

Jeremy Rosen - Does the Kabbalah Make Sense

- Okay, thank you very much. So, we're going to be talking about, "Does the Kabbalah Make Sense?" "Does the Kabbalah Make Sense?" So over to you. Thank you, thank you. Thanks, thanks. Looking forward to your presentation. Thank you.

- It was Gershom Scholem, the German-Israeli academic who once is reported to us, said, "Kabbalah is a lot of rubbish. The study of Kabbalah is a serious academic exercise." Well, I don't entirely agree with him, and I'm going to try to show you today the pluses and the minuses, the positive and the negative. He did, however, have a very interesting theory that I do agree with, and it goes like this. Early human beings were part of the natural world. They understood everything about the winds and the plants and the animals. They were very close to it, but they were scared of life of how to control things. And so early religions, established a way of saying, "Don't worry, guys, come through us and we'll show you the right way to cope with all this." The trouble is, that what happens is, that then, religions established a kind of a structure and establishment becomes rigid and ossified.

And so every now and again, within all religions, there's a reaction against the dry, formal, established structure. And that, in itself, in time, becomes fossilised too. And so there's another cycle, there are constant cycles. When you go back to the beginning of Judaism to the early biblical period, before Greek philosophy and rationality, the situation was that people were invited to engage with God. Moses encountered God in the desert and the people, so to speak, encountered God at Mount Sinai. And in all these situations, fire plays a very important role. Fire was always associated with religion. It was something that could burn and destroy. It was something that could warm and make you feel good. And it was a good analogy for the power of the gods. Beyond our control, we can benefit from, but we can also suffer from. And so throughout the biblical period, fire, whether it's Moses at the burning bush, whether it's on Mount Sinai, whether it's the misbehaving sons of Aaron who get burnt to a crisp, whether it's Elijah going up to heaven in a chariot of fire, all of these represent a way of relating to God on a personal level, not on the structural level, a personal encounter with God. But as we know, religions become so structured they get in the way. And Judaism or the early Israelites soon split into two different ways of experiencing their religion.

There was the priesthood through the formal temple, tabernacle structure inherited by people who were born to the job. And on the other hand, there were those people who were not appointed by anybody who wandered around the country side, the prophets interacting with ordinary people, inspiring them and getting them to feel for their religious commitment. And so, in a sense, there was always what we would call a mystical tradition from the very, very beginning. And this mystical tradition goes through, various different changes. The most important first change is the "Book of Ezekiel" which was written, Yekhezqel in Babylon, where already you begin to see that there are signs of a new way of understanding God. And if you were to look at the first chapter of Ezekiel, you would find a kind of a crazy display of multi-sensual, visual exciting things, which he says, is a vision of God. And as you probably

know, the Norwegian novelist, Erich von Daniken, said he thought that this chapter of Yekhezqel proved that spaceman came to earth, 'cause it looks a bit like a spaceship. It's a modification of an earlier vision that Isaiah had of God and it was meant to imply that God is unlike anything you can encounter on earth. It's multifaceted.

And in order to encounter God, you have, in a way, to suspend your rational critical faculties. And this idea of the first chapter of Ezekiel was called the merkava, the chariot. The chariot, rather like Elijah's chariot, that can take you up to heaven, can bring you closer to God. And that is the beginning of a more structured mystical tradition. If we go on, another 500 years to 2,000 years ago, we already have the attempt before the Talmud to try to understand the nature of God. And there were two different schools of thought. There was what was called "Hekhalot literature," the literature of the chambers, the chambers of the palace, the chambers of God. How do you find your way to get to the inner sanctum? There's got to be a way, there's got to be a route, somebody's got to show you how we get there. Then there was another school of thought which was called , the measure of a man. Looking, if you like, rather like, Leonardo da Vinci's man, stretched out in the square and in the circle.

And this was saying, "Look, if God communicates with humans, "the secret to communicating with God is through us." There must be some method, some way, in which we can reach out to God through ourselves rather like having a transistor radio within ourselves. If we get the right messages, we can pick up the programme. And round about 2,000 years ago, that kind of way of thinking of God was called in different terms, the nistar, something that is hidden, the pades, the beautiful orchard. You have to find a way through in order to get to God. These were all, if you like, important steps in the path of Jewish mysticism. And then we come to the Talmudic period. And the Talmudic period, again, just over 1,500 years ago, includes a great deal of those rabbis who believed in a mystical, personal, non-conformist way to God. And those on the other hand in the establishment said, "No, you've got to toe the party line. "This is a structure stick to it "and don't go off message." And the greatest of those who were off messages, starts off with this idea. This man is called Shimon bar Yochai. Shimon, who insists on preaching to everybody despite the fact that the establishment don't like him and indeed, the Roman occupation don't like him. And as a result, he had to run away and hide in caves.

In a cave, with his son, for really 12 years. And then when he came out, having spent 12 years in this mystical cocoon of his, he looked around and saw people were working and he looked at them and burst them into flame. Again, the symbolism of mysticism and the voice comes out from having a session, "Shimon bar Yochai, that's not how my world runs. "Not everybody can be a mystic like you. "Either you stop this, "or you're going back into the cave for a year." Back into the cave he went, until he could come out and adjust. Shimon bar Yochai is regarded as the mystic power excellence of that early Talmudic period. But at this moment, the term Kabbalah doesn't exist. There's no such word in terms of the Jewish mystical tradition. It's all merkavah, it's called nistar And it essentially tries in a holistic way, to involve the whole of the human being in this encounter with God, whether it is visually, whether it's verbally, whether it's audiolly, it's a holistic involvement of everything in order to reach what they perceived as being the totality of

the universe. There is a reference in the Torah, in the Talmud, rather, to a book called "Sefer Yetzirah," the "Book of Creation." And the Talmud actually says, there were two rabbis who spent their time studying this "Sefer Yetzirah," the "Book of Creation."

And as a result, they were able to create life and they created a calf, a nice little cow, which they slaughtered and had a meal out of. Now, I only mention this because that is the first reference to a book called "Sefer Yetzirah," "the "Book of Creation," which really is a much later fourth century, the earliest book, which is, in one sense, the first "Book of Mysticism." And it is a book that combines two very different elements. One element is astrology. Remember, astrology was the science of those days, how they understood the stars and the planets and the interaction with them and how each one had its own colour and its own sound, its own properties and qualities. And this would help you understand how to cope with life. But also, it included something called the "Sefirot." Now the "Sefirot" are not as they sound, the spheres, there's something else. I'm sure many of you will have seen this picture of these 10 little circles. 10 little circles, all interconnected and all interconnected through the different letters of the Hebrew alphabet. What were these 10 sefirot? These 10 sefirot essentially were 10 different characteristics that we humans have, that also exist within God.

They are the way that God communicates with us. So, God is made up of these 10 different, we'll call them emanations, and they are ways that God distils, the non-physical side of His, shall we say, energy, into a shape and a form that connects with us. And in these 10, each one of them represents a different facet of the human being. At the top, you have the top three which are basically intellectual. They are wisdom, intuition and knowledge. And that, is obviously, the brain area. Then we move down from the brain and we come to the torso. And the torso includes the idea of emotion, of feeling. And to the right hand side there's a little circle which talks about power and authority. And to another, there's one which talks about softness and kindness. And then we move further down and we come to the element, within a human being of creativity, of procreation. And then we move down to the two legs, so to speak. One of them is ambition and drive and the other is stability and satisfaction. Until finally you come down to the throne at the feet. And so if you start at God at the top, and you come down to us, round the throne at the bottom, these are the different ways in which God manages to communicate with us. And God communicates in different ways.

When we're feeling strong, God will remind us, "You know, there's another side." When we feel weak, God reminds us, "No, you can get out of this mess." When we're too focused on rational knowledge, God is telling us, "What about intuition and the non-rational?" In the end, this is a kind of a programme, if you like, the first self-help programme in which "Sefer Yetzirah" invites you to meditate on the different ways of communicating with God, depending on whatever state you're in. Happy state or a sad state. And this is something you can do any time, anywhere you are. You don't need to be in a synagogue or a temple or anything like that. It is, if you like, the plan for how you communicate with God. And that is what "Sefer Yetzirah" said, apparently, it was written by Abraham, our forefather, but of course it wasn't because it's languages much later. But it was common in those days to name important books after important characters in

order to give them this sense that they were important. This is the first step towards what we're going to call Kabbalah. The next step is a book which was written by a man called, Isaac the Blind, we think, round about a thousand years ago.

At the same time, as another mystic, who lived in Northern Spain called Solomon Ibn Gabirol when there was a sudden upsurge in massive interest, in every religion, not just in Judaism, in mysticism. You had it in Christianity, you had it in Islam. And this was, if you like, one of the great products of the fertile interaction of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, in Southern France and Northern Spain a thousand years ago. Ibn Gabirol is the first person to be troubled with this idea of God. If God is, shall we say, eternal, how can God, in some way interact with us? It can't make sense. What tools would we use? I mean, we listen with our physical qualities, with our physical nature. God isn't physical. How do we manage to bridge that gap? And it was he who came up with this idea that God is Ein Sof. God has no limitations whatsoever, totally beyond the way we can look at the world today. That God really is beyond us, but there is a kind of an intermediary area, between the two of us, where God if you like, comes towards us and we can rise towards God. And this idea was expanded on in the book of "Bahir" and this is, in many ways, the beginning of what we call Kabbalah, the established mystical tradition.

There was one before it, but this is now the main one. And what we call Kabbalah is made up of three very different, very, very different strands and ways of thinking. At this time, thousand years ago, most Jewish rabbis were what we would call rationalists, like Maimonides. They were influenced by Aristotelianism, by Platonism. They tried to prove the existence of God and they believed there was a fundamental difference, between the physical and the spiritual. Now for them, the spiritual was mental. They thought mind was soul and mind was the way to God. On the other hand, the physical was our bodies. And as in Greek theology and philosophy, the idea was mind is superior to matter. The body isn't so hot, because it's bothered with physical things like eating, and sleeping and going to the toilet, where's the mind and the spirit is above all that. So, the rationalist had built, if you read, let's say, Maimonides' "The Guide for the Perplexed," it's a book about Aristotelian philosophy. Aristotelians, of all different religions, accepted, which is one of the reasons why Maimonides as a philosopher, was read by Christians and by Muslims, but it was rational. Rational was the pursuit of the intellectual elite.

What about the ordinary person who isn't a great philosopher? Where does he fit in all this? And so Kabbalah emerged as an argument and an alternative to the rational way of looking at God. It wasn't interested in proofs, it was simply interested in the experience of God. And so it provides a series of different answers to the question of, "How do you create the world?" The rationalists, for example, said, "Oh, that's no problem. "World was created out of nothing. "One day God woke up, snapped His fingers and poof, "there was the world." But the Kabbalists, they began to say, "Look, this doesn't make sense. "Surely, if God is there and He's everything, "we must be made out of God." It's not as though we're something separate from God. God is us and we are God in one sense, we're part of that same structure. And we're not going to go for all this rational philosophy. Who wants all that complicated stuff? We simply want to find a different way of looking at the world that we live in. And so what developed was an idea if you like, of

intellectual, but mystical experience, rather than the theory.

And that was, if you like, the theoretical answer to the practical. And out of this, came a practical version, which is to say, "Okay, you could maybe explain "how the world came about or that we're part of God, "but how do we get there? "What practises do we have to do "in order to reach that stage?" And then there was a third feature altogether, which we will call "The Folkloristic." In other words, we're ordinary people, how do most of us deal with the world? We deal with the word through magic, through hocus pocus, through charms, by going to the witch doctor, going to the rabbi, going to somebody to sort our problems out for us. And so these three distinct areas became merged into this general term of what we understand as Kabbalah. And from the first millennium, over a period of a couple of 100 years, it began to blossom and it blossomed in two different ways. One of them was through the famous book of the "Zohar." The Zohar, which means, bright light. This book is not found anywhere in Judaism, until in the 13th, the 14th century, a man called Moses De Leon, living in Northern Spain, in Zaragoza, produces this book, which he claims was written by Shimon bar Yochai, almost a thousand years earlier. This is an amazing book, the "Zohar." It's an amazing book.

It's made up of a series of lectures, one after another of different books, essentially starting off as a commentary on the Torah. It's basically a mystical commentary on the Torah. I'm not trying to give you rational explanations, I'm not trying, for example, to tell you why we eat kosher food, because these animals were this way or that way, or there's a logic to a meaning to it. No, purely mystically. I'm telling you, if you eat this kind of food, you will be a spiritual person and if you don't eat this kind of food, you'll be a material person. The "Commentary on the Torah" was accepted universally. The problem was, that intermingled in it were ideas that had never been seen before. For example, nowhere before the "Zohar" do you have the idea of transmigration of the souls. That the souls come back to earth and come back again until they do a decent job of it, round and round, and round, which seems, in a way, absorbed from, if you like Indian ideology, rather than from something within our earlier tradition.

It also talked about the idea that we redeem ourselves by our actions and by how we behave. And it's through our actions that we can get through to God. And this book has been accepted as one of the most important books in Jewish canon. After the Talmud, probably the next most important book is the "Zohar." Now, the "Zohar" itself alludes to, but doesn't include. The work of a man called "Abraham Abulafia" of Zaragoza. Abraham Abulafia was the first person to actually give us a kind of a practical list of exercises that we can go through in order to get closer to God. Using the sefirot as a kind of an example, as a framework, he introduces exercises which are almost identical to yoga, to meditation, to all the things we associate in the East. A thousand years ago, were introduced into Judaism through practical Kabbalah by Abraham Abulafia, and then developed since to this very day. And so you had Kabbalists on the one hand, doing theoretical stuff, and on the other hand, you had them doing practical stuff. Now, from this book, what we call Kabbalah emerged and most academics believe that this book was not written as Moses delay on claims by Shimon bar Yochai who lived so much earlier.

And the reason they give are two basically, the style of Aramaic is a much later style of Aramaic. It's like claim something written in Shakespeare language was written by Josa, or vice versa, if it comes to that. Secondly, they said that the problem with this particular book is that, nobody had any trace of it before Moses De Leon. There's no trace at all of it. And so people were divided as to whether Moses De Leon actually wrote the book or whether he compiled it from earlier documents that he'd managed to bring together. Either way, he was a great guy. And the story is told that one of the greatest and richest men in Northern Spain, wanted to get hold of the original documents. And he approached the wife of Moses De Leon and Moses De Leon's wife said, "I saw my husband write this." And that's where there were splits between those who say, "This came later," and those who's saying, "It came earlier," remains. And so to this very day, the very orthodox ultra haredi world will tell you, "The Zorah was written by Shimon bar Yochai." And the academics will say, if you go to the Mystical Department of The Hebrew University, "No, that's not true. "It's much later." Either way, it's a great, great document and the most important document, but it's not the end of it.

After the expulsion from Spain, Jewish mystics were then moving across, first of all, to Italy and then to the Ottoman Empire. And finally, the Ottoman Empire welcomed them back to the land of Israel. And in fact, in the 16th century in Safed, you suddenly have a gathering together of the greatest mystical minds ever, if we're going to hyperbolize about it. And in this atmosphere, you have a man called "Moshe Cordovero" and he is the person who, if you like, is the grandfather of this new mystical tradition. At the same time, integrated with it, you have Rabbi Yosef Caro, who wrote the first major book of Jewish law after the Talmud. So, you see that there was an intricate involvement between Jewish lifestyle, Jewish law, and mysticism. So, the idea that you can detach the two, has in a sense, is as inconsistent as you can detach the mind from body. One of his pupils, great pupils, was a man who's known as Arizal Ashkenazi who was the equivalent of a .com millionaire. He was a young man in Egypt, he made a fortune and then retired its thought to develop his mystical experiences.

And he developed the, in fact, the Kabbalah that today is the dominant influence, within much of Jewish life. The first thing he said was, "In practical terms, get out of the synagogue. "I want you to be in the fields "and to sing and get closer to nature. "I want you to feel close to everything. "I want you to pray the services, "but do it within an ecstatic way. "Don't be rigid, don't be firm." And he introduced tremendous poetry. So, everything even, you know, which we sing on a Friday evening, and things like this, were all the result of the influence of , the Arizal. And he also developed new theories. His new theory of creation was this idea, "We've got to get around this problem "of God being totally non-physical and the physical world." And he came up with the idea that when God wanted to create the world, He shrunk a bit, since it was called to shrink. He withdrew a little bit from a vacuum and into this vacuum, He placed the most beautiful vessels of light and brightness in order to make the world out of that. But unfortunately, as it came down from heaven down to earth, these vessels shattered and they shattered and they split into wonderful sparks of light and shards and shells.

And this explains why there's good and bad in the world. The good comes from the light and the

shards and the as they're called, the shells come from the bad. And everything in this world is made up of these two different elements. And therefore, we are constantly struggling to reconcile the two. And how do we reconcile the two? We only reconcile the two by trying to meld the two together. If we're only physical, and we're not spiritual, if we're only spiritually and not physical. Shimon bar Yochai taught us, it's not going to work. So, he comes up with this new way of looking at the world, a non-rational, he doesn't even pretend to be rational, doesn't want to be rational. It's the difference, if you like, between sex and love. One is a physical phenomenon that you can actually see and witness and experience. Love is something you can experience, but you can't describe it. You can't actually produce a formula for it. And instead of saying, "It's either or, "either rational or not," we try to find a balance. So those people who say, "I can't prove God, "therefore, there is no God," they fail on the intellectual side. And the person who says, "I'm experiencing God, but I dunno religion," they're failing on the mystical side. You need to have structure. That was his idea. And his influence was very, very powerful. But like everything in mysticism, there's an old saying, "It starts in a mist "and it ends in a schism."

And the schism was, that in the generation afterwards, you began to get these false messiahs. These guys travelling around and saying, "I'm going to solve all your problems. "I'm going to cure your illnesses. "I'm going to do everything you need to make you happy. "Just follow me and do as I tell you, "and everything will be wonderful." One of the most famous of them was a man called Sabbatai Zevi, who was born in Turkey, in Izmir. And this man was an amazingly charismatic, brilliant man, who managed to convince almost the whole of the world, that he was the Messiah and he was going to reunite the whole of the Jewish people and they would all come back to the land of Israel. So much so, that even in England, Pits records in his diary, that in Lloyd's of London they were taking bets as to whether this man was the Messiah or not. And there's a book written by a woman called Gluckel of Hameln in Northern Germany, in which he says, "The Messiah's coming, "I'm salting food to go on this version "on this trip back to the land of Israel." So everybody believed it and he went to the sultan, in order to persuade the sultan to allow to support his plan.

And the sultan was worried because he thought, the sultan, "This guy's bit of a loose cannon, out of control. "I better keep him in control." And so he said to sultan, "So you've got a choice. "Either you convert to Islam or I'm going to kill you." Sabbatai Zevi converted to Islam and the whole of the Jewish world collapsed, just as though their prop had been removed. There were a few people who followed him and there still are today. Some people, a small sect in Turkey called the Donme who are made up of partially Muslim, partially Jewish, believing that Sabbatai Zevi is the Messiah. And in Europe, there was a follower of Sabbatai Zevi called Jacob Frank who said, "What we got wrong is that both the Zohar "and and Shabsai Tzvi, all said that, "excitement in life is the way to get through to God, "through happiness, through joy, through elation, "through sexual pleasure. "And sexual pleasure is the nearest analogy "you can get on earth to uniting with God." And Jacob Frank said, "You know, guys, "we're going to organise orgies. "Orgies in the forest of Poland, "all of them to celebrate "what the mysticism requires of you." Now as you can imagine, the established religion hated that.

They sent him out of Judaism, they kicked him out. And actually, Frank converted to Catholicism. That's another story for another time. But you can see why all of a sudden the established religion says, "Hey, this Kabbalah business is dangerous. "This is a problem." Up to now, it was just for a few select specialists, but now all of a sudden, it's been opened up to the masses. And in reaction to Sabbatai Zevi, a new movement developed in Eastern Europe called Hasidism. And Hasidism wanted to excite people and it did so by adopting the agenda of the Arizal, of Rabbi Luria from Safed. And in fact, they call their way of prayer Nusach Sefard, the oriental style of Arizal, even though they were an Ashkenazi in Russian and Poland and that part of the world. And so Hasidim developed as a mass movement, which was going to enable people to experience the joy of Judaism and not be who hung up on the rigidity and the formality. And if you weren't a scholar that didn't mean to say you couldn't experience God. Up to then, they thought any scholars could experience God. And so Hasidim brought mysticism to the masses and still to this day, a bit of the "Zohar" is studied every day.

It's part of the makeup. So, the objection to Kabbalah was on the part of those who feared its destructive element, and those who supported it, transposed it into the Hasidic movement. But the Hasidic movement, like all these movements we've talked about before, started off as inspirational, started off as getting people to experiment, to get closer to God, to validate their individuality, but slowly, it became structured and fossilised with its own rigidities that in a sense, squashed individuality. So, I look back at this mystical tradition and I say, that within Judaism, it is a vital part of our religious tradition. And if we don't experience it on some level, there is something missing in our Jewish religious experience and religious identity. But like anything, you can't pick it up overnight by doing a quick course. You can't become an expert in the Talmud by doing a self-help course or anything like that. And like anything, it is abused and misused. And it's abused and misused because it absorbed in the mediaeval times, all the superstition and all the magic and all the hocus pocus that didn't find a place in official law of Judaism.

It wasn't part of the structure, but it was like folk medicine, like astrology is today, an answer to many people to the needs they have, where you don't have proper medical advice or doctors or where you'd rather have somebody who solves your problems for you, a guy who writes you a little cure or give you a little blessing and you'll feel better and you'll feel happier. In other words, not everybody wants to take responsibility or can for their own experience and interaction with God. People need some crutches. And it is this aspect of Kabbalah that offered crutches, and it's this aspect of Kabbalah that by and large in my view is being abused, even though I don't object. If somebody finds support in some sort of structure and if it helps them carry on a little bit further, why not? But to put it in a nutshell, the sort of Kabbalah that you see popularly on the internet today is rather like comparing "Mickey Mouse" cartoons to Shakespeare, much easier, much more popular, much more fun, but it ain't the real thing. And on that note, I will conclude and start the questions. So, please fire away and I'll do my best to answer. Okay.

Q&A and Comments:

Q: First question I have is from Romaine, who asks, "Does this search for personal mystical

Judaism lead towards the story of Jesus?"

A: Well, it doesn't lead towards the story of Jesus. Jesus, those people who took a mystical message from Jesus, borrowed on the Dead Sea Sects and the earlier mystical traditions that were there. And people afterwards drew on that. It's a constant process of evolution this mystical tradition.

Are onto Roberta Bidolf, is thinking, "What a mesha'amem these lockdown lectures have been. "I can't believe we're coming "to the first anniversary of lockdown." Thank you so much, that's really sweet of you.

Q: Lori Mannoyum, "Is it still believed one should not study Kabbalah "when younger than 49?"

A: Well, no, because in the Hasidic movement, young people are reading a bit of the Kabbalah, reading a bit of the "Zohar" and studying it. What the Talmud already said was, "Mysticism is something that you can only study "with a reliable teacher, "with somebody who knows what he's talking about "or she's talking about who can guide you. "It's not for everybody." So you could say that still there's a belief today that mysticism is not, should we say for everybody. And there are many special places where Kabbalah is studied in the ultra orthodox world, but to get into them, you have to show your religious calibre, your level of knowledge and you have to have a solid base before anybody is going to move you onto the next level. And these colleges too, differentiate between those who are interested in the text and the study and those who are interested in the experience. And it's very, very hard. If ever you pick up the "Zohar," you will find it very complex. It's very difficult, and I don't advise you to try doing it without a guide if you are genuinely interested.

Q: Let's go onto the next one. Martine, "Why is it so that Kabbalah can only be studied "if you're 40?" Well, "And wife's elite scholars?"

A: Because it's complex. It's not that simple. In other words, you've got to walk before you can run, otherwise, you're going to stumble.

Q: "Would this confirm that Jews believe in reincarnation? "Is this only a character good on earth? "Is it related to Adam?"

A: Well, first of all, there is no reference to reincarnation in the Torah, no reference to reincarnation even in the Talmud. You have the idea that souls continue after the body dies and there's a transition from the physical to the spiritual. But reincarnation is not mentioned anywhere before the Middle Ages. So, if you want to take the "Zohar" as if you like authoritative, you'll say, "Yes, we believe in reincarnation." I don't believe in reincarnation for one minute. Not only that in the Talmud, they make fun of the idea of reincarnation by referring to Cleopatra, asking, "Will I come back on earth "and will I come back on earth with my clothes "or without my clothes?" So, this is an example. Reincarnation, the idea that if you eat something traced it's

going to degrade your body. These are all ideas that come from the "Zohar," and many people, therefore, choose to accept, but they're not core beliefs in Judaism. Many people do believe it but there's a beauty of Judaism. That's very difficult to say, "This is what you have to believe." You say, "These are things which have been core ideas "in our tradition for a very long time." And you should take seriously and examine and if it works, it works. But you have to find how to make it work for you personally.

Q: "Was Kabbalah only for Jews or was it universal?"

A: Well, this is what Adolf Hitler said. Interestingly enough, many Christians in the mediaeval period studied the Kabbalah. For example, Pico della Mirandola, an Italian priest, was very much in favour, and he pleaded with the Pope not to destroy Jewish texts, because he thought this could prove that Christianity is right. And his argument was that, "Look, the Jews accuse us of having a trinity "of Father, Son and the Holy Ghost." Look at these Jewish mystics. They've got 10, the 10 sefirot. They're all parts of God, they're no different. And on the contrary, they reinforce the idea of the trinity. And you had others, and others, so they were very interested. And every religion, Christianity has its mystics in its schools. The Sufis have their mystic in their schools. And they all do similar things, whether it's dancing, the different sufi dances like the Hasidic dances, whether they pray by swaying, whether they sit and they meditate, whether they play with letters and codes and all kinds of things. Almost all mystical traditions, like almost all religious traditions share a basic experience, and a basic structure, and a basic goal. They just have different cultural ways of doing it. So, there's a Jewish way, which works for Jews and anybody's welcome to try and there are non-Jewish ways that work for other people and they're welcome to try.

Q: "Wasn't there is still a connection with mysticism "in Egypt going back to the Essenes in earlier?"

A: Well, yes, because there always was Marlena, there always was a mystical tradition. That's why I tried to show, going back to Moses and even going back before Moses, going back through early Egypt and everywhere. People have always tried to understand the world and understand how it works and where it comes from. And some people have tried to do it with their brains and some people have tried to do it with their feelings and with their body. And Kabbalah is a holistic way of trying to involve both.

Q: "Where can I find a good explanation "of the elements of Merkava?"

A: Well, there are thousands of publications, thousands of them. And I suggest you start by going to Wikipedia and looking at an article in Wikipedia about the Kabbalah and the background. And that will give you an example. But in the end, I've always believed that you should go back to the original texts. And if you want to go back to the original text, I would suggest there's a very good translation of "Sefer Yetzirah," the "Book of Creation" translated into English by a man called Kaplan. It's available on the internet. You can start reading there. I'd

suggest that's more accessible to you than the "Zohar," but you will still, in the end, need the notes or a guide to take it further. But there's tremendous material. I mean, if you want the history, start off with Gershom Scholem. His history of the Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, is the first serious academic study of it.

Q: Yoland, "Are there any women involved in Kabbalah?"

A: Of course, lots. There were lots of women, despite the fact that they originally was very much a male orientated system. There were women mystics. There's the maid of Ludomir, who was lived in the 18th century and 19th century part of the Hasidic tradition. So there are, it's a powerful tradition. And particularly today in Israel, there are many centres that teach a kind of a female version of Kabbalah. Because one of the amazing things of Kabbalah is Kabbalah does not recognise your distinction, between male and female in the sense that the Kabbalah says, "We all have a female part and a male part. "It doesn't matter what sex we're born into." That since we are holistically connected with us, all of us are connected with God in an equal way and we have the capacity to reach through to God directly. And so, whereas, in more traditional forms, women and men are segregated or weren't given the opportunity to study. As far as Kabbalah is concerned, everybody has this access.

Q: "What do you think of Rabbi Baters teaching Kabbalah "to people like famous actors?"

A: Look, what you're teaching to famous actors is a simplistic self-help distillation of genuine Kabbalah. There's no way somebody who can't immerse themselves in a religious way of life can genuinely understand the full impact or rise to the top. But it's a useful, if you like way in. And in a world in which we live where everybody wants self-help and self-help and find the answer to your problems and they're looking everywhere in this fad and that fad and another fad and this era and that age and new age and the old age and back age, why shouldn't we contribute a little bit to this popularism? But it is very popularism. If somebody wants to do it, good luck. I used, at one stage in my rabbinical career, I used to teach Kabbalah and it was very low. I said to myself, "Very well-attended. "People used to flock to here." But the moment I said, "But, you know, the next course "is going to be on actually studying the texts," oh, nobody bother to turn up anymore. So, I'm sceptical, but if it works for them, why not? I don't think that placebos are necessarily all bad things if they help people, by all means, help 'em. But don't delude yourself into think that's the real thing.

Q: "I was once told," says Nermi, "that Kabbalah is on being just a finite number of souls "and it was pure luck whether a newborn "had inherited a good soul or a bad soul, "that's a person had a wonderful life, just lucky. "And one who suffered through life was unlucky. "Do you believe this theory?"

A: Absolutely not. I can't imagine why anybody would think that. Although, the truth of the matter is that Calvinism and Proticism had this idea of predetermination and predestination that everything is ordained. The Torah says very clearly, that we are born with a capacity for good

and a capacity for bad. We make mistakes and we get things right and it's up to us to make them most of our lives. And this idea was developed through the period of the Talmud to say essentially that we can either make our next world or make our next hell. Maimonides, of course, the Rationalists said, "There's no such thing as heaven and hell. "These are just mystical ideas. "These are just abstract ideas to explain "to the ordinary person something "that will drive them forward to try to be a better person." But I think we have degrees of choice and it's up to us to make the most of it if we want to. So, therefore, don't think that it makes much help to talk about everything is preordained. We are influenced by things, we are influenced by our genes, we are influenced by our society, by our parents and by everything else. And we don't have total freedom to do whatever we want. We can't even walk down the street without having laws, telling us what to do, but we can make more of ourselves if we put the effort into it.

Q: "Didn't the early rabbis posit Pardes "as the venue for Greek philosophy "as memorised story of Akiva? "Is there another tradition Pardes "and entry to the kingdom of Hashem?"

A: Yes, most definitely. In the Talmud in the Hagigah, pardes is described as the orchard in front of the palace. We are given the opportunity to make a success of our work in the pardes, in the orchard, to prune the trees, to cultivate it. And if we make of success, we're going to be let into the palace. That's our role. The story of pardes with Rabbi Akiva is that four rabbis, great rabbis, experienced this mystical world and he warn them in advance. When you go into this mystical world, you're going to go to a different kind of world to the one you're used to. And therefore, you should not be misled by appearances. You should try to look beneath the level of appearances. So in the Talmud, it says, "When you get to that part that looks like water "or looks like rock, "or looks like sapphire, "whatever it is, don't mislead yourself into thinking "that appearances are true."

So, the four of them went in, Rabbi Akiva and Azai, and Zoma, and Elisha Binabuya into this journey into mysticism. Ben Azzai died. It was such a shock to his system. Ben Zoma went mad. Elisha ben Abuyah was such a rationalist. He said, "I've got no time for all this mystical hoo-ha, "I'd rather be a Greek rationalist." And he abandoned Judaism and went into philosophy. Only Rabbi Akiva was the only one that has able to combine them both, was able to understand there is value in both and the both of them should be combined. So knowledge, science is good, but you also have to have spiritual experience. Religion, spirituality, you need to combine them both. That's the message of pardes in the Gemara. Later on, that word was developed by mainstream Kabbalah to symbolise the different elements in analysing the text of the Zohar - it was for were for numerology, were for letters, for the secret levels. Each one represented a different way of understanding Kabbalah.

Q: Next question, "How would you suggest the most productive way "of studying more closely London-based?"

A: You know, I've been out of London for such a long time and I honestly don't know. The truth is, that the most popular teachers who are going to teach you in London are going to be

Chabad-Lubavitch. And I have a lot of admiration for Lubavitch for the work that they do, but they are rooted in a very strict and a very literalist interpretation of Kabbalah that has been passed down through their rabbis and through the "Tanya," and through their way of looking at things. And they are very loyal to their particular way of understanding Kabbalah. But it's only one way of understanding Kabbalah. And it's a way that I personally, I'm not entirely 100% happy with, even though there's a lot of it, which is absolutely 100% and brilliant. In the end, it all depends on your teacher, which is why the Talmud says, you have to find a teacher who's on the same wavelength, who you can relate to, who you have time with. And I don't know, I think you have to do research and ask around.

"Could you suggest most," yeah, so that was, that one that Gail mentioned. Let's carry on down a bit longer.

"What a pleasure to hear lecture you such perfectly." Ah, thank you, Mary. Too cute.

Q: "Where does Rav Kook fit in?"

A: Rav Kook was a mystic. He studied mysticism. He was a mystic. He was one of the best examples I can think of, of the sort of mystic I admire, a good human being, who knew the traditional sources inside out and back to front, who wrote poetry and songs and experienced religion as it was and who suffered because of this. The right wing thought he was too flaky. The left wing thought he was too religious. He supported Zionism. So, the anti-Zionist didn't like him. He was a wonderful, wonderful man. Not so keen about his son, who I knew personally, but Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel, almost wonderful man. One of my favourite all time favourites, Rav Kook.

Q: "Why they say he should be over 40 study?"

A: Again, only because of this idea of it's not that easy and you can misunderstand it. And how many people like Madonna, think they know what the Kabbalah is about? Well, that's a bit of a joke. So, until you have a solid base, it's like you really wouldn't start wanting to study Shakespeare with somebody who's only been brought up at primary school level English.

Q: "What do you feel about Kabbalah Centre "that's present in many comes with the world?"

A: The same thing as I said before. It takes, parts of the Kabbalah, turns it into a kind of a universalist self-help, happy clappy, wishy-washy, but it works for people. And most people are happy to have an easily digestive wishy-washy thing. But I'm always suspicious of people who want money from you. I'm always suspicious of teachers who squeeze you for more cash, although I'm not against popularising Kabbalah. So, long as you realise that as I said before, it's a cartoon version, not the real thing.

Q: "I understand Knights Templars were incorporated."

A: There were stories about Knights Templars. They weren't very supportive of the Jews, but I've no doubt that a lot of the mystical, traditional, the Cathars in the South of France adopted that these sort of things were, if you like, influenced by the Jewish mysticism and other forms of mysticism as well.

Q: Next question, "What part is numerology?"

A: Well, that's a good question. Numerology plays a very big part in Jewish cultural life.

Sorry, I just have to make a connection, because my battery is running out and I need to put it in to make sure that I carry on with this. So, here we are. Let's go back to where the question was.

The Hebrew language is quite unique in the sense that every letter has a number attached to it. And because the Hebrew language is based on roots, on basic roots, it doesn't have vowels. Every letter recurs more often than you would in any other language sometimes. And particularly words like God. Yod Hay Waw Hay. 10, five, six, five, 10. These are vowels that constantly recur. So, because they do, because the indefinite article, the is a letter Hay. Because all female endings are letters Hay you are bound to be able to come up with patterns in the Hebrew language. And, therefore, it's basically fun to get the numeral value. And it is part of a scholarly tradition. The trouble is that, for example, I give you a simple example. The Hebrew word for a judge, yeah, has the same numerical value as an idiot, tipesh. So the same word for an ass, can be mercy, racham. So it really depends on what you're looking to find. If you're looking to find something, if you're looking to find something that predicts through numerology or through the text or the letters of the Torah, that rabbins are going to be assassinated, it depends on how you spell rabbin.

With two Ys and one. Very many of these so-called codes play a game that anybody can play. And in fact, I've once seen an advert actually in Sydney and Australia. Come and see how it's all proved to be the word of God. The codes prove the Quran is the work of God and I know people do that also with books in English too. So, I find numerology interesting, it's fun. It's the way of making, combining interesting ideas. Like any sermon is, like any kind of commentary is. It's a tool, but there's no magic in it at all. And if like me, you're not a numerate sort of person, then it doesn't speak to you, shall we say, as much as something visual does. But some people like it and I'm all in favour of anybody playing it if they want to play it as a game. But to think that it predicts something or it forecasts something or it is something that you should act upon, because, shall we say, the numerical value of your name is 117 and the numerical value of this boy you just met in the bar is 117. Therefore, this is you ought to get married. No, bad move.

Q: "Three branches of Kabbalah."

A: Yes, there's theoretical Kabbalah. The idea is of creation, of humanity, of how the world works. There's the practical. How do we do this, how do we meditate, how do we pray, how do

we contemplate, how do we experience God? And then there's what we call the folkloristic, The hocus pocus, the medicine, the cure, the rabbis, the blessings and all these kind of things, which might help you in a way of placebo, but it's certainly not going to get you anywhere closer to God.

"I'm far from being Orthodox, "could you please?" Yes, so we've repeated that one. I mean, I think it's got, I think I don't like labels. I don't like Orthodox, non-Orthodox, or fore, conservative. I like people who are trying to experience and get through to the core of Jewish experience and you need to do that by practising . But everybody chooses what to practise. People say people choose, unfortunately, everybody chooses Even the Haredi people choose, whether they're going to have a vaccination or not or how many people are going to have to a wedding or not. Everybody chooses. Where to be strict, and where to be lenient. There is a constitution. I believe in the constitution, I believe in that structure to be there as a guideline, but I also believe that people have to find their own way to God. And it doesn't matter what denomination you are. We're all human beings and we're all trying to get through life as best we can, as the most successful as we can.

Q: "Do you think there aren't so many Jewish "that think that so many not Jewish people "are in nowadays, interested in studying Kabbalah?"

A: Well, I think so because I think we live in a world in which science for all is great advance, hasn't helped many of us on the personal level. Stress, strain, anxiety is more than it's ever been. And, therefore, human beings need ways of coping. Religion is a way of coping, mysticism of way of coping. Psychiatrists are a way of coping and self-help a way of coping. And astrology is a way of coping. And we choose what works for us. Of course, I believe in living a Jewish practical and spiritual life but that's 'cause it works for me and I enjoy it. Not because I think I'm going to be, oh, struck with lightning if I disobey it or I'm going to go to hell if I don't or anything like that. So, I'm interested primarily in making a success of my life, now on earth.

Q: "Where does Chabad-Lubavitch?"

A: Well, Chabad-Lubavitch is a mystical Hasidic tradition and it has its structures. There are lots of others. We see it around, but it's one of the smaller of the Hasidic traditions. Satu Mare is much bigger in Israel. Gere and Bells are much bigger there. Each Hasidic movement has its own take, its own set of customs, its own way of dressing. So that's one way. If it's a convenient way, you might start there but don't think it's the only way and don't think that it's absolutely, divinely ordained that this is the truth. Thank you for answering.

Q: "What's the relationship between Kabbalah and Hasidut?"

A: Well, as I think I mentioned, Hasidut has adopted Kabbalah as its core influence on the spirit as opposed to the letter. The letter is still the essential Torah, Gemara and classic Halakhah literature. But it is the heirs to sum of the spirit. But whereas the original spirit of mysticism was

to be innovative, my complaint against Habad is that it's no longer innovative. It's still stuck and probably needs to be in the tradition set out by the rebels, because that's what's made them so successful. It's rather like having a franchise. They've got the best franchise in Judaism in the block. They are the McDonald's of Judaism. But not everybody wants McDonald's. Some people prefer Colonel Sanders or PizzaExpress. "We've said, where women figure wing "will fear prominently, "and you have to find them." And particularly in Israel, you'll find very many women who are Kabbalists, who are very good. There's Mimi Feigelson, Rabbi Professor Dr. Mimi Feigelson comes to mind. But there are plenty of others. Israel is so creative. There's so much rubbish there, but there's so much wonderful stuff there. There's nowhere in the world, where you'll get as much resources on Judaism, whether it's academic or whether it's religious or whether it's mystical. I can name any number of places. I could recommend you to go to in Israel. Whereas in the diaspora, hardly one that I regard as really being in the top league. But there we are. Sorry.

Shivi Alavi, "What is his leg?" Shivi Alavi, A, Shivi Alavi. Sorry, it doesn't mean anything to me. Can we carry on?

Mike Dhan, "In Egypt, there was, "but Israelites ignored this." Well, we don't know exactly what they all ignored or didn't know. In the Amadou, we talk about reviving the dead. Yes, but what does reviving the dead mean? It doesn't necessarily literally mean coming back from the dead, after all, that's the same blessing, which we talk about rain. We bless God for rain in that and rain is like bringing the earth back to life. It's like reviving. It's like people given up for dead can still survive. That God has the power over life and death. The words of our prayers are poems. They're an agenda of ideas to play with, not to take literally or to try to work out the logic of them, it's to stimulate. If you to think about ideas, what is life all about? What happens? What should I do?

Your thought, "What is known Kabbalah Centre?" Yeah. Yes.

- I think let's take two more questions, Jeremy, because you've been going a long time and I want to give you a break. Thank you.

- Whatever you say, you're the boss. Okay, so two more questions.

Q: "I studied, I was 40. "It was a necessary, because student only experience. "Would you agree with that? "And by the way, it used to be your part-time secretary "when you used to be the rabbi at the Western Synagogue."

A: Cynthia, oh yeah. Where was the days of the Western Synagogue are a long time ago. Look, sort of I don't believe in any kind of censorship. I believe that as in secular education, when you're ready to study something you should study and take it seriously. And so, I don't think that this 40 business needs to be taken literally.

Q: And now we've got Ken, the last one, "I guess, that differentiates "the intellectual knowledgeable individual "who studies Kabbalah from someone like Madonna "who simply finds it some in concise "in your opinions, comment. "Yes, I agree with you. "Is there finally the equivalent of Nirvana in Kabbalah?"

A: Yes, but Nirvana in Kabbalah means closeness to God. So the idea that God is the universe is also acceptable, but that we can unite with God in that universe and that's the difference. Buddhism isn't interested in the idea of God as we understand. It's something transcendental, something beyond. Whereas we are, so we take it, if you like, a stage further. Nirvana or the right way, that's the way to go. Get as good as you can be, do the right thing in the skillful thing. But in the end, it's the relationship that matters and you that matter. And at that point, thank you very much for listening. Next week, you will hear my controversial view on Purim.

Okay, Wendy? I lost you. I've lost you. Okay, too bad.

- I'm trying to unmute, am I unmuted now?

- Yeah, you're unmute.

- I'm sure I'm unmuted. Oh, okay. All right, thank you very much. Sorry, I think I was muted by my office. Thank you, Jeremy, that was fabulous. Thank you, and always.

- Take care. Keep warm.

- And very, very informative. I think we need to, so we really need to start with the text. Start with the text and then we will graduate to Kabbalah, right?

- Okey dokey. Okay, I like that.

- Thanks, good. Bye-bye.