

The Development of Kabbalah in Light of Its Main Texts

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Kabbalah: The Union of Wisdom and Prophecy

The numerical value of the word “kabbalah” (קבלה) in Hebrew is 137. Surprisingly this is one of the most important numbers today in modern physics. As a pure (dimensionless¹) number it is known as the “inverse of the fine structure constant” and expresses an important property of space related to creation.

137 is also the value of the sum of two very important words that relate to Kabbalah: “wisdom” (חכמה) equals 73 and “prophecy” (נבואה) equals 64. Kabbalah can therefore be understood as the union (or “marriage”) of wisdom and prophecy.

Historically, Kabbalah developed out of the prophetic tradition that existed in Judaism up to the second Temple period (beginning in the 4th century BCE). Though the prophetic spirit that had dwelt in the prophets continued to “hover” above the Jewish people, it was no longer manifest directly. Instead, the spirit of wisdom manifested the Divine in the form of the Oral Torah (the oral tradition), the body of Rabbinic knowledge that began developing in the second Temple period and continues to this day. The meeting of wisdom (the mind, intellect) and prophecy (the spirit which still remains) and their union is what produces and defines the essence of Kabbalah.

In the Kabbalistic conceptual scheme, “wisdom” corresponds to the sefirah of wisdom, otherwise known as the “Father” principle (*Abba*) and “prophecy” corresponds to the sefirah of understanding or the “Mother” principle (*Ima*). Wisdom and understanding are described in the Zohar as “two companions that never part.” Thus, Kabbalah represents the union of wisdom and prophecy in the collective Jewish soul; whenever we study Kabbalah, the inner wisdom of the Torah, we reveal this union.

It is important to clarify that Kabbalah is not a separate discipline from the traditional study of the Torah, it is rather the Torah’s inner soul (*nishmata de’orayta*, in the language of the *Zohar* and the *Arizal*).

Oftentimes a union of two things is represented in Kabbalah as an acronym composed of their initial letters. In this case, “wisdom” in Hebrew starts with the letter



chet "prophecy" begins with the letter *nun*; so their acronym spells the Hebrew word *chen*, which means "grace," in the sense of beauty. Grace in particular refers to symmetric beauty, i.e., the type of beauty that we perceive in symmetry. This observation ties in with the fact that the inner wisdom of the Torah, Kabbalah is referred to as *chochmat ha'chen*, which we would literally translate as the wisdom of *chen*. *Chen* here is an acronym for another two words: concealed wisdom (חכמה נסתרה). But, following our analysis here, Kabbalah is called *chen* because it is the union of wisdom and prophecy.

Because it comprises both wisdom and prophecy, Kabbalah, the inner soul of the Torah is best suited to provide us with a vision of the perfected, utopian future that the world will enjoy once the Mashiach is revealed. Studying Kabbalah provides us both at the individual and the collective levels with the consciousness and strength of character needed to envision this future, and work towards it even during the greatest hours of darkness.

The Evolution of Kabbalah

In general there are 5 stages in the revelation of the wisdom of Kabbalah, each stage appearing (one might say, even encoded) within a particular text. Kabbalah analyzes everything in our world, especially those things that explicitly relate to the Torah, according to pre-figured basic models that derive from an in-depth study of the Torah. Naturally, these five stages are significant and should be analyzed based on the five ascending levels of the soul.

* Psyche (*nefesh*)

* Spirit (*ruach*)

* Soul (*neshamah*) - intellectual dimension

* The living one (*chayah*) - super rational connection of the soul to God

* The singular one (*yechidah*) - is one with God, (described as "the singular one that marks You [God] as singular," (יחידה ליחידך). This level gives the power for total self-sacrifice, because it is always one with God, whether embodied on earth or not.

Stage One: The Book of Formation

The text revealing the first stage that corresponds to the psyche level of the soul is *Sefer Yetzirah* (The Book of Formation). Jewish tradition attributes the wisdom in this text to the first Jew, Abraham. Lengthwise, it is a relatively short text, and most of its content appears in enigmatic phrases; it appears clear from its language that it indeed has very ancient roots. Explicitly, this means that the wisdom contained in The Book of

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Formation antedates the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. Nonetheless, traditionally, the final edition of the book as it has come down to us was compiled in the generation before the destruction of the Second Temple (1st century CE) by the greatest sage of the Tannaic (*Mishnah*) period, Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva was also the master and teacher of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the author of the *Zohar*, literally The Book of Brilliance.

Stage Two: The Zohar

Unlike The Book of Formation, the *Zohar*, the text revealing the second stage of Kabbalah, is a very large one. Its content is primarily structured as an interpretation of the Bible in general and the Pentateuch, in particular. The *Zohar*, though using what is normally less enigmatic language than the Book of Formation, is structurally varied. Some of the content appears as story-telling, some of it as an in-depth analysis of higher worlds, the reality of *sefirot*, the way in which the *sefirot* develop into partzufim (lit., persona)² —spiritual personas³ of the higher worlds, and so on. There are some parts of the *Zohar* (like the *Idra Rabbah* and *Idra Zuta*), which remained almost completely incomprehensible until the Arizal (16th century CE) shed light shed on them (more on the Arizal in the fourth stage). In the complete corpus of the many writings that make up the Torah, the *Zohar* is considered a *midrash*—a homiletic or hermeneutic discourse on the Torah.⁴ Sometimes the *Zohar* is even referred to as *Midrash Rashbi*, *Rashbi* being the acronym of its author's name: Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

Though originally composed by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in the 2nd century CE, the *Zohar* was not openly published for another 1200 years. During the interim, it was passed from mentor to disciple. "A thing in its [proper] time is good,"⁵ and such was the public revelation of the *Zohar*. Immediately upon its revelation, the *Zohar* spread throughout the Jewish world of learning, and many of the Kabbalistic scholars began to try to unlock its secrets, by properly interpreting its myriad of allusions and metaphors. This went on for almost 200 years, until this process reached its zenith with the work of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (1522-1570), known by his acronym, the *Ramak*.

Three: The Pomegranate Orchard

The *Ramak's* work represents the third stage of the evolution of Kabbalah. His interpretation of the *Zohar* was based on a rational mindset (not very different from the mindset used in explaining other Midrashic literature; see note 3) and a wide and circumspect knowledge of the entire Torah in all its strata exoteric (revealed) and esoteric (hidden) alike. The *Ramak's* commentary on the *Zohar*, titled *Or Yakar*, is tremendous in its scope, spanning dozens of large volumes. But, his magnum opus was

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the volume titled *The Pomegranate Orchard (Pardes Rimoni)*, based on what is perhaps one of the most enigmatic verses in the entire Bible: "Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with pleasant fruits, henna and nard."

This verse is from the Song of Songs, a poetic and metaphoric description of the love between a bride and her groom. Even though all the sages of the Talmudic period knew about and were involved in the study of Kabbalah, the Talmud does not openly delve into its mysteries. However, there is one chapter dedicated to this topic: the second chapter of the tractate of *Chagigah*. There, the sages who were initiated into the study of Kabbalah are described as having entered the *Pardes*, the "orchard." The Hebrew word *pardes* is also understood in Kabbalah to be an acronym for the four parts of the Torah: literal, allusive, homiletic/hermeneutic, and secret.⁶ That the "orchard" contains all four parts of the Torah implies that it is impossible to truly be initiated into its secrets without studying the three other strata.⁷

Four: The Tree of Life

By the work of the *Ramak* and others on the *Zohar* many of its mysteries were revealed. Nonetheless, the deepest teachings and concepts could not be fathomed by the human mind alone if it were not inspired from above by the Almighty. The Holy Ari, the acronym for Rabbi Isaac ben Shlomo Luria, was the new soul⁸ sent from above and chosen to reveal these. The Ari arrived in the *Ramak's* hometown, the holy city of Safed, on the same day that the *Ramak* passed away and was being buried.⁹

Beyond having the intellectual skills and knowledge of his predecessors, the Ari merited to receive a completely new revelation of wisdom from Heaven. Though this new wisdom could be taught independently, the Ari chose to "enclothe" it as an interpretation of the *Zohar*, that is, to teach it in context of the language and style of the *Zohar*. The Ari's teachings were then compiled into the text titled *The Tree of Life (Eitz Chayim)*. So all-inclusive and penetrating were the Ari's teachings, that a student of Kabbalah who has not yet learnt the fifth level of Kabbalah, will tell you that the classic work for the study of Kabbalah in our generations is *The Tree of Life*.

Spreading the Wisdom

The Arizal explains that as we approach the Messianic era it becomes critical that the study of Kabbalah be taught. In his words: "it is a mitzvah [a commandment] to reveal this wisdom now." This is based on the statement of the *Zohar* that "with this book [i.e., the *Zohar*], we will come out of their exile with mercy"¹⁰). Meaning, that the study of the inner dimension of the Torah, as revealed in the *Zohar*, has the power to prevent the

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difficult traumatic events otherwise required for us to make the transition from our present state of consciousness to the consciousness of the Messianic era.

Even though the Arizal was the first to say that the time has come for Kabbalah to be taught openly, nonetheless, there are still conditions placed upon those who desire to study the esoteric dimension of the Torah. On the part of the teacher it is indeed a mitzvah to reveal the hidden teachings, but only to those who are already worthy to integrate them into their lives. The description of what is required of an appropriate student is even outlined in the introduction to *Eitz Chayim*, The Tree of Life, the most basic text of the Arizal's Kabbalah.

The Fifth Stage of Kabbalah: Chassidut

More than a century and a half after the Arizal's statement that the time has come for Kabbalah to be revealed, the Ba'al Shem Tov (1698-1760) founded the Chassidic movement. As explained in length by one of the greatest Chassidic scholars, Rabbi Isaac of Homil (who was a disciple of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of the *Chabad* branch of Chassidut, his son, Rabbi Dov Ber, and his grandson, the *Tzemach Tzedek*), the Ba'al Shem Tov's teachings in particular and Chassidut in general are a final tier of Kabbalah. They are a unique revelation of the Divine wisdom of Kabbalah in the sense that they form a new corpus of teachings that as a whole provide a deeper insight and a more advanced conceptual scheme than ever revealed before with which to understand and internalize the teachings of the *Zohar* and the Arizal. Chassidut is thus the fifth stage of the revelation of Kabbalah.

But, the Ba'al Shem Tov's Kabbalah is not different only in its breadth of explanation; it is also wider in its scope. Whereas the Arizal still imposed limitations on who is worthy to study Kabbalah, the Ba'al Shem Tov advocated a radically new approach. The Ba'al Shem Tov experienced an elevation of his soul to the dwelling place of the Mashiach in heaven, where the Mashiach revealed to him, that the redemption would occur once his [the Ba'al Shem Tov's] wellsprings of teaching would spread forth to the most remote extremes. Subsequently, the Ba'al Shem Tov explained that the "most remote extremes" specifically refers to those Jews who until now could not have been considered sanctified enough to study Kabbalah. Obviously, spreading the wellsprings of Kabbalah to these extremes means specifically addressing every single Jew, regardless of level of observance or commitment to the Torah. Not only that, but even non-Jews, who also require the wisdom of Kabbalah in order to participate in the redemption in a compassionate and merciful manner, should also be addressed and taught those parts of the wisdom that pertain to them. This implies there really are no longer any conditions

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placed on the study of Kabbalah. Since all souls require this wisdom to rectify themselves, there is also no difference between genders. Until the coming of the Mashiach it is our task to do all in our power to spread the wellsprings of Chassidut, the fifth level of Kabbalah.

Revealing the Concealed

It is important to mention that whenever we speak of “new teachings” we of course mean not that some new Torah has been given from God through someone, but rather that some righteous individual has merited revealing hidden parts of the Torah that were always present but remained concealed until that point in time (for reasons known only to God, in His providence to bring creation and history to the utopian state for which the world was created). Those unique souls sent from Heaven at certain critical moments in history to reveal new dimensions of the Torah will of course never contradict or nullify any of the Torah's laws or teachings that had been revealed until that point in time.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the found of *Chabad*, stated that “there will not be a second giving of the Torah,” meaning that all new teachings must always truly be founded on the Torah as it has been transmitted and developed from generation to generation. The Torah that was given by God at Mt. Sinai already contains all the new teachings and understandings of all the generations up to and including even the deepest revelations that will be taught by the Mashiach. In fact, the prophets clearly stated that just before the final revelations of the Torah by the Mashiach, prophecy will return to the Jewish people. The purpose of this prophecy is, again, not to reveal a “new” Torah, but rather to prepare the soul so that it can integrate the depth of the revelation of the Torah's hidden teachings as they will be revealed by the Mashiach.

The Road to Prophecy

Let us now see how the 5 stages of the development of Kabbalah relate to the 5 aspects of the soul:

- * psyche - *nefesh* (natural faculties)
- * spirit - *ruach* (emotional faculties)
- * soul - *neshamah* (mental faculties)
- * the living one - *chayah* (super-rational faculties)
- * the singular one – *yechidah* (one with God)

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As mentioned, the 5 stages of Kabbalah constitute an unfolding of the Jewish consciousness. We find in the prophets that real prophecy will return to the Jewish people just before the final redemption. Essentially this is not only a sign of the coming redemption, it is also a prerequisite. As we mentioned in the beginning, Kabbalah is actually the unification of wisdom with prophecy and is what prepares the Jewish people for the return of prophecy.

The first text, *Sefer Yetzirah*, talks about the different phenomena of nature (the seasons, the days of the week, the planets, the human body, etc.) and corresponds them with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, thus it corresponds with the revelation of the natural, psyche (*nefesh*) aspect of the soul.

The second text, the *Zohar*, when stripped of the deep contemplative explanations offered on this text by the later stages and read at face value, has the special power to arouse the spirit (*ruach*) of the soul. As stated by one of the Rebbe's of Chabad, as a text, there is nothing like the *Zohar* to arouse a person's emotions. Of course, the spirit aspect of the soul includes the emotional faculties.

The Kabbalists of the third stage, epitomized by the *Ramak* and his work, sought to use their mental faculties to comprehend the inner mysteries of the *Zohar*. This stage was continually underscored by Judaism's greatest philosophical text, Maimonides' Guide to the Perplexed. The ideal was to unify the *Zohar*'s esoteric wisdom with the Jewish philosophical tradition; to unite Kabbalah with Jewish philosophy. The *neshamah* aspect of the soul¹¹ contains its mental faculties, which unfolded and reached an apex during this stage.

The new revelation of the Arizal taxes the mind's faculties to the limit, but more importantly it challenges the soul to go beyond the mind's rational approach. Its essence is super-rational, though the Arizal did present this essence in intellectual terms. Unlike reading the *Zohar* which leads to an emotional experience, reading the *Eitz Chayim* requires a deep intellectual endeavor, which still leaves a sense of being something beyond the intellect. Thus the Arizal's Kabbalah serves to unfold the level of soul's aspect of *chayah*. The *chayah* is described as having the quality of "touching/not-touching"; it hovers ever so closely to our mind, yet always eludes it.

The final revelation is known in Chassidic tradition as the "soul of the Kabbalah of the Arizal," or the "soul of the soul of the Torah." The classic text of Chassidut is the *Tanya*, written by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi. One of the most important teachings in the *Tanya* is that the Jewish soul is "an actual part of God."¹² Though this thought appears in earlier Kabbalistic texts (in various formulations),¹³ it was never stated so unequivocally and had not yet formed the basis for an entire conceptual scheme as it

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does in the *Tanya*. What this statement says is that we have an eternal continual connection with God, and that every action that we do reflects the essence of the Divine. Chassidut thus reveals the level of Divinity before the initial contraction of God's infinite light that allowed the creation of finite reality; Chassidut thus reveals the infinite capacity of the Jewish soul. In order to understand how novel a revelation this is, the Arizal did not expound regarding the stages that came before the initial contraction. It was left to Chassidut to reveal and unfold these stages, in virtue of the fact that the essence of our Divine soul was indeed there. Chassidut is revealing a pristine, unconscious memory of the soul before creation.

When a new disciple would come to the Ba'al Shem Tov, the first question he was asked was "what do you remember?" The Ba'al Shem Tov was jingling the deepest levels of the new disciple's soul preparing him for the study of Chassidut. In the Arizal's Kabbalah there was also "memory triggering" but it involved "recollecting" one's previous incarnations, which of course do not reveal the soul's existence as it was before the creation of the world, when it was still an actual part of God, the *yechidah*, the singularity aspect of the soul.

aspect of the soul	central text	develops
psyche (<i>nefesh</i>)	<i>Sefer Yetzirah</i>	understanding of natural world
spirit (<i>ru'ach</i>)	<i>Zohar</i>	emotional realm
soul (<i>neshamah</i>)	<i>Pardes Rimonim</i>	intellectual faculties
living one (<i>chayah</i>)	<i>Eitz Chayim</i>	super-rational understanding
singular one (<i>yechidah</i>)	<i>Tanya</i>	oneness with God

Seeing the Future

A well-known Chassidic story illustrates this point well:

After the Maggid of Mezheritch passed away (the Maggid was the Ba'al Shem Tov's successor), the disciples each looked for a Rebbe to follow. The eldest of the disciples was Rebbe Menacham Nachum of Chernobyl. Rebbe Shneur Zalman, the founder of Chabad, did not follow his close friend Rebbe Nachum, but instead looked to Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk for guidance. Rebbe Shneur Zalman and Rebbe Nachum would visit one another once a year on Sukot.

On one of those visits, when they were sitting and discussing the deep mysteries of the Torah in the sukah, Rebbe Nachum asked Rebbe Shneur Zalman: "Why did you take Rebbe Menachem Mendel as your Rebbe and not me?"

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Rebbe Shneur Zalman replied: "I once saw him when he was giving audience and I realized that everything that the person seeking his council had done in his life was known to him."

Rebbe Nachum shrugged as if to say that he too saw past actions.

Rebbe Shneur Zalman continued: "I then realized that not only could he see all his actions in this present lifetime, he also was aware of all of the person's previous incarnations since the six days of creations."

Rebbe Nachum shrugged again.

Finally, Rebbe Shneur Zalman said: "In the end I realized that not only could he see his past actions and past incarnations, he could also see everything that this soul was destined for in the future until the coming of the Mashiach and after."

At that moment Rabbi Nachum raised his brows in wonder, thereby acknowledging Rabbi Shneur Zalman's choice of a Rebbe, but the conversation abruptly ended, as the Chassidim, who had been intently listening to the holy words of the two tzadikim from on top of the sukah, suddenly moved and were heard....

Everything that a person has done in his lifetime up to the present moment, in deed, word, and thought, corresponds to the first three levels of the soul: *nefesh*, *ruach* and *neshamah*. These were apparent to the Kabbalists before the Arizal.

Past incarnations, which the Arizal focused on, correspond to the *chayah* aspect of the soul.

But, in order to see a soul's destiny in the future, it is necessary to see the soul as it is an actual part of God, for whom past, present, and future all exist at once. The ability of Rebbe Menachem Mendel to see a person's *yechidah* was what convinced Rebbe Shneur Zalman to seek his guidance.

aspect of the soul	sees
psyche, spirit, and soul	past actions (deeds, words, and thoughts)
living one	past incarnations
singular one	future destiny

The Dangers of Kabbalah

The first thing that one should ask before learning Kabbalah is what is the correct way to do this without endangering oneself due to the highly energetic (psychological) and consciousness altering (spiritual) power of this part of the Torah. Past experience provides many examples of people who lost their mind, or were psychologically hurt from studying Kabbalah in an inappropriate manner. Most of these individuals were not entirely stable to begin with. Nonetheless, there is no question that the improper study of Kabbalah contributed to some extent to their psychological breakdown.

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In our generation, this is less frequent, because those people who are not psychologically stable usually seek professional help of some sort and are in some kind of treatment program. Nonetheless, while many of the psychological dangers are no longer so much of an issue, spiritual dangers still exist. The spiritual dangers that we are speaking of are of the type that place a person's spiritual and consequently physical well-being in jeopardy.

Kabbalah Is a Part of the Torah as a Whole

The first danger lies in the notion that it is possible to study Kabbalah without performing commandments (*mitzvot*). The Jewish people received the Torah at Mt. Sinai on the basis of their declaration "We will do and we will understand."¹⁴ Action creates vessels, while understanding brings light, or soul into these vessels. It is important to know that the ultimate purpose for which God created the world was the formation of vessels, by living a good life by emulating God—the essence of the Torah and its 613 commandments for Jews and 7 commandments for humanity.

The attempt to have mystical experiences or even prophetic experiences without creating the proper vessels to contain them is hazardous, because it is like creating "a soul without a body." Most times these experiences themselves are simply illusory, and there is nothing but the person's imagination at work. But, if they do become real then in essence they are the equivalent of death, because that is essentially what "a soul without a body" is. The importance of creating vessels parallels the importance that the Torah places on life. In this sense, the Torah's commandments "give life,"¹⁵ that is, they make life possible by forming the vessels into which the soul enters.

The Torah tells us of great souls, like the two eldest sons of Aaron (Moses' brother, and the High Priest) Nadav and Avihu, who were deeply immersed in the most profound mysteries of the Divine, yet, because they did not perform a commandment of God, perished while serving in the Tabernacle.¹⁶ In Kabbalah, their mistake is described as an overly enthusiastic "run" to God, without the anchor provided by the proper performance of commandments that allows the person to remain grounded, even while transcending to the highest levels of spirituality. This is the essence of the first danger: without being properly grounded through the performance of *mitzvot*, a person can easily lose touch with reality.

We mentioned that from the time of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the study of the inner dimension of the Torah became permissible and even necessary for everyone, men and women alike. This is especially true of Kabbalah as it appears at its highest level of revelation, in Chassidut. Kabbalah as manifest in Chassidut is a must for all. The

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Lubavitcher Rebbe writes that the permissibility and advisability of studying Kabbalah as it appears in the Arizal's *Eitz Chayim* depends on the level of yearning that each particular person has for this type of study. In order to safely enter into and depart from the figurative orchard, the *pardes*,¹⁷ it is necessary to be well protected from overly powerful energy and well-grounded in reality through a serious commitment to the entire Torah.

The teacher must never give the false conception that commitment to the Torah as a whole is not required by someone wishing to learn Kabbalah. Nonetheless, the teacher has to know how to fulfill the Ba'al Shem Tov's legacy that even those Jews who are still far from the Torah study this wisdom, even though many Jews who have grown up distant from the Torah are not initially willing to take on the commitment of performing commandments. The real teacher of Kabbalah has to know how to properly take the risk of bringing someone who is not yet ready to commit to the Torah as a whole closer to the Torah.

Real, Knowledgeable, and Inner Teachers

Real: The second danger involves who one chooses to learn Kabbalah from. Even if a person is willing to live according to the Torah as part of the study of Kabbalah, he or she may nonetheless be receiving wisdom from an inauthentic source.

Let us give some examples of false sources. If you go to see some so-called kabbalist and he starts performing all kinds of calculations on your name (and your spouse's name) and his conclusion is that either your name is no good and has to be changed, or you are not a good match for your spouse, then you can be a hundred-percent certain that this person is a charlatan. You would do best to keep as far away as possible from someone like this. The Arizal impressed upon us that in our generations there is no longer any need for, or legitimacy in using practical Kabbalah.¹⁸

Knowledgeable: Secondly, there are many teachers who though they may mean well, are actually ignorant when it comes to the rest of the Torah. Because their knowledge of the revealed part of the Torah is so lacking, they cannot possibly fully understand its concealed facets; consequently, whether consciously or unconsciously, they teach incorrect knowledge.¹⁹

Inner: Finally, an even more subtle flaw regarding the source of one's learning is that many of the teachers teaching today only understand the external aspects of Kabbalah. The largest part of the Arizal's teachings is based on the distinction between external and internal aspects of things.²⁰ Even someone who knows the Torah and knows Kabbalah, may be wholly lacking an inner understanding of them. Inner understanding

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refers to being able to not only intellectually understand the meaning of the teachings of Kabbalah, but rather, as explained in length in Chassidut, to be able to experience them in a rectified and holy manner. An authentic teacher of Kabbalah understands and relays to his students that Kabbalah is not referring solely to external reality. Recognizing a teacher who understands the wisdom of Kabbalah in an inner manner is dependent on the student's sensitivity to truth.

The previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, said something very important in this respect. If a person gets used to looking at the world externally, it ruins his or her ability to later acquire an inner point-of-view or perspective. It is as though the external perspective does some kind of mental or spiritual damage to the Divine soul.

To explain this flaw a bit more, we may use the statement of the sages that a woman forms a bond only with the first man who makes her into a vessel (i.e., that she is intimate with).²¹ A teacher of the Torah is called a Rav. A teacher of the inner dimension of the Torah is called a Rebbe (with an additional Hebrew letter *yud*, at the end). The relationship between a student and a teacher of Kabbalah is like that between a wife and her husband. Thus, like a woman, you create a bond or intellectual covenant with the first teacher who inspires you with the teachings of Kabbalah. It is hard to break this bond—not entirely impossible, but very difficult.

Kabbalah and Chassidut

The third danger is to study Kabbalah in our generation without Chassidut. As explained above, the fifth stage of the revelation of the wisdom of Kabbalah is Chassidut. From the time that Chassidut was revealed it is the preferential form in which to study this wisdom. Kabbalah must be studied from the original texts as well, but always with the inspiration and highest sources that Chassidut gives and reveals. The Ba'al Shem Tov explained that even when the classic texts of Kabbalah (that predate Chassidut) are studied with a heart for inner understanding, nonetheless, because of the coarseness of the human mind, the teachings may be misinterpreted and the result may be an anthropomorphizing of the Almighty (הגשמה).

The teachings of Kabbalah especially in the texts of the Arizal, involve a personification of the Divine. The Divine is described by an entire sequence of interlocking personas (*partzufim*). The only way to avoid a misunderstanding of this personification is to study Kabbalah with Chassidut. For example, even without going as far as the Arizal's personas of the Divine, we can take the secret of the contraction (the *tzimtzum*), which is the first thing taught in *Eitz Chayim*, the Arizal's central work. If, God forbid a person understands this secret literally they may think that God is not

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omnipresent in reality; that somehow “God has left the earth”²² and receded from it. Only by studying the teachings of Chassidut are we convinced that the contraction of God’s light should not be understood as literal, but as a metaphor. The correct way to interpret this teaching can be understood only by studying Chassidut.

Submission, Separation, Sweetening

These three dangers correspond to the basic model of psychological change introduced by the Ba’al Shem Tov. The three stages of this model are known as submission, separation, and sweetening.

The stage of submission corresponds to the first danger, because to overcome it one has to submissively acknowledge that action must come before understanding and that in order to study Kabbalah there must be a commitment to the Torah as a whole, just like the Jewish people did as a whole at Mt. Sinai.

The stage of separation involves distancing oneself from a non-authentic teacher of Kabbalah.

The final stage of sweetening corresponds to the sweetness of studying Kabbalah in our generation as it should be studied with the inspiration offered by the teachings of the Ba’al Shem Tov.

1. “Dimensionless” means that this number is not a measure of any quantity, for example: distance (meters) or time (seconds) or energy (joules), etc., or a ratio between units (like speed: meters per second, etc.).

2. E.g., the father (*Abba*) and mother (*Ima*) principles/figures mentioned earlier.

3. Of course, all of these figures/personas are created entities emanated by God during creation; they are not a part of God Himself.

4. Other Midrashic texts include the Halachic (legal) midrashim like the Mechilta (on the book of Exodus), *Torat Cohanim* or *Sifra* (on the book of Leviticus), *Sifrei* (on the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy). Among the homiletic *midrashim* (some containing content similar to the *Zohar*) are the *Tanchumah*, *Midreash Rabbah*, *Pirkei Derabbi Eliezer*, *Shocheh Tov*, and others.

5. Proverbs 15:23. See also Job 3:11: “God has made everything in its proper time....”

6. In Hebrew, “pardes” is spelled: פֶּרְדֵּס. *Pei* (פ) stands for *p’shat* (literal); *reish* (ר) stands for *remez* (allusive); *dalet* (ד) stands for *drush* (homiletic/hermeneutic); and *samech* (ס) stands for *sod*.

7. It is just as important to note that if the “secret” part of the Torah is missing from one’s study, then the acronym becomes the Hebrew word *pered* (פֶּרֵד), which means “separate.” Without the inner soul of the Torah, even the most dedicated student may remain separate from God, the giver and the source of the Torah.

8. In Kabbalah, a new soul is one that was not contained within Adam and therefore did not partake of the primordial sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Because every human being is actually a mosaic of souls, and most if not all of these were contained

within Adam, the Ari, like all human beings cursed with death, eventually did pass away. For a more in-depth explanation, see “*Tzadik Yesod Olam*” in Harav Ginsburgh’s Hebrew volume *Leiv Lada’at*, p. 136.

⁹. The Ari later reported that he had seen the pillar of fire that rose above the *Ramak’s* body during the funeral. In each generation, there is one individual who merits seeing the pillar of fire rising above the body of the demised leader of the previous generation. In seeing it, that individual is appointed by Heaven to become the leader of his generation. The Jewish leader of every generation is called the *Moshe Rabbeinu* of the generation.

¹⁰. *Zohar* III:124b

¹¹. In the study of the Torah, it is common that a particular aspect of a composite entity is named for the entity as a whole. In this case, *neshamah*, the third aspect of the soul, is normally translated into English as “soul.” *Neshamah* can also be translated as “breath” (derived from the Hebrew word, נשימה) and based on the verse “God breathed into him the breath (נשמת) of life” (Genesis 2:7), which can also be translated as “God breathed into him the soul of life.”

¹². Beginning of chapter 2.

¹³. Most notably by the author of the Kabbalistic work *Shefa Tal*, Rabbi Shabtai Sheftel Horowitz.

¹⁴. Exodus 24:7

¹⁵. Leviticus 18:5.

¹⁶. *Ibid.* 10.

¹⁷. The Hebrew word *pardes* (פרדס), which means “orchard,” is an acronym for the names of the four parts of the Torah: *p’shat*, the simple meaning of the text; *remez*, the hints and allusions within the text; *d’rush*, the derivative implications of the text arrived at by way of hermeneutic rules; and *sod*, the symbolic and esoteric meaning of the text. (Kabbalistic interpretations are considered part of the *sod* level).

¹⁸. Rabbi Chayim Vital, the Arizal’s foremost student, wrote on this prohibition in length in his book *Sha’arei Kedushah* (Gates of Holiness).

¹⁹. The revealed teachings of the Torah (like the Talmud) are based on rational thought. The concealed facets like Kabbalah (especially as it appears in the Arizal’s writings) are based on super-rational insight. Above we explained that the rational level of study precedes the super-rational level just as *neshamah* (the soul’s intelligence) precedes *chayah* (the living one’s super-rational insights).

²⁰. *Eitz Chayim, Sha’ar Pnimitiyut Ve’chitzoniyut* (Gate 40).

²¹. *Sanhedrin* 22b.

²². Ezekiel 8:12.