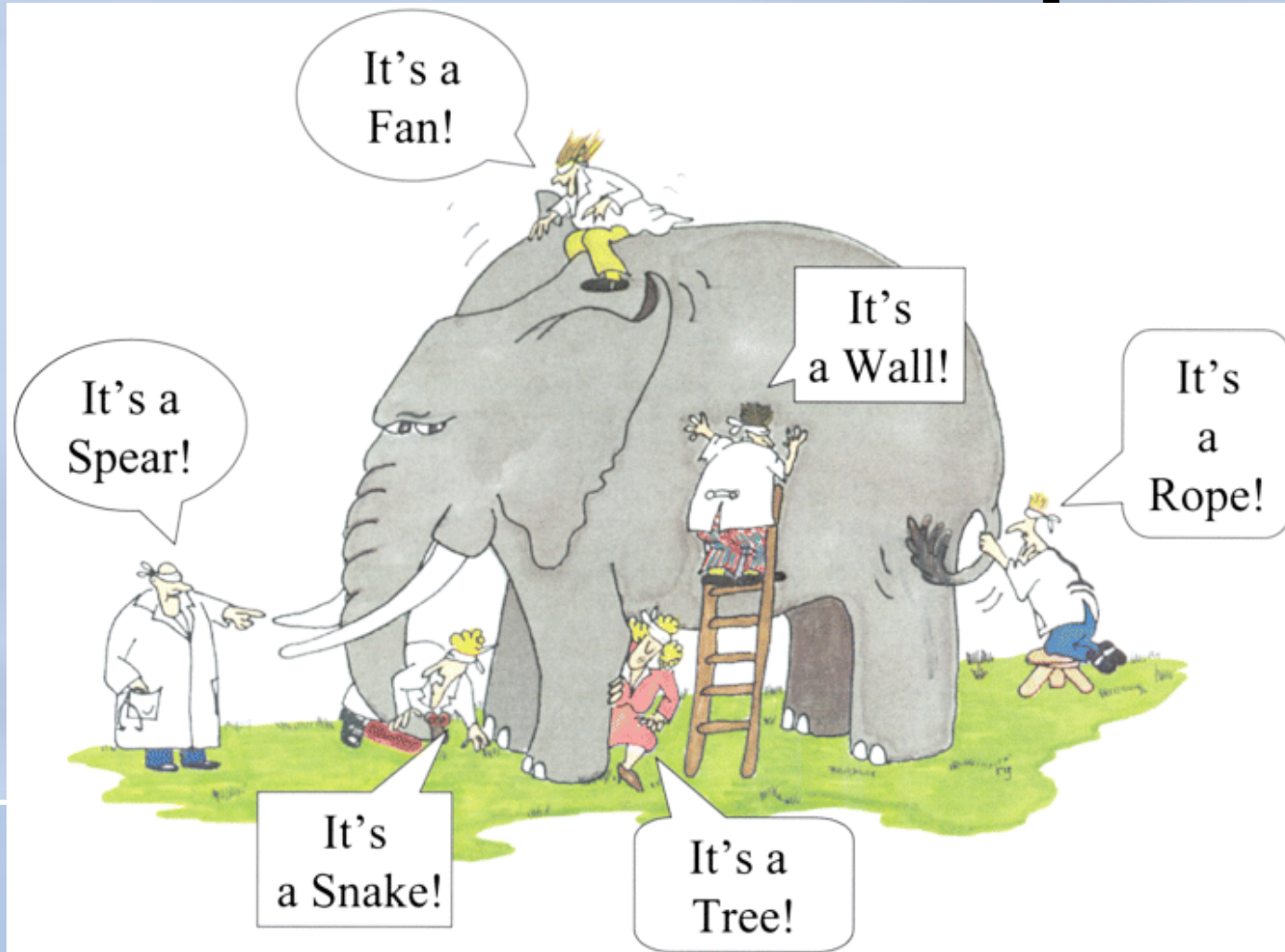


Becoming More Spiritual

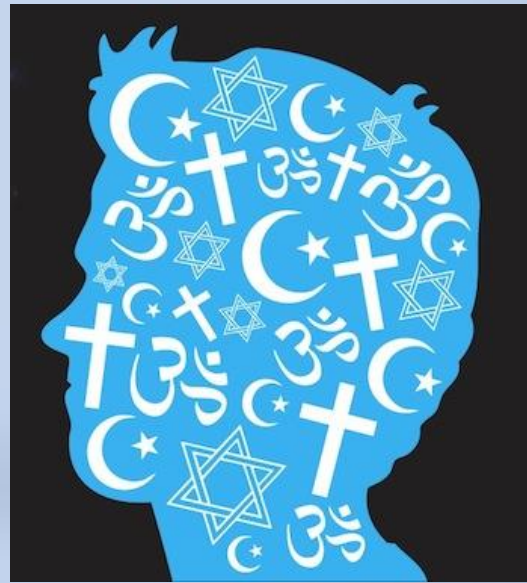
Step #4: Seeing yourself as God's hands.

- Moving your prayer from
 - “Give me” to “Teach/help me” to “Use me”
 - Mystic – not Magic!
- You are God's shadow so bring God with you wherever you are.
 - Isaiah 43:12 quotes God as saying “You are My witnesses and I am God.”
 - The rabbis say that this means God can only be God if we serve as God's witnesses!

Understanding Interfaith: The Blind & the Elephant



**Perhaps we each can
see/understand only a portion
of God's totality.**



**Our error is in our certainty
that our view is the only truth.**

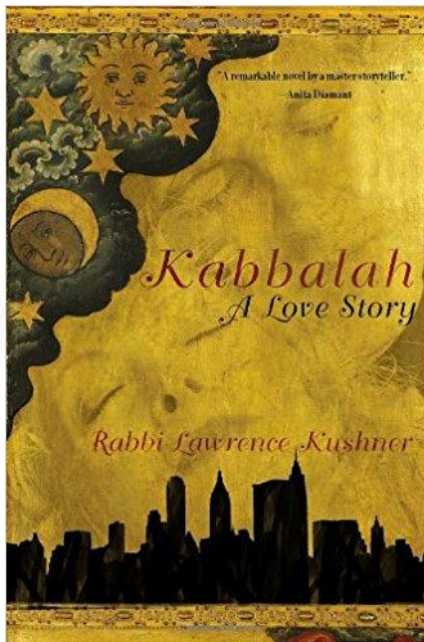


The blind people all hear the creature speak and they all hear the Golden Rule, this rabbi's test for a *Kosher* religion.



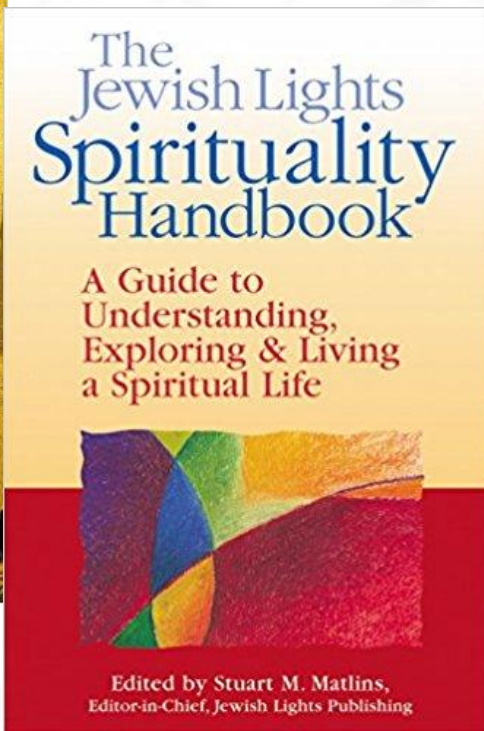
Suggested Reading

Kabbalah:
A Love Story

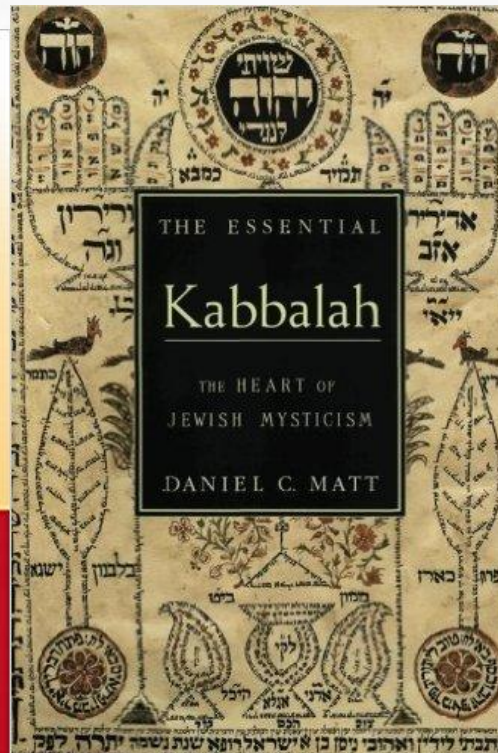


By Rabbi
Lawrence
Kushner

The Essential
Kabbalah

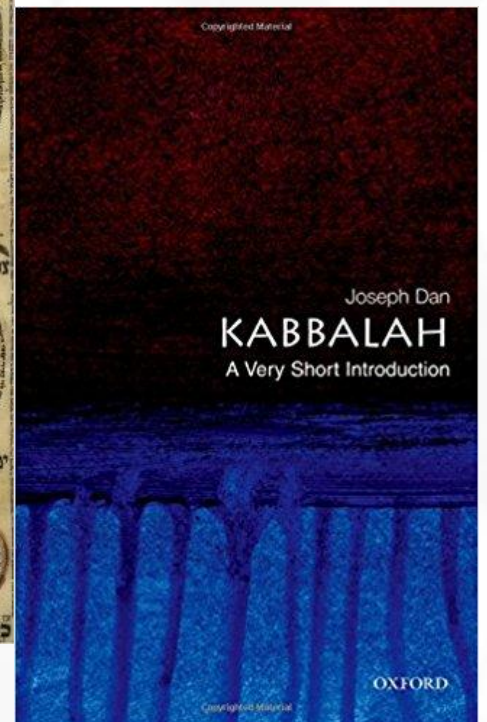


By Stuart Matlins



By Daniel Matt

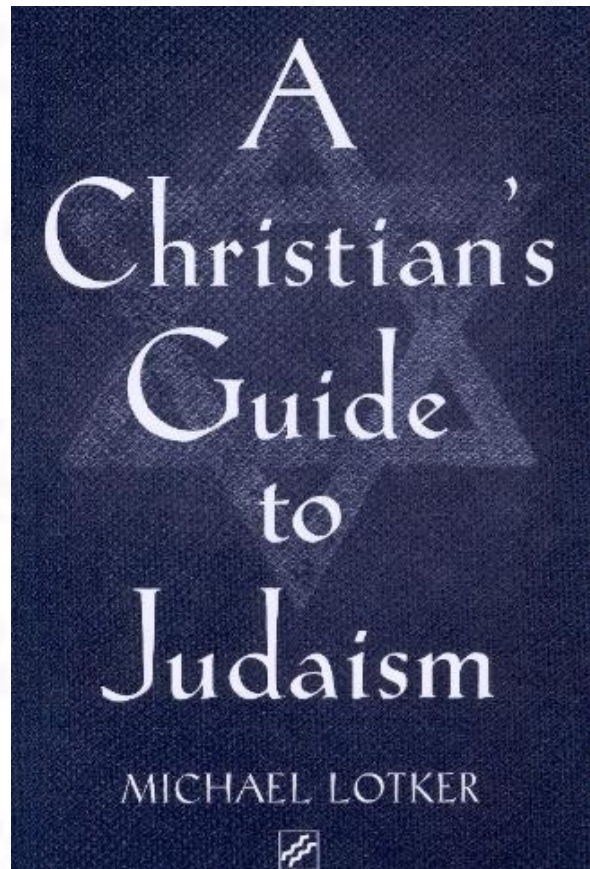
Kabbalah: A Very
Short Introduction



By Joseph Dan



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