

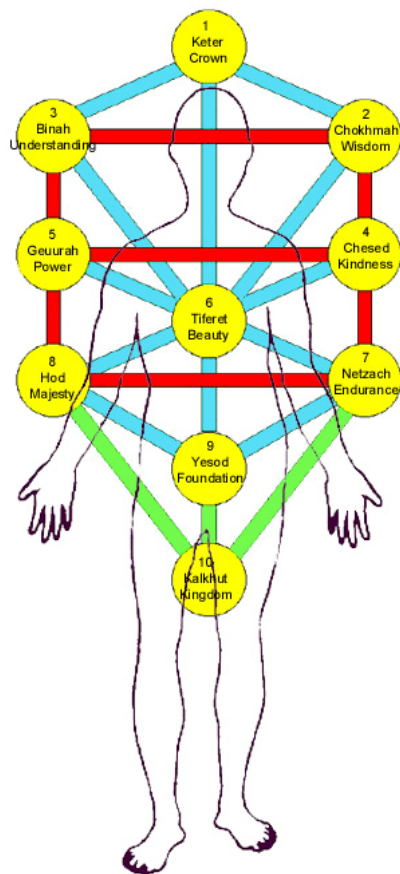
Kabbalistic Healing

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Introduction

The term Kabbalah has been used since the eleventh century to refer to a diffuse tradition of Jewish mystical thought said to be hidden in religious law received from the remote past, perhaps even given to Adam before the Fall. One of the most popular texts is of *Zohar* edited in the thirteenth century by Moses de Leon (died 1305). His ideas were elaborated by Isaac Luria (1543-1572) in Palestine.

The *Zohar* explores the inner workings of the Divine and his relationship to mankind. It examines the nature of the Godhead; the expected coming of the Messiah and the future redemption. God (*En Sof*) himself without qualities or attributes made existence perceptible by projecting ten successive channels of light, the *Sefirot*, to serve as media for his manifestations in the finite. These are the ten divine structures that bring the world into being through emanation and make up different levels of reality. Primordial man, Adam Kadmon, is a reflection of the Sefirot 'we were formed after the supernal pattern, each limb corresponding to something in the scheme of wisdom' (Zohar 2:212).



THE SEFIROT

According to Kabbalah, man and cosmos are inextricably linked. Disorder in the cosmos influences the physical, mental and spiritual health of mankind. By the performance of good deeds (*mitzvot*) cosmic disorder will be eliminated and so too physical and emotional suffering. Here I examine three aspects of Kabbalah and healing: psychoanalysis and Kabbalah; the healing 'power' of religious language in Hasidism and the contemporary revival of Kabbalah through the Kabbalah Centre.

Psychoanalysis and Kabbalah

David Bakan (1963) in *Sigmund Freud and Jewish Mystical Tradition* presents a cogent discussion of the relationship between psychoanalysis and Kabbalah. He argues that Freud consciously or unconsciously secularised Jewish mysticism; psychoanalysis can be viewed as a form of secularisation of Kabbalah. Although the influence of Kabbalah on Freud's psychoanalytic writings is contentious, it does appear that Freud was exposed to Kabbalistic ideas early on in life (Dein 2006).

Freud's methods, particularly free association, are similar to those developed by the early Kabbalists, especially the thirteenth century Spanish Kabbalist Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, who strove to 'unseal the soul, to unite the knots which bind it,' hence developing a theory of repression and a way of dealing with it six centuries before Freud. Abulafia described a form of free association he called 'skipping and jumping' which involves according to Scholem (1955):

'a very remarkable method of using association as a way of mediation... a way of mediation... every jump opens a new sphere... within this sphere, the mind may freely associate, the jumping unites, therefore, elements are free and guided association and is said to ensure quite extraordinary results as far as the widening of the consciousness of the initiate concerned. The jumping brings to light hidden processes of the mind'.

Like psychoanalysis, which attempts to reveal the hidden recesses of the mind, Kabbalah attempts to understand the hidden depth of Torah. The Torah can be read at different levels. The deepest level is the mystical level, which Kabbalah will help us to understand. Just as psychoanalysts attempt to delve into the subconscious, so too, Kabbalists attempt to delve and understand the deepest levels of the Torah.

There are similarities between Kleinian thinking about 'containment' or 'holding' and the Kabbalistic idea of *shevirath ha-kelim*, the breaking of the vessels. According the great Kabbalahist, Rabbi Isaac Luria, when God created the world he drew his light into a single point, a process which is referred to as *tzimtzum*. In a vacuum left by the original contraction light continued to pour in. It was necessary to contain this in a vessel. However, the vessel shattered resulting in shards or fragments containing seeds of the original light. The fragments with the embedded light are known as *Klippot* and are responsible for the existence of

evil. The whole point of existence is to free the light trapped in the vessels, undo this exile and re-establish God's unity.

What is the relationship between this process and Melanie Klein's ideas? For Klein, when a child is born, the unity between the child and his mother is broken. The child cannot contain the primary impulse which Klein recognises as both life impulse and death impulse (Freud's *Eros and Thanatos*). For Klein the child needs to contain these impulses to protect himself from terrible internal tension. To do this he splits or shatters his mind and projects large parts of himself outwards into others. The outer world becomes full of bad persecuting bits and pieces. To deal with the emptiness he may take back or introject many of the bad bits.

The Kabbalistic process of disintegration is repaired by establishing a relationship with God. In the same light, for Klein the child can be a functioning container of his own impulses and life forces by re-establishing a close relationship with those who love and care for him. A strong containing function is the requisite for order.

Hasidism, Language and Healing

Hebrew Language in the Kabbalah has a metaphysical reality of its own. Words are more than descriptive, they are an integral part of the reality they describe. The letters mediate between the Sefirotic world and the material one. Language in the Kabbalah has a metaphysical reality of its own. Hasidim have incorporated Kabbalistic ideas into their religious texts.

The Hasidim, or 'pious ones' in Hebrew, belong to a special movement within Orthodox Judaism, a movement that in the first half of the nineteenth century, claimed the allegiance of millions in Eastern and Central Europe - perhaps a majority of East European Jews. Lubavitch is a world wide movement of Hasidic Jews centred in New York where its leader, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, resided until his death in June 1994. For the past twenty years I have been researching their understandings of healing (Dein 2002).



The Lubavitch Rebbe

The Lubavitch mystical text called *Tanya* is the philosophical work which emphasises a close the relationship between the Hebrew alphabet and the physical world: language is regarded as instrumental in the process of the creation of the world and is an actual component of reality. Lubavitchers maintain that the manipulation of the Hebrew language can bring about changes in the physical world – a form of Kabbalistic magic. Misspelling of a Hebrew word in a religious text can, so they hold, result in physical sickness. Repairing this aberration can result in physical healing.

At times of sickness, Lubavitchers would typically write to their spiritual leader or Rebbe – Menachem Schneerson – for healing. He would respond by asking them to check their *Mezuzot*, a metal casing placed at the right hand doorposts of every room containing a parchment with Hebrew prayers written on them. Typically they would find some aberration in the writing on the parchment which reflects some disorder in their physical body. One such typical story:

Mr Cohen, a 60 year old member of Lubavitch, developed angina due to blockage of his coronary arteries. Distressed by the pain which was not alleviated by medication, he wrote to the Lubavitch Rebbe. The Rebbe told him on three occasions to check his mezuzot. Finally, after sending the parchment to a scribe, it was found that the Hebrew word lev (heart) was scratched. Once the parchment was replaced his heart pain disappeared. Mr Cohen attributed his improvement in health to a close relationship between the Hebrew word lev (heart) and his physical heart.

Contemporary Kabbalah : The Kabbalah Centre

In the last twenty years, there has been a revival of interest in Kabbalah appealing largely to a secular audience. The Kabbalah Centre is a not-for-profit spiritual organisation with headquarters in Los Angeles that provides courses on Kabbalah on-line, and through its local centres. Its founder Philip Berg, and his wife Karen Berg, devised a unique and friendly user system accessible to anyone explaining Kabbalistic principles. Courses are open to Jews and non Jews. The Centre has attracted considerable opposition from Orthodox Jews who consider Berg's teachings inauthentic and assert that mystical principles should only be taught to religious Jews.

According to Berg, all widely held spiritual religious beliefs systems are merely specific branches of a universal wisdom. The Bible is not to be taken literally, but rather as a code and it can only be understood in this context. Kabbalah provides the means of understanding this code. The five senses provide access to a mere one percent of reality. By studying Kabbalah, one can understand the other 99% of reality, thus gaining knowledge of the 'truth'. Berg emphasises the use of astrology to understand the nature of cosmic forces. Much of his teaching focuses on sexuality and the role of sexual union in the re-harmonisation of the universe (Berg 2006).



The Kabbalah Centre has attracted a number of high profile followers such as Madonna and Lindsay Lohan, who maintain that Kabbalistic ideas have completely revolutionised their lives. The centre has attracted a lot of controversy on account of its claims of cures for cancer: spring water sold by the group was held to have amongst its effects a curative effect on cancer. Reputedly, bottles were sold to cancer sufferers for hundreds of pounds. The Kabbalah Centre sells copies of its sacred texts such as the Zohar which are similarly held to possess healing powers. Among the best-selling items is the red string bracelet, said to protect the wearer from the 'evil eye'.

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