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The Mysteries of the Kabbalah: Moving Deeper into the Life You Already Have

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In response to the word Kabbalah, many people have a vague notion that it relates to a mysterious branch of the Jewish tradition. Others may add that it involves reading arcane texts. If you dig deeper, three additional themes include:

1. That what we humans sometimes refer to with the letters G-d is *infinite*—and the Kabbalah concerns our finite attempts to perceive aspects of what is ultimately beyond us.
2. In the often male-dominated world of religion, Kabbalah also famously includes the *Shekhinah*, the feminine half of the divine.
3. Many social justice advocates are interested in the Kabbalistic emphasis on *tikkun olam*, the role we humans have in “repairing the world.”

But these themes are broad strokes, and the Kabbalah is often much more about the details.

Indeed, for those of us who spend most of our time in the English-speaking world, the Kabbalah can seem like a rarified, esoteric tradition. And in one sense, it is. But if you were to travel to Israel and pay close attention, you would begin to encounter the word Kabbalah with surprising frequency. As Joseph Dan traces in his excellent book Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford University Press, 2006), at its root, the word Kabbalah means “to receive”:

- If you are checking in to a hotel in Israel, you would go to desk with a large sign reading, *Kabbalah*, meaning that it is the “reception” desk, where new guests are *received*.
- If you buy anything in Israel you will receive a slip of paper with the word *Kabbalah* at the top, indicating that it is your “receipt” for the goods or services you have *received*.
- During your travels through Israel, if you attend a reception, you might notice people referring to the event as a *kabbalat panim* (literally “receiving the face”)—so a reception is kabbalistic because it is a place where your face is *received*.
- If you need to visit a bank or government office, “the hours in which clerks *receive* the public” are the *kabalat kahal*.
- Similarly, if you were to enroll in a class, a professor’s “office hours,” the time during which students are *received*, is known as the *sheat kabbalah*.

Here’s the twist: most Hebrew-speaking Israelis don’t pay any more attention to the many references to *kabbalah* all around them than tourists do. The word is so common that it is treated as unremarkable (3).

And with that insight, we can begin to get to the heart of the matter. **Esoteric traditions are often about training yourself to notice the sacred depths that are already around us.** I’ll give you a few quick examples:

- My meditation teacher often says, one of the most helpful practices from the Buddhist tradition is, “Noticing what you are noticing while you are noticing it.” It’s harder than it sounds. Typically our “monkey minds” want to do many other things than simply noticing what is actually happening in each present moment.
- Or there’s an adage from the Hindu tradition that, “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.” Part of the implication is that the teacher (in various different forms) has always been around, but the missing ingredient is our readiness to *notice*.
- Along those lines, you may know the saying from many spiritual teachers that, “We don’t perceive the world merely as it is; we perceive the world *as we are*.”

So, on a surface level, a receipt is just a receipt, a reception is just a reception, and office hours are just office hours. On a deeper level, the Kabbalistic tradition—which at its root means “to receive”—invites us to notice the surprising aspects we might be

capable of *receiving* from even the most mundane circumstances if we open our heart, mind, and spirit.

One of the most powerful archetypal symbols for the shift I'm talking about is cut into the ground between our congregation's sanctuary and our chapel across the courtyard from it. Our labyrinth is a unicursal pattern: there is only one way in and one way out. You are never lost, even if it might feel that way sometimes along the journey.

The labyrinth can serve as a corrective for one of the biggest misperceptions about spiritual growth: that it is primarily about getting somewhere else—often to some allegedly perfect place, where the grass is supposedly greener. (Don't get me wrong: sometimes the grass really is toxic where you are—and you need to go some place else. More often, it's not the grass that needs to change, it's us. As the proverb says, "Wherever you go, there you are.") So a labyrinth, as symbol of the spiritual journey, invites us to *move deeper into the life we already have*, to more fully notice the sacredness of everyday life—to more deeply perceive the potential for connection and transformation in acts as simple as receiving a receipt for someone's *time and effort*, receiving *hospitality* at a reception, or receiving someone's *attention* during office hours.

The Jewish Kabbalistic tradition has sought to achieve this shift in awareness most frequently through a close reading of texts that might seem mundane until their deeper meaning emerges through careful study. And regarding the texts typically associated with the Kabbalah, I should add a few cautions. If you were to find yourself discussing the origins of the Kabbalah with a traditional orthodox Jew, they would likely tell you that 4,000 years ago on Mount Sinai, the prophet Moses 'received' (*Kabbalah!*) directly from G-d, not only the "Written Torah" (which, according to tradition, was written down as the first five books of the Bible), but also the "Oral Torah," which was "secretly transmitted from generation to generation": first from Moses to Joshua, then to the Elders, then to "the judges, the prophets, and the early *sages* of the Talmud"—all the way down to the Middle Ages when some of the classic Kabbalistic texts were first written down (4-5).

That is a beautiful story, but historians of religion tell the story differently—just as they would tell us that Moses did not author the Torah. The Kabbalah is not pure unbroken tradition from Moses to today. Instead, scholars have shown that the

Kabbalah is an innovative spin on tradition “which first appeared in southern Europe in the last decades of the twelfth century” (6). The Kabbalists in the Middle Ages were neither copying ancient manuscripts nor writing down oral tradition, but instead *composing new ideas* in creative response to the tradition that preceded them (32-33).

To be clear about where I’m coming from, as a Unitarian Universalist, my inclination is to say, “Not that there’s anything wrong with that.” To me, **the Kabbalah is no less interesting as a source of spiritual wisdom because it is 800 years old instead of 4,000 years old.** As a pragmatist, I’m interested in “what works” to help us live meaningful and ethical lives—whether the source of wisdom is millennia old or five minutes old.

Noting the relatively recent origins of the Kabbalah is also not new. There have been Jewish thinkers who have estimated the likely medieval origins of the Kabbalah since at least the late sixteenth century, around the time of the Protestant Reformation. That being said, if you find yourself discussing the Kabbalah with an orthodox Jew, be forewarned that this area can be a minefield. For orthodox Jews, the discovery by historians that, for example, the Zohar (a classic Kabbalistic text) was written not in the second century, but more than a millennia later at the end of the thirteen century is “regarded as the beginning of heresy” (31). But for better or worse, we UUs are many things, but orthodox is not one of them. And heresy simply means to choose for yourself.

Having spent some time exploring the Kabbalah, I also wanted to be sure to spend a little time on the life and legacy of Gershom Scholem. He is the primary reason we know as much as we do about the Kabbalah today from a modern perspective. “He made research into Kabbalah a truly scientific field of Jewish studies.... He created the tools and he did most of the work, baking the bricks and building the entire building” that new generations of scholars now inhabit” (Zadoff 2018: 222).

However, in looking back at his life, I find it fascinating that it was far from evident at early points in his life that Scholem would soar to such heights. To give you a brief overview, he was born in 1897 in Berlin, Germany to a middle-class Jewish family (Engel 2017: 3). But for someone whose name has become synonymous with the study

of Jewish mysticism, his childhood was decidedly secular. Although his family maintained some Jewish rituals, they also had a Christmas tree each year. And his father would routinely mock the weekly ritual of kindling Shabbat candles by lighting his cigar in their flames and chanting—not “blessed be the one who brings forth bread from the earth or the fruit of the vine”—but *Brei pri tobacco*, “Blessed is the fruit of tobacco” (Prochnik 2017: 28). At age 14, Scholem had what he called a “Jewish awakening” of a sudden interest in his Jewish heritage, but ultimately never felt like he fully fit in either orthodox or liberal Jewish circles (26, 34).

Seeking to find his place in the world, in 1923, while in his mid-twenties, he emigrated to Palestine (Engel 4). He did not know how he would make a living—and his father was extremely discouraging of his choices:

He was disappointed to hear that his twenty-six-year-old son, who had just received his Ph.D. in Semitic culture from Munich University, had turned down a research position at Berlin University in order to travel to Palestine [where] Gershom had no real prospect of employment. He left Germany with nothing but a handful of contacts and the hope that his German state certification in mathematics would enable him to obtain a teaching position. (99)

Fortunately, within a week of being in Jerusalem he received two job offers: math teacher or librarian. Although the salary was lower, he chose librarian because it offered more freedom to be self-directed. Four years later, he transitioned to being a full-time lecturer in Kabbalah at the then-new Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where he remained the rest of his career (Zadoff 4).

We know now that he was to attain world renown as a scholar, but in these early days he forged ahead despite the risk of failure and the major discouragement of his father, who wrote the following to him about his appointment: “Three cheers for Hebraica and Judaica, but not as a career! You will suffer a bad shipwreck and who knows if it will prove too difficult for you to reach safe shores, since you are all too lacking in strong arms” (Biale 2018: 79). His father did not live long enough for his son to demonstrate how wrong his judgements were. Today, almost four decades after

Scholem's death in 1982, his work in scholarship in the Kabbalah continues to be widely read and his influence lives on.

I don't know if Scholem ever fully forgave his father for his repeatedly harsh words over the years. But I suspect some of you can identify with harsh words being said to you by someone in your life. And one of the reasons I chose this Sunday to focus on Gershom Scholem and the Kabbalah is that we are nearing the end of the middle of the Jewish High Holy Days, which stretch from Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) to Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). The ten days in total are also known collectively as the Days of Repentance or the Days of Awe. And as contemporary UUs —open to drawing wisdom from the world's religions, balanced with the insights of modern science—one of the invitations of this time of year in the Jewish tradition is to practice *forgiveness*, the cultivating of atonement (“at-one-ment”). We are also a little less than a week away from the fall equinox, marking the first day of autumn. This coming time of falling leaves is also an auspicious time for experimenting with letting go.

That being said, it is important to be honest about what authentic forgiveness is and isn't. **I'm not talking about cheap forgiveness that makes us into someone's doormat for repeated abuse.** Forgiveness is a practice—not that different from other *practices* like playing the piano, shooting free throws in basketball, or going to the gym. If we consistently practice forgiveness, we can get better at it over time.

The same is true of “un-forgiveness.” We can also get better at holding a grudge over time if that's what we choose to practice. But as the proverb says, **refusing to forgive someone over a long period of time is like “drinking poison yourself and wishing your enemy would die.”**

Relatedly, one of the most helpful touchstones I have found about forgiveness is from Archbishop Desmond Tutu—that the final step of forgiveness is not necessarily the *renewing* of a relationship. Instead it may mean the *releasing* of a relationship. In that spirit, I invite you to remain seated, but begin turning in your teal hymnals to #1037, “We Begin in Love.” As we prepare to sing this song, I invite you to notice if, perhaps in surprising ways, you are feeling led to experiment with forgiveness. As you think about the practice of forgiveness, what name is on the tip of your tongue? Whose face flashes through your mind? You may not yet be able to fully forgive the person, but in the words

of the Buddhist teacher Noah Levine, perhaps you can open yourself to experiment with the intention of **“I forgive you as much as I can in this moment.”**