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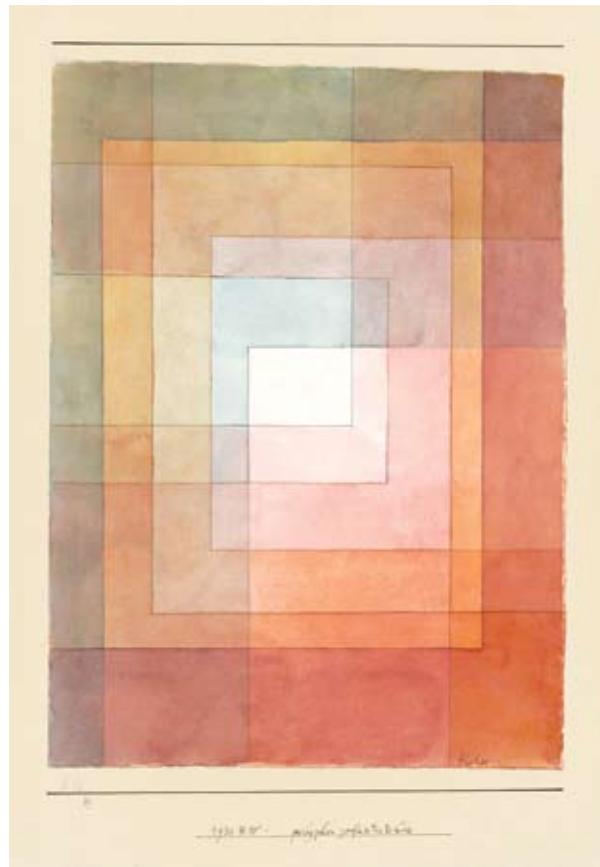
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INTO THE HEART OF KABBALAH

MY YEAR WITH THE RABBI

By Louise Danielle Palmer

Kabbalah is about wrestling with the complex and paradoxical nature of life, which is why this Jewish mystical tradition, with its thousands of sacred texts, leaves most people confused. But in its essence, Kabbalah is really about making the mundane holy.



Paul Klee, *White framed polyphonically*, 1930, pen and watercolor on paper, 13 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 9 $\frac{5}{8}$,
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Rabbi DovBer Pinson grew up in the tightly knit Chasidic community of Crown Heights in Brooklyn, New York, speaking Yiddish as his first language. Although he often skipped school when he was a kid, it soon became clear that he would follow in the footsteps of his grandfather and great-grandfather, both highly respected spiritual teachers and scholars in Russia. He was self-taught and ordained as a rabbi in Israel at 18 and spent the next few years locked up in his room, meditating and studying a wide range of spiritual traditions, contemplating the possibility of life as a monk (until the day he came out and met the woman he married). At 34, he is a world-renowned Jewish scholar, lecturer, and spiritual teacher, with seven books on Kabbalah under his belt.

In this article, I've tried to distill the Kabbalistic teachings of Rabbi Pinson to their essence. What is presented here is a mix of Rabbi Pinson's words and mine, based on his writings and teachings, and the conversations we've shared in his home in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, over the past year. While Madonna put Kabbalah on the map, popularizing this highly esoteric philosophy, few people understand it. It's not easy stuff to grasp. Contrary to popular belief, the mystical Jewish tradition is not so much about magic formulas or secret numbers related to the Hebrew alphabet. As Pinson teaches it, Kabbalah is more about questions than answers, more about wrestling with the complexity of life than with simplifying it. It's designed to help us elevate our consciousness so we become better people: more expanded and better able to perceive the spiritual, better attuned to the root of our soul, more open to the divine in all of creation.

"The deeper Kabbalistic teachings are designed to shift a person into an entirely new way of thinking and feeling and being," Pinson says. "The way I teach is, I give you ideas that you move towards. Some ideas will remain vague and beyond you. That's fine. You are meant to sit and meditate on these ideas and eventually come to them. They're not meant to be simple."

In other words, if you feel confused while reading this article, you're in good company. Pinson points out that there are many spiritual traditions, such as Taoism,

which are based on one book — or no books — and focus on being present, aware, conscious. They are simple teachings, and that is the beauty of them, he says. Kabbalah is complex because *we* are, and that's the beauty of it. Kabbalah tries to address the paradoxical, elaborate nature of the human experience. Pinson's office also attests to this — he sits surrounded on three sides by bookshelves filled with row upon row of sacred texts, gold Hebrew letters stamped onto red leather-bound spines. I can't walk you through the whole library, but I can give you a glimpse into the heart of this tradition, as it has been expressed to me, so you know what the talk is all about.

The main teachings of Kabbalah date back thousands of years, to the roots of Judaism. Kabbalah is the mystical understanding, or deeper meaning, of the Torah and Talmud. For example, Talmud says one should bless a glass of water before drinking it. Why? Talmud would say you make a blessing because you are thinking of God. Kabbalah would say the blessing is about drawing Godliness into the cup, and realizing the enlivening force in the water is continuous, and as such, an aspect of Godliness. Many Kabbalistic principles, however, are not related to ritual or Torah or Talmud per se. Rather, they are aimed at universal truths of life, and so can be studied by anyone of any faith.

Kabbalistic teachings were preserved through oral tradition until the first text, *The Book of Illumination*, was published late in the twelfth century. The seminal text of Kabbalah, the *Zohar*, was published a century later. Many teachings, however, were never written down and have been lost, particularly those concerning meditative and magical Kabbalah, which uses tools such as incantations and amulets to alter or influence the course of nature. Pinson focuses on theoretical Kabbalah, which concerns the inner and outer dimension of reality. Kabbalah isn't theoretical, though. It is often called the *Tree of Life* because it is a philosophy that is meant to be lived out.

Many spiritual traditions focus on getting us out of the mind or quieting the mind so we can get to a place of peace and silence and oneness and stay there. Kabbalah is also about getting to that place, but it allows us to use and engage our minds to do so. It's about being in that noisy place in the head because we are meant to think, to be in turmoil, to wrestle down the truth. Kabbalah teaches you how to use and trust your senses, but also how to use them to sense the deeper within. Kabbalah gives you a philosophical structure that allows you to be connected to the divine source, whether you are in your mind or your heart or your body. So whatever space you are in is the right space to be in. Wherever you go, there you are. Buckaroo Banzai was a Kabbalist!

So what does this structure, which contains the whole universe, look like? The best way to visualize it is as an enormous house with hundreds of rooms, antechambers, closets, attics, and basements that you can move in and out of. The frame of the house helps you understand all of what you experience, no matter how ugly or awful or painful or paradoxical, in a spiritual light: who you are, how the world was created, and who you are in relation to creation.

The first and most important aspect of this structure is that it contains within it parallel worlds, or different realities that exist simultaneously. You can move in and out of these worlds like floating in and out of rooms in the house. These parallel worlds contain parallel truths and parallel feelings which may exist simultaneously, even though you may experience them consecutively.

The outside wall of the structure is the reality of ESSENCE. Essence is what the universe was created from. It contains everything: the infinite and finite, light and dark, space and no space, time and no time, good and bad, and no good or bad. It is a place of form and no form, of absolute potential that contains everything that exists or could exist. Essence is the source of eternal light, the source from which everything is sourced. Some call this divinity, some call it God, some call it Oneness or unity. In Hebrew it's called *or ein sof*.

(Note: Light here is just a metaphor for the initial manifestation of the divine. Light is used by Kabbalists because it is something you can perceive without touching. In fact, the whole structure of the house is a metaphor for the creation of the universe.)

From essence comes a glimmer or revelation of light. Separation begins as the unified light unfolds

and breaks itself in two. The first world that is created is made up of the INFINITE, or transcendent reality. This is the top floor of the house. Then there is a contraction of the infinite light, a quantum leap that conceals the *or ein sof*, and from the infinite, the FINITE reality is created. A line comes down from the finite world with 10 points called *sfeiros* running along it, into the world of creation, the world of matter. This is the bottom floor of the house. These points on the line coming down from the finite allow us to perceive everything that is material, or finite: time and space, tables and chairs, you and me. The *sfeiros* are 10 distinct aspects of the divine, or infinite light, such as wisdom, severity, beauty, intuition, and reason. Think about the *sfeiros* as if they are colored filters or screens that allow us to see, feel, and experience life — as well as the divine source — in all its forms.

For example, we can delve deeply into the mystery of creation and observe the wisdom of *or ein sof*, or we can watch the sunset over the horizon and observe the *or ein sof*'s beauty. It's the same unified "light" manifested through different forms. Form allows us to approach the Infinite light, or *or ein sof*, because we cannot grasp through our minds what is formless, eternal, beyond time and space, which is essentially everything.

Daily life unfolds in this finite universe within which there are four more worlds lined up in descending order: spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical. Each world is as real as the next. Everything in each world is an expression of oneness, of the ultimate existence or essence, but we don't necessarily experience things in this way. In our daily lives, we experience our feelings, other people, or things as separate from one another and from us. Kabbalah strives to help us move into a more expansive state of awareness so we always remember and know that everything is an expression of and a part of essence. So how does this work in real time?

Say you are in a room in the house that represents physical experience. You are there because someone has hurt you and you are in pain. From a Kabbalistic perspective, how do you respond? How do you get out of that room so you can best cope with the pain? There are multiple pathways. You can shift into the room of emotion, where you recognize that you are physically hurt but emotionally well. You can shift into the mental

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M.C. Escher, *Relativity*, 1953, lithograph, 10⁷/₈ x 11¹/₂
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universe where you see that you are physically hurt but can get help and heal. Or you can shift into the spiritual universe and see that the pain is serving a purpose and that you will grow as a person from it.

If none of this works, you can move more deeply into the spiritual world, where you see that everything in life is a reflection of the 10 *sfeiros*, or expressions of God, which are projected into the universe and so are always present in a specific way in each room, on each floor. Going down this path allows you see that everything you experience must have some kind of divine root. For example, through the *sfeiros*, you can come to see your pain as an expression of God's pain, or God's wisdom, or God's severity. In this way you make your pain holy; your pain is no longer just your own. Kabbalah's essential teaching is that we are not separate from our creator and that the Infinite light from which all arises is reality.

If you understand that everything has a divine root, you can trace every feeling to its divine source. For example, you might feel afraid and small and vulnerable when you are hurt and in pain. Kabbalah teaches that the divine root of that feeling is awe: once you feel awe, from a more open state of consciousness, you feel less pain and fear. You can now begin to see that pain allowed you to move from a feeling of smallness to a feeling of expansiveness, or awe, where you experienced more of your spiritual self. You might even say, from an even more expanded state, that you just had an encounter with the *or ein sof* itself through your pain.

Or not! You can go on to an entirely different room through meditation or prayer. Why do you pray? To change things? Maybe you pray because prayer will change you and take you to a different place. Kabbalah allows for you to take the elevator to the top floor and, through meditation or prayer, enter the infinite reality, a place of transcendence. In this place you go beyond the body and the ego-self to where there is no difference between pain and no pain. It's a place of absolute peace and equanimity, and it is as real, if you can experience it, as the pain. So, when you come back from there, you will still have your pain to contend with, but you will have a different perspective on it. You will have a greater context within which to experience your pain, which will help you accept it and be at peace with it — without denying the reality, which is that you hurt!

So what happens if you get stuck? Let's say you are stuck in an angry place because someone has hurt you. You are convinced you have been wronged because you didn't deserve to be hurt. The mystics would recommend a meditation that focuses on the infinite because you are stuck in the finite, a place where A supposedly causes B. In this finite place you live in, you count on life to run according to rules, and when the rules are broken, you are angry. The masters would say focus on the divine name *Ehay*, which translates as "I am" or "I will be what I will be." If you meditate on that, you will ask yourself if it is true that B always follows A. How could it be true if God is saying, "I am" and "I am becoming," if life is a state of becoming where nothing is absolute? In this place there are no "shoulds," no rules. In the infinite, everything is one, and there isn't one reality, but infinite realities. Who says you aren't supposed to be poked? You don't know. This is a place of mystery, so meditate on that. Maybe the story you are telling yourself isn't true, or maybe there is a parallel universe where it is both true and not true. From this more peaceful place of infinite reality, you begin to realize that your anger is just one truth. This will help you get unstuck. Remember, there are parallel worlds and realities, multiple floors of the house where multiple truths are operating at the same time.

Think about life itself: you can look around you and see the world of *tikkun*, which means reconciliation. In that world of *tikkun*, everything is connected, defined, and in order. Or you can look at the world and see that everything is insane and nothing is connected, and wonder what the heck is going on. Both are true. You can look at the self and see a soul that is eternally alive, or you can look and see a body that is essentially dying matter. Both are true. We live in a world of paradox where God is reflected in everything. According to Kabbalah, there are traces of infinity in the finite, and traces of essence in everything.

You can't ever get stuck if you can entertain life in all its dimensions and contradictions. Kabbalah is a system within systems with lots of possibilities. You can always change your perception of what you are experiencing, depending on what part of the house you decide to inhabit at any given moment. You can choose where to go in the house. It's up to you. It's not easy. It takes practice. It requires mastery. It's as elaborate and multifaceted as we are. We are everyone we've met and everything we experience. We are the fire, the water,

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Constantin Brancusi, *Beginning of the World*, c. 1920, marble, metal, and stone, 30 x 20 x 20 inches, Dallas Museum of Art, Foundation for the Arts Collection, gift of Mr. and Mrs. James H. Clark, ©2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

the table, the chair. And since we are everything, Kabbalists have a system that allows for everything within it.

As you can see, this system is designed to help you reconnect with the divine source, the Infinite light, at all times, so that you can feel and know that you are not separate from it. It is the ego-self that feels separate, which is at the root of negative emotions, according to Kabbalah. This masks our true inner dynamic, which is that we have a transcendent soul inhabiting a finite body. Nothing exists outside the infinite light, even though the light is often concealed (remember *tzimtzum*, the contraction of light that is necessary for creation to manifest itself). All that exists comes from essence, source, or *ein sof*, which you may begin to see on a cosmic level

and feel on an individual level if you follow a Kabbalist path. This is the essential teaching and training of the mystic. Once you know this, consciously or unconsciously, you can battle and conquer your negative emotions and traits and become a better person, as well as a happier and more whole person. Once you know this in your bones, you will always see yourself and everyone and everything around you as an expression of essence. And so, the mundane becomes holy.

With this framework in mind, we can consider the following questions:

Can you skip this whole process and just realize we are essence?

Thoughts cannot grasp essence. We cannot meditate on essence. The brain is binary, meaning the only way you can make sense of things and appreciate them is through distinction, by dividing and

separating them. In using our minds, we can seek God, try to love creation, or strive to be connected to the source, but we can never completely reach God or essence as long as it is an object of our affection, which implies that it is separate from us. So we can only be aware of essence through the heart (the heart is a metaphor for knowing, sensing, and being that is nonlinear, nonrational). We can only be essence-consciousness. In this condition, we live in unity with everything in creation. God is not, in fact, outside us, or outside creation. What is the place that is beyond the infinite and the finite? It is everything. How do you access that? You can't, because you already are that. How can you understand it? You can't, because to understand it is to be out of it. It's like a peak moment where you are utterly absorbed and your sense of self is lost — the minute you realize you are having one, it's over. God



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says to Moses, you can't see Me because you are Me. You're it. We're all it. There's nowhere to go. That is radical nonduality. You don't have to look at the sunset or read a poem to get a glimpse of infinity. So why do we need this other system? Because we aren't there all the time or even most of the time. It's there all the time, but we aren't.

How do we know the Kabbalistic view of the universe is true?

Kabbalah is based on a verse from Job, "I see God from my own flesh." You could take this literally to mean that if you give up your flesh, you see the greatness of the creator. But it also means that if you look deeply enough into your own self, you can find the entire process of creation replicated. The deeper we look at what goes on within, the more access we have to what is going on in the cosmos. It is an inward journey that allows us to see upward. Everything is reflected in everything else.

Is there good and evil in the world, according to Kabbalah?

It depends. In the place of essence, the source of everything which encompasses all, everything exists. It is beyond good and evil, but it also includes good and evil. In the infinite place, there is no good or evil, there is just mystery. In the finite world we live in, there is good and evil, and laws follow as a result. The potential for evil is created when the contraction of infinite light happens. There is negative space because something now exists outside the light.

Just to confuse you further, nothing is ever really occurring in the highest realm of essence, but in this realm of the finite, where we live and act, the possibility of evil now exists. So, in one realm, evil doesn't exist, and in the other, where we live, it does exist and must be dealt with. In other words, you can't just let evil be,

The author, Louise Danielle Palmer, in conversation with Rabbi DovBer Pinson in his Brooklyn, New York, home.



CAROL SEITZ

but simultaneously, you are aware from a more expanded perspective, that evil that has occurred is meant to be because it exists.

Are all people born good?

Everyone is born from essence, which is divine. This is the deeper part of the self that is the source of all goodness, but it doesn't mean you tap in to it. You might not choose to. You have free choice as an adult.

The potential for negativity arises in you when you are pure ego, only out for yourself, unaware of the transcendent (infinite) aspect of both yourself and others. We need to fulfill our needs but not at someone else's expense. Not all desires are meant to be fulfilled.

Why was this universe created?

The or ein sof is one, but a desire arises in it to have relationship with something, with everything. So the infinite contracts itself into the finite, and one divides into two, and then into many. Life is that relationship between the infinite and the finite.

What is our purpose as human beings, according to Kabbalah?

The cosmos began as one and gave rise to two, and to many. So our cosmic purpose is to join the many, the two, back into one. The first way we do this is to fully express ourselves as individuals, as unique personalities with egos. The second is to

fully express ourselves as transcendent beings with a spiritual dimension, recognizing yourself and the other as two finite expressions of the infinite "one." The goal isn't to eradicate your ego, but to render it transparent so you can live eternally, fully, as the true expression of who you are on all levels: physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. If you live so fully, you are joined with everything, all of creation, back into the one, unity. That is what we all long for at the deepest level: union, or reunion. Our purpose is to seek and find union with the creator or source through each other, through life itself! ❖

Rabbi DovBer Pinson runs the Iyyun Institute in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, with his wife, Rochie. He is the author of *Reincarnation and Judaism: The Journey of the Soul, Inner Rhythms: The Kabbalah of Music; Meditation and Judaism: Exploring the Jewish Meditative Paths; Toward the Infinite: The Way of Kabbalistic*, and *It Was Good, It Is Good, & It Will Be Good: Jewish Wisdom of the Afterlife*. His latest book is *Essential Kabbalah: God, Man, & Universe* (Ktav, 2006).

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