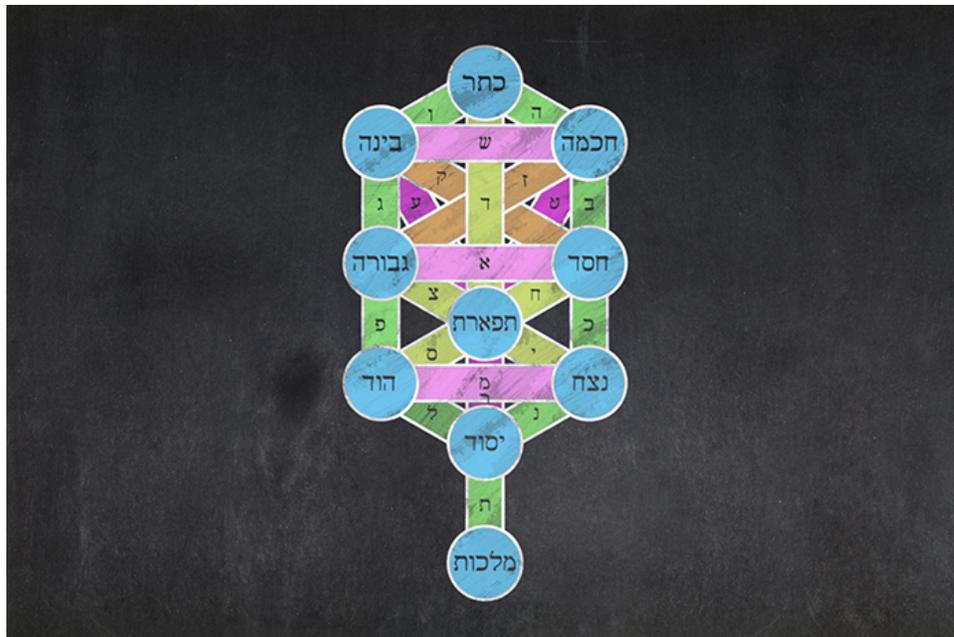


Home / Beliefs & Practices / Spirituality

What is Kabbalah?

Rabbi Geoffrey W. Dennis



Kabbalah (also spelled Kabalah, Cabala, Qabala) — sometimes translated as “mysticism” or “occult knowledge” — is a part of Jewish tradition that deals with the essence of God. Whether a sacred text, an experience, or the way things work, Kabbalists believe that God moves in mysterious ways. However, Kabbalists also believe that true knowledge and understanding of

that inner, mysterious process is obtainable, and through that knowledge, the greatest intimacy with God can be attained.

The Zohar, a collection of written, mystical commentaries on the Torah, is considered to be the underpinning of Kabbalah. Written in medieval Aramaic and medieval Hebrew, the Zohar is intended to guide Kabbalists in their spiritual journey, helping them attain the connectedness with God that they desire.

Kabbalistic thought is often considered Jewish mysticism. Its practitioners tend to view the Creator and the Creation as a continuum, rather than as discrete entities, and they desire intimacy with God. This desire is especially intense because of the powerful mystical sense of kinship that Kabbalists believe exists between God and humanity. Within the soul of every individual is a hidden part of God that is waiting to be revealed. Even mystics who refuse to describe such a fusion of God and man so boldly still find the whole of Creation suffused in divinity, breaking down distinctions between God and the universe. Thus, the Kabbalist Moses Cordovero writes, “The essence of divinity is found in every single thing, nothing but It exists....It exists in each existent.”

There are three dimensions to almost all forms of Jewish mysticism, which are likely to be understood by only small numbers of people who possess specialized knowledge or interest in the topic:

- The investigative
- The experiential
- The practical

The investigative aspect of Kabbalah involves searching the hidden reality of the universe for secret knowledge about its origins and its organization—a quest that is more esoteric than mystical. In Jewish tradition, there are three ways esoteric knowledge can be obtained:

1. By interpreting sacred texts to uncover *nistar* (“hidden” meaning)
2. By oral transmission of tradition from a Kabbalistic master
3. By direct revelation, which might include visitation by an angel or Elijah, spirit possession, or other supra-rational experience

Although it is primarily interested in metaphysics, things beyond the physical universe, investigative Kabbalah is not anti-rational. All Jewish mystical/esoteric traditions adopt the language of, and expand upon, the philosophic and even scientific ideas of their time.

The experiential dimension of Kabbalah involves the actual quest for mystical experience: a direct, intuitive, unmediated encounter with a close, but concealed, Deity. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in his book, “Man is Not Alone,” mystics “...want to taste the whole wheat of spirit before it is ground by the millstones of reason.” Mystics specifically seek the ecstatic experience of God, not merely knowledge about God. In their quest to encounter God, Jewish mystics live spiritually disciplined lives. Although neither formal nor informal monasticism is sanctioned by Jewish mysticism, experiential Kabbalists tend to be ascetics. Nonetheless, Judaism keeps its mystics grounded; they are expected to marry, raise a family, and fulfill all customary communal religious obligations. Therefore, many willfully

expand the sphere of their religious practice beyond what tradition requires, creating *hanganot*, personal daily devotional practices. In his will, one Kabbalist recommended this regime to his sons: periods of morning, afternoon, evening, and midnight prayer, two hours devoted to the Bible, four and a half to Talmud, two to ethical and mystical texts, two to other Jewish texts, one and a half hours to daily care, as well as time to make a living with five hours left to sleep!

The practical dimension of Kabbalah involves rituals for gaining and exercising power to effect change in our world and in the celestial worlds beyond ours. This power is generated by performing commandments, summoning and controlling angelic and demonic forces, and otherwise tapping into the supernatural energies present in creation. The practical aspect of Kabbalah furthers God's intention in the world, advancing good, subduing evil, healing, and mending. The true master of this art fulfills the human potential to be a co-creator with God.

Historians of Judaism identify many schools of Jewish esotericism across time, each with its own unique interests and beliefs. Technically, the term "Kabbalah" applies only to writings that emerged in medieval Spain and southern France beginning in the 13th century. Beyond academia, however, the term "Kabbalah" is a catchall for all forms of Jewish esotericism.

As noted above, Jewish mystics are not like monks or hermits. Kabbalists tend to be part of social circles rather than lone seekers. With few exceptions, such as the wandering mystic Abraham Abulafia, esoterically inclined Jews tend to congregate in mystical as-

sociations, and it is not unusual for a single master to bring forth a new and innovative mystical school which yields multiple generations of a particular mystical practice. Although Kabbalah has been the practice of select Jewish “circles” until recently, most of what we know about it comes from the many literary works that have been recognized as “mystical” or “esoteric.”

From these mystical works, scholars have identified many distinctive mystical schools including the Hechalot mystics, the German Pietists, the Zoharic Kabbalah, the ecstatic school of Abraham Abulafia, the teachings of Isaac Luria, and Chasidism. These schools can be categorized further based on individual masters and their disciples. Most mystical movements are deeply indebted to the writings of earlier schools, even as they add innovative interpretations and new systems of thought to the existing teachings. In contemporary Reform congregations, the observances of Kabbalat Shabbat, havdalah, and the Tu BiShvat seder derive from Kabbalistic traditions.

Spirituality

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September 17, 2025

Trauma is the response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms an individual’s ability to cope, causes feelings of helplessness, and diminishes their sense of self and their ability to feel the full range of emotions and experiences. Many of

us in the Jewish community have experienced some sort of trauma or grief due to October 7th, the ongoing conflict, and the global rise in antisemitism.



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September 1, 2025

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July 28, 2025

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