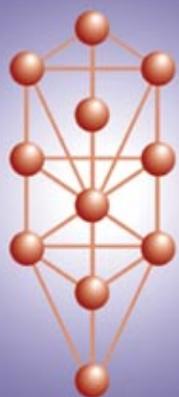


MYSTERIES

OF THE

KABBALAH



MARC-ALAIN DUAKNIN

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR AND PROFESSOR MARC-ALAIN OUAKNIN CLEARLY INTRODUCES THE KABBALAH, THE MYSTICAL, SECRET, AND OFTEN BAFFLING TRADITION OF JUDAISM. HERE THE AUTHOR EXPLAINS THE ANCIENT MYTHS AND SYMBOLS THAT HAVE SO PROFOUNDLY INFLUENCED BOTH THE JEWISH AND NON-JEWISH WORLD.

THE KABBALAH HAS BEEN TRANSMITTED ORALLY FROM MASTERS TO DISCIPLES SINCE ITS BIRTH ABOUT FOUR THOUSAND YEARS AGO. IT CONTAINS EXTRAORDINARILY POWERFUL METAPHYSICAL DISCOURSES, COMBINED WITH SPECIFIC METHODS TO HELP US GO BEYOND OUR NORMAL LEVEL OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND DISCOVER A NEW LIGHT, DEEP WITHIN OURSELVES, THAT WILL LEAD US BEYOND THE COMMONPLACE OF OUR DAILY LIVES. THE KABBALAH CAN BE UNDERSTOOD AS A BALANCE BETWEEN "THE LOVE OF WISDOM," AND "THE WISDOM OF LOVE."

IN PRESENTING THE KABBALAH, OUAKNIN COVERS ITS HISTORY; ITS VERTICAL VIEW OF THE UNIVERSE; THE FOUR WORLDS WE LIVE IN; OUR VARIOUS WAYS OF BEING; THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EACH LETTER OF THE HEBREW ALPHABET; AND THE MEANING OF CERTAIN NUMBERS OR "GEMATRIA." THE FINAL CHAPTER OFFERS MEDITATION AND PRAYER. THROUGHOUT, THE AUTHOR REFERS TO TEXTS IN THE HEBRAIC TRADITION AS WELL OTHER WESTERN AND NON-WESTERN CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHIES. HE ALSO EXPLORES THE VITAL

INFLUENCE OF KABBALAH ON ART, LITERATURE, MUSIC, ARCHITECTURE, PSYCHOANALYSIS, AND HEALTH. SUPPLEMENTING THE TEXT ARE ABOUT 100 ILLUSTRATIONS OF LETTERS, ART, AND SCULPTURE. MYSTERIES OF THE KABBALAH WILL APPEAL TO ANYONE INTERESTED IN JUDAISM, SPIRITUALISM, OR HISTORY.

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MARC-ALAIN OUAKNIN IS A RABBI, A PROFESSOR OF COMPARATIVE STUDIES AT BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY IN TEL AVIV, AND THE DIRECTOR OF THE ALEPH CENTER FOR JEWISH STUDIES IN PARIS. HE IS ALSO AN ARTIST AND A CALLIGRAPHER. A SPECIALIST IN THE HISTORY OF SCRIPT, HE WROTE ABBEVILLE'S MYSTERIES OF THE ALPHABET AS WELL AS OVER TWO DOZEN WORKS OF POETRY, FICTION, AND NON-FICTION, WHICH HAVE BEEN TRANSLATED INTO OVER FIFTEEN LANGUAGES.

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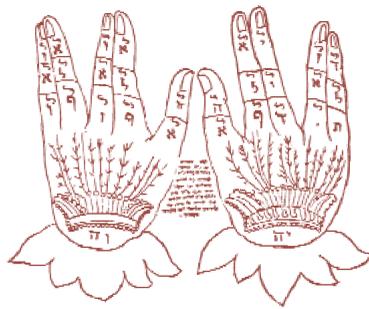
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CONTENTS

Introduction: The Tree of Light 7

Part One

KABBALAH AND THE KABBALISTS א

| | |
|---|----|
| 1.A Short History of the Kabbalah | 21 |
| 2. The Keys to the Kabbalah | 43 |
| 3.What Is a Kabbalist? | 61 |
| 4.A Revolution in Our Perception of the World | 71 |
| 5. The Route to Initiation | 75 |
| 6. Journey to Paradise | 89 |
| 7. How to Transmit the Secret | 97 |

Part Two

THE GROUND PLAN OF THE KABBALAH ב

| | |
|---|-----|
| 8.A Dialectic of Light | 105 |
| 9.Offering and Accepting | 109 |
| 10. The Kabbalah and Love | 117 |
| 11. Hasidism: An Existential View of the Kabbalah | 125 |

Part Three

THE COLLOQUY OF ANGELS ג

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| 12. The Four Worlds | 143 |
| 13. The Five Modes of the Soul | 159 |

Part Four

THE TEN SEFIROT ד

| | |
|---|-----|
| 14. Travels of a Spark | 191 |
| 15. The Harmony and Balance of the World | 207 |
| 16. The Decade of Fundamental Elements | 219 |
| 17. The Art of Being Present for Oneself | 227 |
| 18. Learning to Be Astonished and Amazed | 231 |
| 19. Wisdom, Intelligence, and Knowledge | 235 |
| 20. The Dialectic of Opening and Closing | 243 |
| 21. Mastery and Beauty, Politics, and Aesthetics | 251 |
| 22. Foundation and the Kingdom: Receiving, Transmitting, Giving | 255 |
| 23. The Symbol of the Tree in the Kabbalah | 263 |

Part Five

THE HORSES OF FIRE



| | |
|---|-----|
| 24. The Letters of Creation | 273 |
| 25. Abracadabra: The Power of Words | 277 |
| 26. In the Beginning There Was the Point ... | 281 |
| 27. Knights and Kabbalists | 285 |
| 28.A Description of the Twenty-two Letters of the Hebrew Alphabet | 293 |
| 29. Archaeography | 297 |
| 30. The Combining of Letters | 301 |
| 31. The Kabbalah and Healing | 313 |
| 32. How to Extract Meaning | 319 |
| 33. Astrology and the Kabbalah | 325 |

Part Six

GEMATRIA



| | |
|--|-----|
| 34. Numbers and Letters | 335 |
| 35. The Various Methods of Gematria | 337 |
| 36. The Secret of Perfect Numbers and Friendly Numbers | 355 |
| 37. God and Pi (π) | 369 |

Part Seven

THE NAMES OF GOD



| | |
|--|-----|
| 38. God Is the Text | 377 |
| 39. Secrets of the Tetragrammaton: The Geometrical Approach | 387 |
| 40. Secrets of the Tetragrammaton: The Mathematical Approach | 391 |
| 41. Secrets of the Tetragrammaton: The Dynamic Approach | 395 |
| 42. Secrets of the Tetragrammaton: The Practical Approach | 405 |
| 43. Secrets of the Tetragrammaton: The Ethical Approach | 411 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| As a Conclusion: If You Want To, You Can | 417 |
|--|-----|

| | |
|--------------|-----|
| Bibliography | 421 |
|--------------|-----|

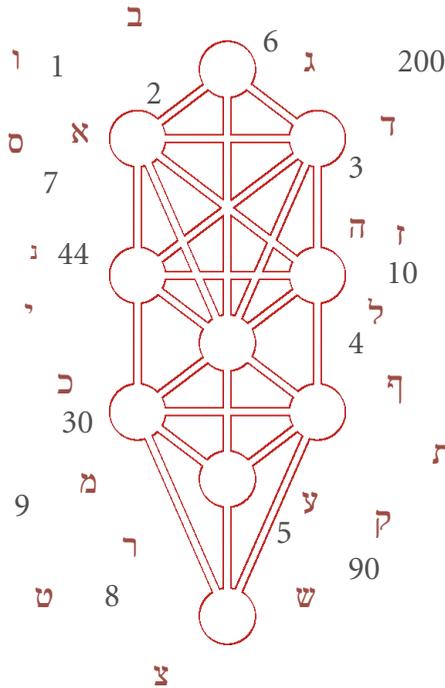
| | |
|-----------------|-----|
| Acknowledgments | 426 |
|-----------------|-----|

| | |
|-------|-----|
| Index | 428 |
|-------|-----|



The Path of Energies: The *Sefirot*, Letters, and Numbers

The purpose of the present work is to show as clearly as possible the path of energy from its source, which is called the “infinite light” and which propagates itself throughout the universe through a model of ten “transformers of energy,” which the Kabbalah calls the *sefirot*. Each part of the world, from the tiniest particle to the largest, most complex matter, the structure of the spirit in its logical and rational organization or in the craziest fantasies, receives the vital energy-vibration, which has first passed through one or more transformers—the *sefirot*. We will see that these energy transformers are also deployed through the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the figures and numbers to which they correspond.



DYNAMISM

Movement and Change

Truths made for our fet, truths that are capable of dancing.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

One of the basic concepts of the Kabbalah is that of movement. Light circulates through all of the worlds. It is the fundamental energy of every living thing, the flow and reflow of every organism. As soon as the world was created, it entered into a process of returning to its source and constructed itself by flowing from below to above, from the least perfect to the most perfect. There is “a striving for perfection. The world is getting better and better and is constantly acquiring new benefits, which it adds to those it already has, organizing them into units that are full of power and splendor,” according to Baal Ha-Orot in the *Orot Ha-Qodesh*. Existence progresses, renews itself, moves closer to the light-without-beginning-or-end; “This process of elevation is infinite because it reveals the force of divine will in the universe, a force which aspires to absolute good. The evolution of the world is a positive process and is based on optimism in the world. For how can one despair when one sees that everything develops and everything thrusts upward?” (*Orot Ha-Qodesh*, 537, “The Law of Evolution”).

The evolution of creation, with this “ever upward” movement, is the source of the fundamental optimism of kabbalistic thought. It is this optimism and joy that Rabbi Nachman of Breslov summarizes in his dictum: “It is forbidden to despair.” This endless striving for a deeper, better, higher existence is the very meaning of messianism, faith in the ultimate perfection of the human being in a return to the “without-beginning,” the source of all life.

The essence of being is time, which in the human being is translated as the dynamic force that constantly and infinitely renews and perfects the world.

Kabbalists and Scientists

It is understandable how fundamentally kabbalistic thought influences and provides the dynamic for philosophical, metaphysical, and scientific research. In fact, the scientific researcher seeks to unveil the secrets of the universe on a physical level, just as the researcher of the Kabbalah seeks to unveil its secrets on the metaphysical level. Both are oriented toward the construction of a more perfect world. For the Kabbalah, evolution does not end with the human race; it continues, thanks to humans, toward even higher stages. The whole “process of striving for perfection” is hope for and striving toward absolute freedom. It is then that man will attain the creative forces of which he still has no conception.

Man’s present scientific achievements and his ability to change nature thereby are merely signs that are the precursors of a distant future in which “the human spirit will reveal itself freely, with force and splendor, much more than it does now” (*Orot Ha-Qodesh*). The ultimate finality of development lies in a distant future that transcends the finitude of the human spirit. Supreme spiritual perfection cannot be achieved midway through the journey; the quest is infinite. The path with which man is confronted in the course of his development is infinite, as is his desire to “return to his infinite source, to unite with the divinity.” In fact, he wants to override his human nature and rise “beyond the limits of the created being.” One can no doubt envisage man at the next stage of evolution as a higher being, capable of comprehending that which transcends the narrow limits of sensory perception. The relationship between science and the Kabbalah is probably stronger than it has ever been, thanks to recent discoveries in astrophysics that, in many points, offer surprising analogies to the models proposed in the Kabbalah.

Kabbalah and “Return to Self”

*Im ata ma’amin she-ata yakhol leqalqel
ta’amin she-gam ata yakhol le taqen.*

[If you believe that you are capable of destroying, believe that you are also capable of repairing.]

—Rabbi Nachman of Breslov

אבגדהו

Hochrechnung Berechnung des Elementarvektors

$$\frac{1}{2} \left(\frac{\partial^2 y_{1m}}{\partial x_1 \partial x_2} + \frac{\partial^2 y_{2l}}{\partial x_2 \partial x_m} - \frac{\partial^2 y_{1l}}{\partial x_1 \partial x_m} - \frac{\partial^2 y_{2m}}{\partial x_2 \partial x_l} \right) \quad \text{fol}$$

$$- \frac{1}{2} y_{lc} \left(\frac{\partial^2 y_{1c}}{\partial x_1^2} + \frac{\partial^2 y_{2c}}{\partial x_2^2} - \frac{\partial^2 y_{1l}}{\partial x_1^2} \right) \left(\frac{\partial^2 y_{1c}}{\partial x_{1m}} + \frac{\partial^2 y_{2c}}{\partial x_{2l}} - \frac{\partial^2 y_{2m}}{\partial x_{1c}} \right)$$

$\frac{1}{2} y_{lc} \frac{\partial^2 y_{2c}}{\partial x_2^2}$ fällt ab.

$$y_{lc} \begin{bmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \\ 0 \end{bmatrix} = y_{lc} \left(2 \frac{\partial^2 y_{1l}}{\partial x_1^2} - \frac{\partial^2 y_{2l}}{\partial x_1^2} \right) = 0 \quad \left| \frac{\partial}{\partial x_m} \right.$$

$$y_{lc} \begin{bmatrix} 0 \\ 1 \\ 0 \end{bmatrix} = y_{lc} \left(2 \frac{\partial^2 y_{2m}}{\partial x_2^2} - \frac{\partial^2 y_{1m}}{\partial x_2^2} \right) = 0 \quad \left| \frac{\partial}{\partial x_l} \right.$$

$$2 y_{lc} \left(\frac{\partial^2 y_{1l}}{\partial x_1 \partial x_m} + \frac{\partial^2 y_{2m}}{\partial x_2 \partial x_l} - \frac{\partial^2 y_{2l}}{\partial x_1 \partial x_m} \right) + 2 y_{lc} \left(2 \frac{\partial^2 y_{1l}}{\partial x_1^2} - \frac{\partial^2 y_{2l}}{\partial x_1^2} \right) + \frac{\partial y_{lc}}{\partial x_l} \left(2 \frac{\partial^2 y_{2m}}{\partial x_2^2} - \frac{\partial^2 y_{1m}}{\partial x_2^2} \right)$$

$$- \frac{1}{2} y_{lc} \left(\quad \right) = \frac{1}{2} \left| \frac{\partial y_{lc}}{\partial x_m} \left(2 \frac{\partial^2 y_{1l}}{\partial x_1^2} - \frac{\partial^2 y_{2l}}{\partial x_1^2} \right) + \frac{\partial y_{lc}}{\partial x_l} \left(2 \frac{\partial^2 y_{2m}}{\partial x_2^2} - \frac{\partial^2 y_{1m}}{\partial x_2^2} \right) \right.$$

zweites Glied:

$$- \frac{1}{2} y_{lc} \frac{\partial^2 y_{1c}}{\partial x_1^2} \frac{\partial^2 y_{2c}}{\partial x_2^2} \quad \text{fol} \quad \begin{matrix} + \frac{\partial^2 y_{1c}}{\partial x_1^2} \frac{\partial^2 y_{2c}}{\partial x_2^2} \text{ gleich} \\ + \frac{\partial^2 y_{2c}}{\partial x_2^2} \frac{\partial^2 y_{1c}}{\partial x_1^2} \end{matrix}$$

$$- \frac{1}{2} y_{lc} \left(\frac{\partial^2 y_{1c}}{\partial x_1^2} - \frac{\partial^2 y_{2c}}{\partial x_2^2} \right) \left(\frac{\partial^2 y_{2c}}{\partial x_1^2} - \frac{\partial^2 y_{1c}}{\partial x_2^2} \right) \text{fol}$$

$$= - \frac{1}{2} y_{lc} y_{lc} \frac{\partial^2 y_{1c}}{\partial x_1^2} \frac{\partial^2 y_{2c}}{\partial x_2^2} + \frac{1}{2} y_{lc} \frac{\partial^2 y_{1c}}{\partial x_1^2} \frac{\partial^2 y_{2c}}{\partial x_2^2}$$

Die mit $\frac{\partial y_{lc}}{\partial x_l}$ multiplizierten Elementarvektoren erhält also der Vektor

$$\begin{bmatrix} \frac{\partial y_{1m}}{\partial x_2} - \frac{1}{2} \frac{\partial y_{1l}}{\partial x_m} \frac{\partial^2 y_{2l}}{\partial x_1^2} + \frac{\partial y_{2l}}{\partial x_m} \frac{\partial^2 y_{1l}}{\partial x_1^2} + \frac{\partial y_{2m}}{\partial x_l} \frac{\partial^2 y_{1m}}{\partial x_2^2} \\ - \frac{1}{2} y_{lc} \frac{\partial^2 y_{1c}}{\partial x_1^2} \frac{\partial^2 y_{2c}}{\partial x_2^2} + y_{lc} y_{lc} \frac{\partial^2 y_{1c}}{\partial x_1^2} \frac{\partial^2 y_{2c}}{\partial x_2^2} \end{bmatrix}$$

$$= - \frac{1}{2} y_{lc} \frac{\partial^2 y_{1c}}{\partial x_1^2} \frac{\partial^2 y_{2c}}{\partial x_2^2} + y_{lc} y_{lc} \frac{\partial^2 y_{1c}}{\partial x_1^2} \frac{\partial^2 y_{2c}}{\partial x_2^2}$$

Resultat sicher. Gilt für Koordinaten, die der Gl. $\Delta \varphi = 0$ genügen.

The flow of life attracts man, moves him upward toward what constitutes both the source and the ultimate object of desire. Life remembers this primordial light, and wants to return to its days of splendor.

Natural evolution is presented as one of the manifestations of the cosmic movement of return (*teshuva*). This process of return requires the existence of the transcendence one aspires to regain. Evolution results from the power of the cosmic will, the “ardent desire” to use it in order to “return to the source of reality”—to life from life.

The Hebrew word *teshuva* has three different meanings, whose common denominator is the idea of returning. First, it means “to return to God,” in the sense of repentance. Second, it means “to turn, to turn round, to turn from a particular way of life and choose another.” Finally, it also means “reply” or “response.” The sages of the Talmud included *teshuva* as one of the things whose creation preceded that of the world; it thus constitutes a phenomenon that is both primordial and universal, one on which the very existence of the world is based. In this perspective, *teshuva* has two meanings.

First, as it is written into the structure of the universe, *teshuva* shows that even before he was created, man was granted the ability to change the course of his life. Thus, in a certain sense, it constitutes the highest expression of human freedom, a sort of manifestation of divinity in human form. In the context of freedom, *teshuva* indicates that man is capable of releasing himself from his past and the quasi-mechanical causality that seems to lead him down a path from which there is no return, in which a sin leads to another sin, in which every action causes a reaction and every intention has unfortunate consequences. In this sense it indicates the presence of divinity in man, since God is not subject to laws nor to causality. *Teshuva* is itself a way of breaking the immutability of determinism. This concept is closely allied to the thinking presented later in the Kabbalah about astrology.

The second aspect of *teshuva*, also a universal one, is that it gives man the ability to control his movements in all the dimensions of his existence, and especially that of time. Without it, time would be linear and irreversible. Apparently there is no way of making an event that has happened “unhappen,” nor can it be corrected or changed; the past is static. And yet *teshuva* implies that there is a possibility of changing the past, or at least of

altering its effect upon the present and the future. It is this paradoxical capability of mastering time that explains why *teshuva* precedes the creation of the world. It has this exceptional dimension of being beyond time and the inexorable interlocking relationship between cause and effect.*

Kabbalah and Culture

The Kabbalah as a dynamic and vital force has a relationship not only to science and scientific research, but to culture in general.

What is culture? Every culture is a culture of life. It is the action that life exercises upon itself and through which it transforms itself. If “culture” means anything, it is the self-transformation of life, the process through which life constantly modifies and changes itself to attain higher forms of achievement and accomplishment, to grow, to transform itself, and to fulfill itself. A culture that does not pursue this movement of creation, elevation, and perfection, even if it considers itself to have achieved a very high level, enters the realm of barbarism. A culture that does not renew itself is a barbarian culture.

The Kabbalah represents the vigilance of the spirit as it avoids falling into the trap of cultural satisfaction, on both an individual and a collective level. The Kabbalah is a reminder of the life force that exists in every living thing, and which constantly seeks action, creation, and invention. Even when the elementary forms of the living creature seem to be transfixed and their blind transmission ends in the mere mindless, automatic repetition of infinitely repeated structures, the Kabbalah intimates that in the very deepest corners of the human being in the world, deep forces are at work that may still be allowed to emerge. Man then perceives his own strengths, hidden as though they had been asleep, “not only maintaining the state of things which permit the continuation of life, but remaining vigilant and, not content with preserving that which is, waits with a patience on a par with the millennia that it takes, for an opportunity to use the sum of knowl-

* These are the perceptions of *teshuva* that Adin Steinsaltz provides in his introduction to the Kabbalah in his magnificent work *The Thirteen Petaled Rose*. As regards the critique of determinism, see Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Lire aux éclats* (Reading in bursts).

edge acquired in past in order, in one fell swoop, to discover hitherto unnoticed relationships, to invent a tool or an idea, to build a new world” (Michel Henry, *La Barbarie*).

Baal Ha-Orot, the Master of Lights, teaches:

Everything moves and rises. Every step is an ascent. Even descents are ascents within themselves. Everything moves, everything flows, and everything rises. . . .

Every true poet, every man who knows how to penetrate the internal nature of things, everyone who is alert to the spirit of holiness perceives all reality in his upward movement. . . .

Man should perceive the world not as something complete and finished, but as something that is always in the course of moving on, of ascending, of developing, and ascending again. Everything renews itself. This is what is called “constant renewal,” *khiddush hatemidi*.

In each little corner of the world, at every moment, each part of the tiniest creature is in movement, attracted or repelled, ascending, descending, always on the rise even though it may look outwardly as if it is falling, constantly moving to and fro, as the prophet Ezekiel says: And the creatures came and went. *Vehahayot ratso veshov*, an expression that can also be read as *vehahayut ratso veshov*, that is to say: “And cosmic vitality is always moving to and fro.” . . .

Each piece of existence, however tiny, contains a spark of holiness which aspires to return to its source and it is this which produces the fundamental movement of elevation and the dynamic of existence.

These rises and falls are uninterrupted in man and in the cosmos in its entirety. Every movement, even a fall, a descent or a psychological depression are an elevation. Changes of state, of mood, and even deep depressions have a positive value.

It is the moon, which is almost invisible before its renewal, it is the low tide before the return of the high tide; it is sleep, which offers renewal and force for the morning and for awakening. . . .

A fall is not an accident, it is a natural movement in our participation in the world.

Is the world not the result of a descent of light and of the infinite?

To quote a famous expression of the Kabbalah, there is a state of *yerida let-sorekh ha’aliya*, “descent for the purpose of rising,” in other words, descending can have no other outcome than rising again.

(*Orot Ha-Qodesh* II, fifth discourse, 511 ff.)

3

What Is a Kabbalist?

One day, a rabbi gathered all his disciples and invited them to question and even to criticize him. The disciples said to him:

– Master, your conduct surprises us, you never do what your father, your master, did, whom we knew before he chose you as his successor. How do you consider his heritage, where is your loyalty?

The rabbi looked at his disciples gravely, but he had a gleam in his eye, a spark of joy and of malice. He said to them:

– I will explain to you, it is very simple. No one is more faithful than I am! In everything, I do exactly what my father did; just as he never imitated anyone else, I do the same!

—Martin Buber, Tales of the Hasidim

An Initiate and a Master

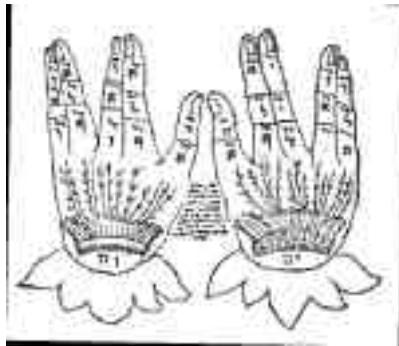
The Hebrew word for a kabbalist is *mequbal*. This word poses a translation problem. The literal meaning of the word is: “he who is received.” The correct term ought to be *meqabel*, meaning “he who receives” a teaching, a secret, a tradition, etc.

If being a kabbalist means “to be received,” it is important to understand the meaning of such an “act of receiving.”

The first interpretation teaches us that the Kabbalah is not a matter of lonely meditation, but is studied within a group of initiates. The kabbalist is indeed “one who is received, accepted into a group.” The correct translation of *kabbalist* would thus be “initiate.”

The second interpretation relates to the fact that man receives the title of “master” during a ceremony in which his own master recognizes his right to teach and to make legal judgments. In the second meaning, he is not received into a special group of initiates who practice meditation, but received into the chain of tradition.

The Initiation Ceremony of the Masters: *Semikha*, or the Laying On of Hands



For a disciple to be promoted to the rank of master, for him to receive authorization to teach Torah, to lead the people, and to decide any judicial matter, even a criminal case, he must first provide proof of his lucidity of mind and his capacity for initiative. (We shall later define this wisdom, intelligence, and knowledge as *khokhma*, *bina*, and *da'at*.) Only then can the ceremony of initiation and the laying on of hands take place: “The Lord answered Moses: “Single out Joshua, son of Nun, an inspired man, and lay your hand upon him. Have him stand . . . before the whole community and ordain him in their sight. Invest him with some of your authority, so that the whole Israelite community may obey” (Numbers 27:18–20). The purpose of this ordination is clear. It is to “appoint someone over the community who shall go out before them and come in before them and who shall

take them out and bring them in, so that the Lord's community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd" (Numbers 27:16–17). Although the ordination must be performed publicly, it is of a private and mystical nature. In fact, thanks to the laying on of hands, the spiritual power of the master or, at least, part of this power—Moses having received it directly from God—is secretly transmitted to the disciple (Talmud Bavli, Bava Batra, 75a).

The laying on of hands began even before Moses. It is encountered very explicitly for the first time as a ceremony of both transmission and benediction in the story of Jacob, who called all his children to him as he lay on his deathbed so he could transmit his last words to them (Genesis 48). This tradition is perpetuated to the present day in the words of the blessing that parents give their children on Friday evening or Saturday evening, at the beginning or end of Shabbat or the festivals, which are the same as those of the priestly blessing and which refer to Ephraim and Menashe, for boys and to the matriarchs, for girls:

May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe
 [May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah]
 May God bless you and keep you
 May God make His face to shine upon you and be favorable unto you
 May God turn his face unto you and grant you peace :Shalom !

The Hebrew blessing consists of sixty letters that correspond to the energy of the first perfect number, 6, which runs through the ten *sefirot* (see the subject of perfect numbers below). Today, the use of the hands as a medium for the transmission of divine energy can be encountered in the ceremony of the priestly benediction (*birkat kohanim*, the plural of *kohen*).

The Laying On of Hands and the Light of Infinity

Each disciple becomes a master through the laying on of hands (*semikha*). The kabbalistic significance of this ceremony lies in the disciple's ability to receive the light of infinity into himself. He then opens himself up to a new perception of the celestial energies, which he may transmit in his turn. The prophet Habbakuk (Hab. 3:3) said:

The majesty of the Eternal has covered the skies and the earth is full of his praise, his brilliance is like the light (*or*) the rays are emitted from his hand and this is the hidden place of his power.

Sefer Ha-Bahir (the “Book of Clarity”) relates:

The disciples asked their master:

–What is the meaning of “the ‘rays’ are emitted from his hand”?

–There are five rays, replied the master, which correspond to the five fingers of the human right hand.

The light from above is extended in the fingers of the right hand and is transmitted to the disciple. The light of infinity is also transmitted through the five fingers of the left hand, but this is not evoked explicitly in this verse. It will be seen below that all of the thought of the Kabbalah is to some extent a commentary on the ability to receive and use this light of infinity.

Tradition and Innovation

The fact that a disciple, ordained as a master, follows a long and powerful tradition in no way weakens his initiative. He must assume his own responsibilities. After having bowed his head while receiving the *semikha*, the disciple raises it again immediately. His first gesture assumes respect for the past; the second, consciousness of the present and responsibility for the future.

The Kabbalah bears witness to the Revelation. This revelation is not consumed in the mystic fire of an exceptional event; it remains inexhaustible. It offers reason infinite possibilities of research. Since not only faith, but reason itself, contains multiple virtualities, *semikha* offered to the disciple, far from hindering his intellectual development, should only serve him as a support. In the eyes of his pupil, the master merely represents the support given to him by the past.

Despite its profound respect for the past, the Kabbalah does not languish in a static attitude. It throws man into the perpetual movement of time. The past extends into the present, renews itself, and opens up to the miracle of the future (see A. Safran, *The Kabbalah*, 101–15).

The Kabbalist Is Someone Who Follows a Path

Never forget that you are a traveler in transit.

–Edmond Jabès

God always travels incognito.

–Anonymous wayfarer in Jerusalem

It is interesting to note that many of the texts of the Kabbalah, the Talmud, and the Midrash are introduced by a journey: “Rabbi Bahya and Rabbi Hiya were on their way . . .,” or “Rabbi Simeon and Rabbi Eleazar his son were taking the road to . . .,” and so on. In fact, the whole text of the Kabbalah opens with an inaugural announcement of “being on the way,” on a path, even if the expression is not formulated explicitly. The Kabbalah, and Jewish philosophy in general, contains a concept of thought as a voyage, that of people who think as they walk and according to the truth of walking. This is certainly one of the meanings of the verse, “You shall speak of them . . . as you go on your way.” (Deuteronomy 6:7)

Everything depends on the way. We are closer to the place we are going to when we are on our way than when we convince ourselves that we have reached our destination and merely have to establish ourselves. The word *way* or *path* does not necessarily have a spatial significance. It does not merely refer to a stroll through the fields or forests of wandering thought. It does not merely take us from one place to another. It is the passage of the actual train of thought.

The road makes things move, calls them into question, places them in the balance. It invites and disquiets, incites and solicits. The “wayfarer” is not solely the kabbalist, but mankind in general. To set out on the path, to go on one’s way, is also the meaning of the words heard by Abraham: “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house.”

Kabbalistic thought is not only the result of research but also the advances, the detours and dead ends, the fumbblings and discoveries, that we experience through many hours of reading, learning, and writing.

דרכ path

Thinking—that is to say to truly experience the act of thinking, does not mean rehashing a set of definitive theses which we have in our possession, but rather the desire to discover and formulate that which one does not know or which one knows imperfectly, and to discover new modes of life itself. “We only live at the extremity of our knowledge, at the very tip of what separates our knowledge from our ignorance” (Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*). For the kabbalist, living is an adventure and not a nostalgia for forms that have already been lived!

To Be Open to Meeting with the Most Radical Strangeness

An idea is false from the moment one is satisfied with it.

—Alain

During our lives we meet other people, encounter books, ideas, and images. This is a true dialogue, in which the conduct of the conversation is reversed. We no longer lead the conversation ourselves; we are led. No one can know in advance what will emerge from such a situation. Consequently, the time may come when we feel at a loss, defeated. But this defeat, this feeling of having strayed from the path of knowledge, is the very experience of study.

“The experience of study” denotes not only the sense of instruction that we may receive on one subject or another, but the act of being open to experiences. The kabbalist is an eternal student. His position is that of a “seeker after truth,” and not of a “possessor of truth.” When they mention a sage, the Kabbalah and the Talmud use the term *talmid-khakhham*, “disciple-sage.” The sage always remains a disciple-sage, always ready to study. And to study means to be open to an encounter with the most radical strangeness.

The Kabbalah and Study

Interpreting means to have an effect on the destiny of individuals and the world; it means giving this destiny a new course, taking the absolute responsibility for it and being ready to pay the price. . . . Also, interpreting the Book is firstly to rise up against God in order to deliver voice and pen to His power. We need to rid ourselves of the divine part that is within us for the purpose of rendering God to himself and delight in our freedom as human beings.

—Edmond Jabès, *Elysa*

The kabbalist is not a scholar but a researcher. He is therefore constantly reading the texts of the tradition and all the writings that enable him to make progress in his research. He is always in the process of reading and interpreting. Interpretation is not a futile game but a fundamental attitude, perhaps even *the* fundamental attitude of the human being, implementing the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual functions of man. Through its interpretation a dynamic of the psyche is produced, and of man in his entirety, who has been given the essential task of invention and the activity of opening up.

This is a perfect summary of the epistemological objective that the Kabbalah sets itself. Through several thousands of pages and over and above the various themes discussed, openness is *taguth*, a deployment of the creative imagination and unblocking of the channels of the spirit. Through interpretation, man becomes an “infinite man,” stretched in a transcendental movement toward the infinite. The Kabbalah teaches that a text is indefinite, always open to new interpretations that are not guaranteed in any encyclopedia. The most diverse philosophical, sociological, political, linguistic, and historic interpretations can each only exhaust a small part of the possibilities of the text and of life; life remains inexhaustible and infinitely open.

The essential question is not, What is interpretation? but, Why is there interpretation? There is interpretation in order to show that, “contrary to the aspirations of an ideology, the meaning must be constructed patiently, it

is not identified with a pre-existing truth which can merely be appropriated once and for all and imposed upon others” (Catherine Chalier, *La Patience*).

Interpretation is not only commentary, the fact of saying something else and of saying it better. More essentially, it brings into play the very movement of thinking, which consists precisely in shaking the prefabricated institutions of sense to their foundations. Commentary is a long journey that is an invitation to the urgency of waiving the need, often a passionate one, to draw conclusions, forming a definitive opinion and a judgment. Interpretation is the patience of sense. One needs to know how to renounce “the intense need to want to draw conclusions.”

Impatience is idolatry! The messiah will always arrive late. . . . Wanting everything, immediately, is wanting to a stultified being. “The instant God,” a stultified God, a dead God: the golden calf! Patience means giving time the opportunity of being time. It is the very meaning of the possibility in time of being time. It is the very meaning of the tetragrammaton.

The Human Being: Constantly Called into Question

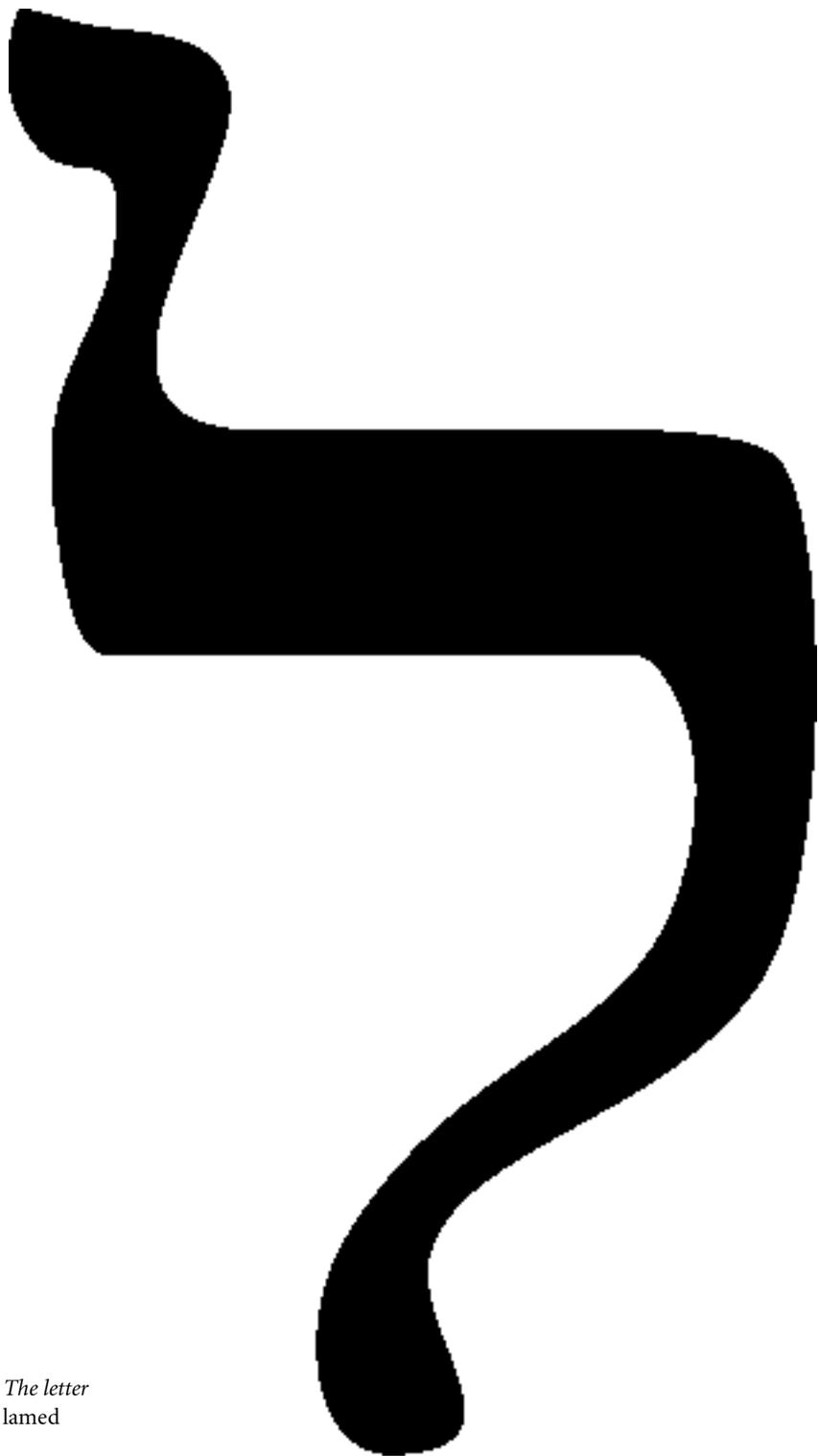
Being is to interrogate the labyrinths of the Question asked of God and of others to which there is no reply.

—Edmond Jabès, *Elya*

If the kabbalist is a researcher and not a possessor of truth, as has been emphasized, he must nevertheless always be questioning himself. “I question, therefore I am!” is one of the fundamental tenets of kabbalistic thought. Man is the “thrust toward,” the effort, tension, and desire, always beyond identity. Man constructs himself, produces himself, in time, each time becoming a different man, a different life, a different experience.

Man does not exist but becomes; this means that he has a duty to exist through his incessant change. This also applies on a collective level. A society that does not devise new forms of organization is signing its own death warrant. Man is always already above and beyond himself.

The expression “above and beyond” is translated in the philosophical language derived from Greek by the term *meta*. Man is a “meta” animal—



The letter
lamed

metaphysical, metaphoric, and so on. In Hebrew, this metaphoric quality of human reality is expressed as *sham*, “over there.” *Sham* consists of two letters, the same letters that are used to write the word *shem*, “name,” and it is the term that produced the word *shemit* or *semitite*. Man is fundamentally a creature who bears a name, a name that goes before him: transcendence and “existence.”

Man is an infinitive being, open to the future and the incessant possibility of calling himself into question. He himself “has become the question,” according to a formulation found in the Zohar. In Hebrew, as will be discussed again later, man is called *adam*, a word with the numeric value of 45; this number can also be written in Hebrew as *ma*, “why?” Man is a Why?—his essence is the effect of dynamic questioning. Man is the sentinel of questioning. By preserving the Why? he returns the speech of which he is constituted.

The man, *adam/ma*, is an opening into the future.