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P A R T I

SEEKING A NEW VISION

1

Opening the World of Kabbalah

The need to reach the rock-bottom of truth, the desire to know the very source and origin of life, this is a religious urge that impels man beyond the physical, the material, in his longing for a transcendental truth. This is the inquiry that would encompass the whole of life, down to its root.

—RABBI MORDECAI MILLER¹

From Concealment to Revelation

A hidden tradition. Esoteric, complicated, dangerous. Only a few could study it, and it was carefully guarded from the unlearned and outsiders.

This is the reputation of Kabbalah, as the ancient tradition of Jewish mysticism is known. Today, however, its basic teachings are available to the general educated public. Movie stars study Kabbalah. You can pick up at your local bookstore numerous books that introduce the basic vocabulary and conceptual structure of Kabbalah. Other books offer insights on Jewish meditation. Academic works purport to reveal the psychology or social history of mysticism.

Yet if you think about it, this sudden accessibility is a little suspicious. If Kabbalah was so secret for so long, how can we approach it so easily now? If it is so difficult, how can it be made simple enough for a popular audience? And if it has been around

for millennia, why is it coming to the fore at this time? Is there something special about the resurgence of Jewish mystical tradition among the many religious theories and many forms of meditation and self-improvement available today?

Kabbalah has been hidden to a considerable degree, and the fact that it is coming into public vision now is no accident. The Jewish mystics have taught that although all spiritual teaching goes back to the original Divine revelation encapsulated at Mount Sinai (Exodus 20), the particular form in which a teaching appears is appropriate to its era and its audience. There is a rabbinic saying: “God provides the remedy before the disease.” The appearance of Kabbalah in public means that Jewish mysticism has something unique to offer, a power for healing the spirit as we move into a radically new future.

Many thinkers now acknowledge that the dominant inherited thought systems of the modern West no longer are sufficient to nourish human and planetary life. As a result, various forms of ancient spirituality, formerly esoteric and inaccessible, are now being translated into terms comprehensible to a popular audience. We do not yet know exactly how to do this translation. Some of the richness of complex traditions like Kabbalah is undoubtedly lost in the process of popularization. But if the wisdom of the core teachings can be preserved and transmitted, the tradeoff is worthwhile. We—collective humanity—must rethink and reimagine our world and our personal lives along spiritual lines.

Kabbalah offers truly unique insights that enable us, as the *Sefer Yetzirah* says, to probe into the realities of the world.² Moreover, it presents its truths in an expansive and unusually comprehensive framework. Many books talk about holistic perspectives, but Kabbalah makes clear that holism must be integrated with an appreciation of plurality and diversity. It also insists that we view our personal journeys in the larger context of what is happening in God’s world, for that is the only way to avoid creating another mystical narcissism. Kabbalah thus enables

us to see the depth dimension in all aspects of life, from family relations to politics and technology.

This book will provide you with guideposts in understanding Kabbalah. As you absorb the lessons of Jewish mysticism, you will be able to think in new ways—as a citizen of the cosmos—and align your life with the greatest spiritual aspirations of humankind.

Remembering Who We Are

Let's start with a basic question: Why is it that human beings encounter so many problems in life? Why are we beset with war and racism, political and ethnic conflicts, disharmony with our environment, and shattering events in our personal lives? Kabbalah tells us that the ultimate cause of our problems, from our personal lives to the widest range of humanity, is forgetting who we are. We have forgotten our true selves and our true purpose. This teaching brings us some good news: In our deepest core, we do know who we are. When we rediscover it, we will recognize it because it is not alien to us. This teaching comes ultimately from the Bible, which clearly states that human beings are made in the Divine image—that is who we truly are. Our purpose is to become clear mirrors of Divinity. Sometimes we see glimpses of our true inner selves, our Divine selves. But most of the time, in our haze of half-knowing, we create layer upon layer of delusion about our lives.

Strangely enough, the Jewish mystics also say that our forgetting is necessary so that God's purpose in creating the earth can be accomplished. If we remembered with clarity why we are here, we would not have free choice. We would simply be robots programmed to do what we were told. But if we are truly to manifest Godliness we cannot be robots, because one of the characteristics of the Divine is the ability to create freely. Thus, by obscuring our origins, God was able to give us free choice—to choose whether or not to manifest as loving, creative images of the Divine.

This is simply the nature of earthly existence according to Kabbalah. Many other forms of mysticism agree. Robert Frost, in a little-known poem called “The Trial of Existence,” writes of the forgetting that accompanies earthly incarnation. He puts the words in God’s mouth very poignantly:

... Always God speaks at the end,
 “One thought in agony of strife
 The bravest would have by for friend,
 The memory that he chose the life;
 But the pure fate to which you go
 Admits no memory of choice,
 Or the woe were not earthly woe
 To which you give the assenting voice.”³

We volunteered for earthly service, but part of the package is that we cannot remember doing so. That is what makes life such a challenge.

Along with forgetting who we are comes another problem: self-doubt. Our uncertainty about what we are doing here distorts everything in our culture. We live in a time when human beings have achieved more than people of previous centuries could even dream. On the surface, we appear to be a species of self-confident, assured creatures. But our culture reveals the opposite: Books, newspaper columns, talk shows, and self-help groups constantly address the issue of self-esteem. Group rivalry and ethnic conflict escalate to shore up weak social identities. Why are we so insecure? To use a New Testament image, we have built our houses on sand instead of rock. The sand is the idea that we are separate, independent individuals, desperately competing in an alien world. The rock is our connection to God. When we are not in touch with the ultimate Source that can give us a picture of our true worth, we will slip and slide into the sea of false knowledge that inundates our information age. What we need is the deep knowledge of ourselves as truly

created in the image of God. We must experience ourselves as creative, loving, and profoundly connected to each other and to the rest of creation.

The idea that we are made in the image of God is such an awesome thought that we hide it from ourselves. The great modern Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote sadly, “The man of today shrinks from the light.”⁴ We may say, “Well, maybe we’re made in the Divine image,” but then we counter by saying, “We can’t really know God. So what good is it anyway?” Kabbalah emphasizes, on the contrary, that while we may not be able to know God’s essence, we can think about God and understand how teachings about the Divine plan apply to our lives.

Kabbalah teaches us directly about Godliness, about Divinity. Scholars have called it a “theosophy,” which means “wisdom about the Divine.” Only when we have a grasp on the meaning of Divinity and Divine purpose can we possibly understand what we are here for. Intellectual work is thus an important part of Kabbalah. If we ask questions and are told “you just have to accept it,” that’s insufficient. We can’t just recite words and phrases that are meaningless to us. We may not be able to understand everything, but at least we have to put in the effort. While traditional religious virtues like faith and trust are important categories in Judaism generally and in Kabbalah in particular, we must also be willing to embark on a journey that will stretch the mind.

Often social customs and pressures discourage us from this effort. Most established religious traditions have tried to place limits on people’s search for the deeper truths. Religious authorities often believed that esoteric wisdom was dangerous to the social order, because religious enthusiasm could often be manipulated by the unscrupulous (as indeed it has). Historically, mysticism has also been seen as dangerous to those in power, as mystics who believe in the Divine image in everyone have tended to be concerned about equity and justice. As a result, many of us have been taught to believe that one has to be a very saintly person to be truly “in the image of God.” It’s beyond the reach

of ordinary folk. Different religious traditions have put this belief in different ways. Some say that only one person was really Godly, and all we can do is rely on what that person said and did thousands of years ago. Others say that we can reach a level equivalent to divinity, but it takes a person a multitude of lifetimes. Still others tell us that we can do it, but we have to give up worldly pleasures, become ascetics, and cut off our ties to the world.

These views are all contrary to the teachings of Jewish mysticism. All of us have the gifts we need to reflect the image of God, each in our own unique way. The very fact that we have arrived here, in human incarnation, tells us that we have the courage to take on the task. Although Kabbalah teaches that we may reincarnate in different bodies to accomplish our soul's mission, we always have the possibility of completing that mission in our present lifetime. Moreover, Kabbalah was not cultivated in an atmosphere completely separated from daily life. Judaism never had monks and nuns who withdrew from ordinary life to nourish their spirituality. Most rabbis, including many kabbalists, worked for a living at some trade or business. If they wanted to be close to God, they had to spend time at it, but most had to do it while they were living a normal life.

Today, although we are busy and often preoccupied with day-to-day matters, many of us actively desire to have our entire lives permeated with spirituality. We want to work at creating our lives around a higher ideal. The teachings of Kabbalah are appropriate because Judaism says that our "temple" is the home as well as the synagogue or religious institution; that marrying and raising children is just as holy as having a separated spiritual life; that caring for our bodies and minds is as important as spiritual experience.

Of course special times and activities such as retreats and purifications can be helpful as part of a spiritual practice. Mystics in Judaism as in other traditions were known to depart from the normal person's routine—for example, by sleeping less or fasting more. But Judaism holds that, for most people, separations from

the world should be temporary and limited, enabling us to refresh our connection to Spirit. We must then return to the world and integrate what we have received. This is the point of our effort, for the ultimate goal is that *the whole world will become a vessel for Divinity*. When humans reach the point of “From my flesh I will see God!” as Job says (19:26), the purpose of creation will be realized. We will have remembered and fully realized our Divine image.

Kabbalah provides a unique system for enabling us to do this. It continually tries to point us to the deeper levels of everything we do. Nothing in the world is outside its purview. Kabbalah teaches, for example, that our true Divine purpose can never be completely forgotten. If we look with a compassionate eye at our lives and at the society we live in, we can perceive that most people are indeed striving for spiritual greatness but have expressed that striving only in partial, truncated ways. Science’s quest for power over nature, an individual’s aspiration for wealth and honor, our desperate searches for love and pleasure are all part of the same effort. They are all part of Divinity—love, power, honor, and delight are all attributes of God. But in our society they are usually cut off from their ultimate Source, so they do not give full satisfaction.

For Kabbalah, everything is a metaphor that provides access to ultimate reality. Problems that arise on one level can be resolved on another. And at each point, we are thrown back to the question “How can we manifest Godliness? How can we be Divine?”

Is Kabbalah Only for Jews?

God isn’t only for Jews, so neither is Kabbalah. While there are some aspects of Kabbalah that are almost impossible to understand without absorbing a great deal of Jewish tradition, Kabbalah as a theosophy is primarily about understanding what God is (as far as we can understand) and who we are as refractions of the Divine image. Because of this, it is important for all peoples.

Yet, according to the popular conception among Jews, you couldn't study Kabbalah unless you were forty years old, married, and male—and, traditionally, Jewish. What these criteria meant was that a student should be mature, well grounded in the basics of Judaism (including Talmud), and stable in his personal life. Because a strong grounding in biblical and Talmudic texts was presupposed, women were not included. Women were taught the portions of Torah necessary to live a Jewish life, which was a considerable amount of learning, but they generally did not have access to Talmudic learning or extensive biblical commentaries. Rules also restricted certain kinds of kabbalistic interpretation and use of Divine names. All these restrictions would apply to non-Jews even more.

There were good reasons for the restrictions. If one studied kabbalistic texts without an appropriate background, one could easily misinterpret them. An uneducated interpreter would be like a person trying to fill a doctor's prescription without going to pharmaceutical school—even if you could read the writing, you wouldn't understand the code. Nevertheless, restrictions on some teachings were gradually lifted beginning around the twelfth century, and writings of masters of Kabbalah slowly became accessible to the literate Jewish population. At certain periods in the Middle Ages mystical teachings became quite widespread. Admittedly, widespread in medieval and early modern times did not mean what it does today. When books had to be copied painstakingly by hand, they were expensive and scarce. The writings of the mystical masters were more difficult than biblical Hebrew, and some were in Aramaic. Even after the printing revolution of the sixteenth century, the literate Jewish population who could read those languages well was largely limited to males. The subject matter of the mystical writings was highly esoteric, including many intricate interpretations of Hebrew letters and words and their numerical value. Nevertheless, over the centuries, the general concepts of Jewish mysticism gradually became available to those who sought them. The concepts of

medieval Kabbalah were familiar to some Christian scholars and mystics. By the time of the Renaissance, those teachings were regarded as part of the general heritage of Western mysticism—some Christians even used them to support Christian doctrine! Kabbalah was also influential in the theosophical movements that emerged in nineteenth-century Europe and North America (and which may have influenced Robert Frost).

In short, Kabbalah in the general sense has not always been limited to Jews, and some of the basic concepts of Kabbalah, such as we will study in this book, can be understood without intensive Jewish education. More intricate teachings are difficult to access from outside of Judaism, and it is probably wise to be suspicious of anyone who says they are teaching deep mysteries to people without background in Judaism. It is also the case that many Jewish scholars still insist on limiting most Jewish teachings, including Kabbalah, to Jews. Some even teach, on the basis of certain mystical traditions, that Jews have a different kind of soul from non-Jews. While I don't subscribe to that viewpoint, I would be misleading my readers if I didn't acknowledge its existence.

Even if one could have defended such a viewpoint in earlier times, I believe that it is no longer relevant. We are part of one world, and we all need to understand each other at the deepest levels. Opening up the insights of our mystics can be a significant step in that direction. By learning something about Kabbalah, you can deepen your insight into the highest teachings of your own tradition, whether you are Jewish or a practitioner of another spiritual approach.

How Kabbalah Can Help You

Kabbalah is exciting because it is so multidimensional. Ever since I began my studies with rabbis from Hasidic traditions that were shaped by Kabbalah, I was fascinated by its conceptual structure. Soon I learned that people in these traditions—primarily Lubavitch and Breslov—were practicing various forms of meditation, which I had thought was only for Hindus and Buddhists. At

the same time, I saw an intense devotion to what I had always loved about Judaism, namely, an insistence on applying spirituality to practical action in the world. As I continued my own studies, I discovered teachings about physical health, emotional development, childhood education, and relationships. And in each case I found that when my teachers explained the issue in depth, they were drawing me back to that single focus: Bring God into the world. You and I, each one of us personally, has the job of bringing God in, daily, nightly, weekly, yearly. All of us, collectively, are creating the body of God.⁵ The task was awesome and challenging, and at the same time delightful and deeply meaningful.

That task is what I want to introduce to you in the chapters that follow. Kabbalah is a theology that gives rise to a cosmology and an anthropology. As a theology, it presents God as active, in dynamic interaction with the created world. As a cosmology, it shows how the world emanates from God. As an anthropology, it is a map of humanity in our effort to approach the Divine and to bring Divinity into our corner of the cosmos. In Chapter 2, I will offer an overall perspective of this cosmology and anthropology, and introduce the basic vocabulary that we will use. This vocabulary may not be familiar, but will become almost second nature by the time you reach the end of the book. Several alternative translations of the Hebrew terminology are in use; I have adapted them to convey, as best as possible, the various levels of Divine manifestation that Kabbalah is trying to express.

Then, in Part II, we will examine in greater detail the kabbalistic map of Divinity, the way that God expresses Godself in the world. I call this “The Unfolding of Creation.” The three chapters in this section look at the kabbalistic “Tree of Life” from the top down. An especially exciting aspect of this side of our study is that kabbalistic teachings seem to run parallel to some of today’s most advanced scientific cosmologies, and I will allude to some of these parallels.