

# What is the qabbalah essay



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' The Qabbalah (or Kabbalah) is the name given in post biblical Hebrew to the oral tradition handed down from Moses to the Rabbis of the Mishna and Talmud. ' 1 This description offers perhaps is good basis of what, in simplified terms, the Qabbalah is. In actuality the Qabbalah is a little more complex in its definition.

Generally the Qabbalah can be described more precisely as a ' commonly used term for the esoteric teachings of Judaism and Jewish Mysticism. ' 2 These descriptions, however, can still be elaborated upon. The term Qabbalah first appeared in the works of Solomon Ibn Gabriol, a philosopher and poet, in the 11th Century. It then later appeared in the esoteric theosophical teachings that were prevalent in Northern Spain and Provence during the 12th and 13th centuries. It is thought to have arisen due to a philosophical influence it had upon those Jewish people who sought to obtain a profound understanding of the established forms of Judaism and the concepts that Judaism presented. However there is no geographical or historical explanation as to why it appeared in this particular stage in history.

It is argued that this was due to a close relationship between the Qabbalah and the Gnostic doctrines; however there is no actual evidence to support this. The development of the Qabbalah is said to occur in eight stages. ' Sefer ha-bahir'<sup>3</sup> is thought to be the first of these stages. This refers to the first form of ' the early qabbalistic tradition. ' 4 This was thought to be the foundation of the ten emanations (Sefirot) of God. The meaning and description of the Sefirot is best illustrated by Neusner as being a ' paradigmatic plan of all that unfolds from the supreme deity, (Ein Sof) or infinity.

At the end of the 12th century a collection of qabbalist schools were developed in Provence. At their hub was Isaac ' the blind' or Yitshaq Saggi Nahor, this is considered as being the second stage of the Qabbalah's progress. Consequently, in the third stage Yitshaq's schools and the Bahir (which was a symbolic commentary on the Old Testament) were amalgamated. From this there was a reinvention of philosophical teachings and subsequently a ' specific kind of ethical literature in which the qabbalistic message is hidden'<sup>6</sup> was formed.

The following stages were a preliminary to the formation of the Zohar. Ya'aqov, Yitshaq, Mosheh of Burgos, Avraham Abulafia and in particular Simeon bar Yohai can be strongly accredited for Mosheh de Leon's production of the Zohar, which occurred in the final years of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century. It is also important to mention that many Qabbalists have denied a historical development in the Qabbalah, as initially it was seen as a ' primordial revelation'<sup>7</sup> that began with Adam. Some qabbalists believe that only changes were made to the Qabbalah, in reference to revelations when the tradition had been overlooked or disturbed. This argument was, perhaps, due to the large emphasis that Qabbalists put on the Qabbalah being a secret tradition. It was thought that they only way to gain access to the Qabbalah was to be initiated into the qabbalistic tradition or by being deemed worthy by assessment of their ethical qualities.

However this seems to be a problematic principle as many books, despite numerous protests, have been published on the methods and teachings of the Qabbalah. The Zohar is the principal literary work that is associated with

the Qabbalah. The word Zohar literally means 'Book of Splendour,' and its name originates from the book of Daniel in which the word 'brightness'<sup>8</sup> is translated from the Hebrew word Zohar. The Zohar is made up of various pieces of writing, most of which are 'interpretations, scriptural passages, short sayings or longer disquisitions.'<sup>9</sup> The way in which the Zohar is written is in the format of a 'multi-layered commentary to the Pentateuch and the five scrolls.

<sup>10</sup> Comparisons have often been made between the Zohar and the Bahir, another primary text concerning the Qabbalah. The reasoning for this is that they share various similar qualities. For example their titles are not dissimilar in meaning. Bahir translates as 'Bright light' in Job chapter 37 verse 21. Both also focus on the main ideas and principles surrounding the Qabbalah.

The Zohar, perhaps, best demonstrates one of the main characteristics and aim of the Qabbalah tradition, in that it shows how God and the Torah can be recognized as one and illustrates the inner personality of God. Arguably, this is best presented by looking at how the creation story is interpreted in the Zohar. It looks upon creation from a hugely theological standpoint and often uses metaphors to convey God, as a person and not, as perhaps the majority do, as a divine force. For example, 'And God said, let there be light and there was light'<sup>11</sup> is elaborated on within the Zohar the 'light' is described as the 'Primal light that God made.

It is the light of the eye... this is the light through which God revealed to Moses the land of Israel.

'12 The Zohar could be said to be method of revealing the cosmic facet of the Torah. From the prospect of a qabbalist, the Torah when read in the literal sense does not lend itself to the mystical profound meaning that is rooted within it. This is where a gap is formed between the esoteric reading that qabbalists have of the Torah and the exoteric reading traditional Jews have. The Zohar states that readers of the Torah should be ' urged to look under the garment of the Torah. '13 It is argued that qabbalists are those who have been enlightened, those who are not are deemed unenlightened.

This might be due to the qabbalistic belief that those who ' can see through the veil of scripture'14 have a deeper understanding of the Torah. This leads onto the main principles and aims of the Qabbalah. For those who follow the Qabbalah, God transcends from a level of instructorship to a personal level. God therefore could be said to become a real person. Their principle aim is to illustrate the mystery of the world as an expression of the mysteries of the divine life.

By the reading of the Torah and indeed the Bahir and the Zorah, from a qabbalistic perspective, God becomes highly accessible. This point is reiterated by Abraham J. Heschel, a Jewish theologian, who states that the aim of a qabbalist is ' to feel and enjoy (God); not only to obey but to approach him. '15 The doctrine of mysticism is outlined specifically in the Zohar, in which it says ' God is not a concept, a generalization, but a specific reality.

.. for all things are in Him and He is in all things...

He is both manifest and concealed. '16 In other words, Qabbalists have the ability to discover, by almost reading into a subtext perhaps prevalent in the Torah, new meaning and thus have a new interpretation of what God is and what God wants. This approach taken towards God has often been described as Theosophy, as it essentially has the aim of analysing and developing the connection between 'divine life' and human life. However the link between theosophy and mysticism is unsubstantiated.

In the same way the esoteric qualities of the Qabbalah, are at times incongruent to the mystical qualities of the Qabbalah. The Qabbalists believe that esoteric knowledge, concerning the Qabbalah can be communicated; however those who have this knowledge are not at liberty to pass it on. In contrast to this they also believe that Mysticism cannot be communicated as it is only evident through symbolism and metaphorical interpretation. This illustrates the somewhat, at times, the problematic nature of the Qabbalah, however despite this it has had quite substantial impact on Judaism. The affects of the Qabbalah on Judaism are relatively extensive. The Qabbalah is now accepted in modern Judaism and Qabbalistic literature has emerged alongside Judaic theology and practice.

It is even argued by Neusner that it has 'reshaped Judaism. Scholem argues that the Qabbalah has been an integral role in the Jews 'understanding themselves. '17 This is a fair argument as it offers an alternative angle from which Jews can explore the Torah and other Judaic scripture. In summary, the Qabbalah could be depicted as an ancient tradition which is both esoteric, mystical and contains qualities of theosophy built on the premise of applying

analytic skills to the Torah which consequently seeks to develop a relationship with God that is profoundly personal.