

Will we ever unravel the mysteries of Kabbalah?

Harry Freedman tries his best to explain one of the world's most esoteric traditions, but mystery, it transpires, is mysterious

Nicola Barker



A 17th-century Kabbalah amulet. The seven-branched candlestick is made up of words

Kabbalah: Secrecy, Scandal and the Soul Harry Freedman

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In an age where ‘authenticity’ is prized above all things (even if what this actually means is that — like, say, Trump — you are just celebrated for being authentically narcissistic), it seems a rare kind of delight to investigate a spiritual/mystical philosophy of which it is airily claimed that: ‘It’s meaningless to speak of authenticity.’ *Wow*. Double-blink.

Welcome to the curious but fascinating world of Harry Freedman’s *Kabbalah: Secrecy, Scandal and the Soul*, a cheerfully non-partisan, no-frills attempt at demystifying one of the world’s most mysterious, opaque and esoteric spiritual traditions. Yes. Kabbalah... or...um... Cabala. Freedman certainly has his work cut out here. As if explaining the rudiments (and the rudiments are all that it’s humanly possible to explain in a book of this length) of Kabbalah/Cabala isn’t difficult enough, there’s long been this schism between the original, inward-looking, Jewish Traditionalist Kabbalists and loopy factions in the west (and this is a psychological kind of west rather than a geographical one) where the tradition has taken on a more occult/New Age/self-help incarnation.

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one that does not detract from their faith.’ Yes. So it’s flexible. It contains a little bit of something for everyone.

In fact the claims that can be made for Kabbalah are even broader than that. It has — historically — enjoyed numerous admirers in the natural sciences, among them notable mathematicians, scientists, alchemists and magicians. Some people have argued that it displays startling similarities to modern theories of the Big Bang. And Jung went so far as to assert that Kabbalah’s portrayal of the cosmos perfectly reflects the structure of the human psyche.

Kabbalah has also enjoyed its fair share of fans in the literary world. In Frances Yates’s account, motifs of Christian Cabala appear in *Dr Faustus*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Tempest* and *Frankenstein*. And don’t let’s forget Madonna and her *Ray of Light* album. Or all of those celebrities buying exorbitantly priced bottled water and wearing little red strings around their wrists.

Kabbalah means ‘that which is received’. To break it all down (and I’m going to be way less successful at this than Freedman is), it is a tradition which does not possess one central text (a Bible or Koran). There are many. And the central texts that exist are often indecipherable. Among these are *The Book of Formation*, the *Sefer Bahir (Book of Light)* and (considered by many including Freedman as the most important) the *Zohar (Radiance)* which scholars believe was written in medieval Spain. You could say that the philosophy has hovered nervously throughout the ages between the urge to experience God directly (i.e. mysticism) and the urge to comprehend God (i.e. theosophy).

At root, Kabbalah struggles to understand how God — who is perfect/infinite — could have created a universe which is flawed/finite. The doctrine of *tzimtzum* (contraction) steps into this breach (quite literally) and describes God withdrawing into himself to generate a void within which the Creation could take place. As a bridge between the finite and the infinite, God has also created a series of divine emanations called the *sefirot*, which are all explained (by a rather out of breath Freedman) in the book’s handy appendix. In essence this great contraction (and let’s not forget Adam and Eve being violently expelled into the physical world) represents a giant rupture in the cosmos. Kabbalists dream of restoring us all — by various means — to primordial harmony.

If you read this book you will encounter your fair share of ‘signs’ and ‘unifying principles’, there will be ‘encoding’ and ‘decoding’, there will be a female Christ called

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hidden meanings and masks a powerful, divine language concealed behind it.

There is so much to ponder here and so little space to do it in. Which honestly renders Freedman's bold attempt to do so an act bordering on the heroic. That he should manage to perform this service soberly and respectfully while creating a palpable sense in the reader of how extraordinarily fragile the transmission of spiritual knowledge can be, is trebly impressive. Mystery, it transpires, is mysterious. And that's authentically intriguing.

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