

The Great Jewish Books Course
Kabbalah, The Zohar and The Ari z"l
Rabbi Yechezkel Freundlich

- A. What is Kabbalah?
- a. "That which has been received" as opposed to something you can derive on your own
 - b. referred to as *sod* (The Secret), *nistar* (Hidden) or *chachmat haemet* (Wisdom of Truth)
- B. Difference between Kabbalah and the Zohar
- a. **Kabbalah** has always existed as an element of Jewish life
 - b. Elementary definition:

A Window into the Deeper Spiritual Dimension. The World/Existence is Deeper than what we can perceive with our eyes. Kabbalah teaches the deepest insights into the essence of G-d, His interaction with the world, and the purpose of Creation (which is mostly not addressed in the Torah itself). It offers a comprehensive overall structure and plan for the universe, as well as a detailed understanding of the particulars of our lives. The student of Kabbalah is made aware of the personal as well as the collective rectification process and is encouraged to play an active part in it.

- i. Medrash: Torah begins with "bet"; sealed on all sides, revealing only that which is in front of it.
 1. The rest is not for everyone (what is behind us, above us or below us).
 - ii. Kabbalah was the private domain of the pious and pure, transmitted from Rebbe to talmid, providing the inner workings of the spiritual world. (Secrets of nature, properties of the soul, reincarnation, hidden meanings of Torah, the unknowable and mysterious nature of G-d Himself, Destiny of Creation).
 1. (Everyone knows...) not to be studied until 40
 2. Removed the mask on the world, and peered into its inner soul (facial expression; actions of a child, effects of broccoli or exercise).
 3. Introduced terminology, concepts, and tools. System called פרדס
 4. Complete opposite of a rationalist approach of "what you see is what you get" - what you see is almost nothing of what is really there.
 - iii. Many statements from medrash and Talmud, often quoted by Rashi, as a basis or source for kabbalistic ideas.
- c. The **Zohar** is a book (a commentary to the Chumash) attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (2nd Century)

- i. Hid for 12 years from the Romans in a cave (Tractate Shabbos 33b) and was taught the secrets of Kabbalah by Eliyahu HaNavi (not explicitly stated in the gemarah). Secrets were kept a secret for 1000 years.
- ii. It was published sometime in the 13th century by R' Moshe de Leon, a Spanish scribe and kabbalist in the name of RSBY.
 - 1. Much controversy surrounds its authenticity. Rav Yaakov Emden (d. 1776) wrote that the core ideas were those of RSB"Y, but the book was authored by R' Moshe de Leon, and his approach has been accepted by The Torah world. (including the Vilna Gaon and the Baal Shem Tov)
- d. The Ramban (1195-1270) is the first major authoritative figure to incorporate Kabbalah into his commentary
- e. Kabbalah will spread to both Ashkenazic and Sefardic lands, and by the end of 1600s will be a major influence in Jewish Life for next 4 centuries.

C. Historical context

- a. Jewish Life and morale in the 1500s was at a major low following the Expulsion from Spain, which was preceded by the Crusades, followed by expulsion from Portugal.
- b. Concept of "**Exile**" underwent an evolution through Kabbalistic thought.
 - i. Originally viewed as a punishment in Tanach and Talmud (and certainly Ramban), and in our sidur (*mipnei chata'ainu galinu mei'arzinu*).
 - 1. That works for 70 year exile (First Temple), maybe even 300-500 years, but after a point that no longer works for the masses.
 - 2. What sin was so great that required such a bitter exile, with no end, no purpose or direction. It wasn't going anywhere.
 - ii. This became the core issue in Jewish Life
 - 1. Christianity said we were discarded, but G-d had clearly preserved us, but for what purpose? Why so long? Why so hated and downtrodden, persecuted and slaughtered?
 - a. What will another 100 years do?
 - 2. Not a problem for us, where exile is pleasant, we have Israel, and the world indeed is changing at such a rapid pace we can't even keep up. None of this applied though in the 1500s.
 - a. But after Crusades, Spanish exile, 250,000 maranos, expulsion from Germany and Bohemia following the 30 Years War, Black Death pogroms, this was very real.
 - 3. Rambam's answer of punishment, and that the messiah will not bring any change, just peace, in a natural world, didn't explain or justify.
- c. Kabbalah gave answer to this problem: Exile transformed into a spiritual positive. Only through the exile redemption comes, on a personal, national and world humanity level. Form of growth

- i. Expulsion of Adam and Eve: Description of process of humanity and challenge of mankind is to get back to Gan Eden.
 - 1. The expulsion dispersed sparks of holiness throughout the world, covered in a husk (klipa) and the Jew must gather or redeem these sparks of holiness from every corner of earth.
 - a. (Very opposite of Reform's mantra "Light unto the nations")
 - 2. We're part of a process – the purpose of all of creation. Made it bearable, understandable. Engaged in a holy endeavor. Will last until we've completed it.
 - 3. G-d himself is exiled (Heavy on anthropomorphic references – diametrically opposed to Rambam).
 - 4. Many Chassidic leaders imposed exile and wanderings on themselves to be part of the process.
 - d. Messianic tension: Redemption always brings Messianic Era, and that the process is underway. Might burst through at any moment.
 - i. Redemption Kabbalistically is all supernatural (unlike Ramban). This will become the basis of Jewish thought for the next 400 years.
 - 1. Fertile ground for Shabbtai Tzvi debacle as well as the Chassidic movement.
 - ii. The more bleak existence is, the more popular kabbalah became.
 - iii. Philosophy also got a bad name in 1500s following the Spanish expulsion.
 - 1. Almost all Sefardi "thinkers" became kabbalists, no longer philosophers.
 - e. Tsfat becomes center of Mystical thought
 - i. Rabbi Moshe Cordevero (1522-1570- Ramak), R' Yosef Kairo (Shulchan Aruch), R' Shlomo Alkabaz, R' Moshe Alshich
- D. Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (1534-1572), the Ari z"l (The Lion)
- a. The G-dly Rebbe Yitzchak (אלקי רבי יצחק)
 - b. The Ashkenazi Rebbe Yitzchak
 - c. born in Jerusalem, moves to Cairo after his father's early death, Under the Radvaz (Rabbi David iBn Zimra 1479-1573) trained in kabbalah and Talmud there. We find business records of him in the Cairo geniza, and of joining a chabura of aesthetics. Traveled to an island 6 days a week to mediate and study in isolation. Moves back to Jerusalem and then to Tsfat.
- e. The ARI had two students: Rav Chaim Vital did not publish or publicize – the world wasn't ready, but second younger students did spread it and quickly became well know; it is now basis of Jewish thought, and has even made its way into halacha.

E. Some Kabbalistic Principles

a. Hebrew alphabet

- i. Exact science of juxtaposition of Hebrew language and letters, their shape, numerical value and meaning.
- ii. We use letters as symbols. "Light" conveys the meaning of light, but it is not the essence of light. Hebrew does. Contains creative power. *Sefer Yitzira*. Legend of the Golem of the Maharal, and various stories in the Talmud.

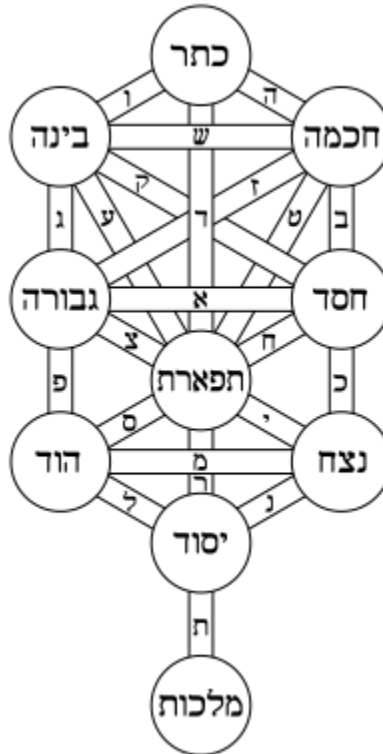
b. Tzimtzum - (ARI)

- i. G-d who is infinite, contracted Himself to "make room" for a finite world, in which His Presence would not be obvious or revealed, allowing for both evil and free will to exist.

c. Reincarnation (gilgul) - ARI

- i. No mention in Torah, Tanach, or Talmud, not even in Ramak's Kabbalah.
- ii. Set number of souls and they come back until they have rectified or fulfilled its purpose. The goal is not have to come back, and you never know what your purpose is, but it might be for just this moment, for just this difficulty or test.
- iii. Answers one of the most perplexing question of *tzaddik v'ra lo* - why the righteous suffer and wicked prosper.

d. Ten Sefirot



Four men entered *pardes* – Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, *Acher* (Elisha ben Avuyah), and R' Akiva. Ben Azzai looked and died; Ben Zoma looked and went mad; Acher chopped down sapplings in the orchard (i.e. confused his beliefs); R' Akiva entered in peace and departed in peace.

Talmud Chagigah 14b

In case you seek information concerning the creation of the incorporeal angels, you will not find it explained in the Torah. The Sages, however, have explained concerning them that they were created on the second day, so that you should not say that they assisted in the creation of the world. But if you will merit and understand the secret of the word “bereshit” and why Scripture does not begin by saying, “G-d created in the beginning,” you will now that, in the way of truth, Scripture tells about the lower creations and alludes to the higher ones and that the word “bereshit” refers covertly to the Emanation called Wisdom, which is the head of all beginnings, as I have mentioned. This is why they translated “bereshit” in the Jerusalem Targum to mean “in wisdom,” and the word is adorned in the Torah with a crown on the letter bet.

Ramban, commentary to Bereishis 1:1

Bereshees is formed of the segments Bara Shees (he created six), because from one end of the heaven to the other, there are six branches that extend from the secret of the sublime with the expansion of Bara (created). Bara expanded from within the first point, which is Arich Anpin. And here, on this first point, the secret of the name with the 42 letters was engraved.

Zohar Bereishis 1:13

In any area where the Kabbalists and the Zohar disagree with the ruling of the Gemarah, follow the ruling of the Gemarah.

But the Zohar is only being more stringent, follow its stringency.

If a Kabbalistic practice is not mentioned at all in the Gemarah, one cannot be forced to adopt it.

But if it is not contradicted by the Gemarah, you should follow the Kabbalah.

If there is a dispute in the Gemarah, the Zohar should be used to decide the matter.

Mishna Brurah, OC 25:42