

Choosing Faith Over Folly

The *Mekubalim* Phenomenon

by Rabbi Yaakov Hillel

A number of leading Rabbanim in the United States have asked for my opinion concerning the proliferation of “Kabbalists,” or “*Mekubalim*,” in Jewish communities around the globe. Our generation has become inundated with individuals who, for a fee, dispense advice or claim to control the future, based on what they say are Kabbalistic principles. These Rabbanim feel that such individuals are harmful for many reasons and I can only concur, since their concerns are very well-founded.

The words “Kabbalist” and “Kabbalah” are among the most abused and misused terms in the contemporary Jewish—and even non-Jewish—lexicon. Kabbalah consists of the profound teachings of our Sages in the *Zohar*, the

Rabbi Yaakov Hillel of Jerusalem is the scion of an illustrious Baghdad family, the great-grandson of HaRav Avraham Hillel, chief rabbi and *Av Bet Din* of Baghdad in the time of the Ben Ish Hai. Rabbi Hillel studied in the renowned Yeshivot of Gateshead in England and Ponevezh in Israel. After his marriage he founded Ahavat Shalom Institutions in Jerusalem. In the ensuing years Ahavat Shalom blossomed into a Torah empire, encompassing tens of *kollelim* with thousands of *avrechim*; Bnot Elisheva Seminary for girls; Shalom LaAm, its highly successful outreach division, with branches throughout Israel; Yeshivot Etz HaHayyim and Ahavat Torah; the Ahavat Shalom Bet Din and Bet Horaah, and a publishing house which has produced over five hundred volumes to date, the majority from manuscript. For thirty-seven years, Rabbi Hillel has taught Kabbalah on a high level to select groups of distinguished Torah scholars. He is the author of numerous works in many fields of Torah scholarship, including *Responsa VaYashov HaYam* (three volumes); *Shorsbey HaYam*, a commentary on *Etz Hayyim* (five volumes); *Sefat HaYam*, a commentary on *Siddur HaRaShash* (six volumes); *Galei HaYam*; *Aspaklaria D’Nahara*; *Takanat HaShavim*; *Tamim Tihyeh*; *Roni Akarah*; *Ruah HaYam*, and more. His works in English include *Ascending the Path: Insights into Mesillat Yesharim*; *Ascending Jacob’s Ladder* (essays); and *The Queen Within You: Torah Perspectives on Women’s Issues*.

writings of the Ari-zal, and other Kabbalistic works, which deal with the Creator, how and why He created the world, and the ways in which He rules and sustains it. It relates to the purpose of Creation and its various levels, and how man perfects both the world and his soul through fulfilling the mitzvot. It also deals with the inner meanings of the Sacred Names of G-d and the names and functions of His angels. It has no connection whatsoever to magic or to the occult, as the popular conception would have it.

An Interpretation of a Mishnah

We can gain insight into the Torah outlook on true Kabbalah by studying our Sages' words in the Mishnah in *Avot* 4:5:

Rabbi Tzadok says, do not make them [the words of Torah] a crown for glorification, nor a spade to dig with. And so Hillel would say: "One who uses the crown (*tagga*) will pass on [from this world]." We learn from here that one who derives benefit from words of Torah removes his life from the world.

Understood simply, Hillel's words follow the theme of Rabbi Tzadok's teaching, "Do not make them [the words of Torah] a crown for glorification, nor a spade to dig with." *Tagga*, or crown, is a reference to Torah, man's spiritual "crown."¹ The simple meaning of these words is that a Torah scholar who merits "the crown of Torah" should not use it for personal advancement. Hillel's words add a very serious warning. He says that one who uses the honor implicit in the crown of Torah to promote his own agenda will "pass on"—he does not deserve to continue living. The problem is not only that he is interested in honor—bad enough on its own—but that he turns the Torah into his personal instrument for material gain. One who exchanges his enhanced comprehension of Torah for the petty cash of worldly honor and materialism "will pass on"; his offense is deserving of death.

The concluding sentence of the Mishnah teaches us that severe punishment awaits one who exploits Torah for his own interests: "He removes his life from the world," a reference to the World to Come. By giving us the Torah, Hashem

1. See *Avot* 1:13 and Commentary of Bartenura.

“planted eternal life in us.”² Every single precious word of Torah is unending spirituality—it is eternity. When we seek to derive benefit from words of Torah, we translate this eternal spiritual treasure into the petty trinkets of money or honor, or even just a good spot further ahead on line. This is a cheap exchange rate for the eternal life granted by Torah. We chip away at our stockpile of spiritual treasure, leaving ourselves with nothing in the long run. By so doing, we remove our own lives from the World to Come, the only “world” which really counts.

However, on a more profound level, the word *tagga*, or crown, is a reference to the esoteric meaning of the Divine Names of the Al-mighty taught by Kabbalah.³ It is regarding this aspect of Kabbalah that Hillel enjoins us, “One who uses the crown,” meaning one who uses the Sacred Names for profane, mundane purposes, “will pass on.” Knowledge of the Names is intended as a means for attaining a deeper understanding of the Torah and the Creator, to the extent that the human mind is capable of comprehending such matters. It may never be used for personal gain. Degrading the sacred teachings of Kabbalah by manipulating the Divine Names for any use other than an extreme emergency threatening the Jewish people (see below) is a grave transgression, as well as very dangerous for everyone involved.

Kabbalah Maasit

Our tradition teaches that theoretically, it is possible to employ Kabbalah to influence the workings of the material world by means of a branch of Kabbalah known as *Kabbalah Maasit*, literally, “practical Kabbalah.” One who knows the names of the angels appointed over different aspects of life in this world and how to bind them by an oath can order them to do his bidding.

The *Tannaim* were familiar with this wisdom. Many hundreds of years ago, saintly *tzaddikim* on a very high plane of purity, free even of unintentional sin, engaged in *Kabbalah Maasit* to save the Jewish people during times of great danger.⁴ There is a reliable tradition that certain great rabbis used their knowledge of Kabbalah to create a *golem* (a humanoid devoid of a soul) to

2. From *U'va L'Tzion* in the daily prayers.

3. See *Rema, Yoreh Deah* 246:21.

4. See *Shaar HaMitzvot, Parashat Shemot*.

help protect the Jewish people from various threatening situations. However, engaging in such activities is an extremely dangerous affair. Some, like Rabbi Yosef Della Reina and Rabbi Shlomo Molcho, overstepped their limits in employing *Kabbalah Maasit* with terrible, tragic results.⁵

It is this branch of Kabbalah which the modern-day Kabbalists purport to employ to manipulate the workings of the natural world. However, even if they really were conversant in *Kabbalah Maasit*, there can never be any justification to use it for profit.

All this refers to those who have a genuine knowledge of *Kabbalah Maasit*. However, today's "Kabbalists" are nearly all charlatans who falsely claim the ability to effect changes in one's physical or financial well-being through Kabbalah. They are frauds who usually adopt the behaviors, modes of dress and speech attributed to great mystics, which have become their trademarks. They speak in impressively esoteric terms and/or act strangely, demonstrating exotic forms of piety. Unfortunately, the ordinary person is not sophisticated enough to assess whether or not the Kabbalist is genuine or a fraud. In the eye of the common man, those who in fact have extensive knowledge of Kabbalah cannot be "real" Kabbalists, since they are too normal!

Unfortunately, in our times there are many people who must grapple with serious challenges in areas of health, family, business or financial problems, and so forth. These people are especially vulnerable to promises of instant, miraculous solutions and *yeshu'ot* (salvations). Motivated by a desire for power and wealth, unscrupulous individuals who have no qualms about preying on the problems and confusion of their fellow Jews have stepped onto the scene and declared themselves "Kabbalists" who can solve all problems. One such individual was recently featured in a list of "ten richest rabbis" published by Forbes, a widely-read business magazine, with details of his spectacular personal financial holdings. It should be noted that throughout history, pious rabbis would distribute every penny they received from the public to Jews in need, without regard for their personal interests. It seems that times have changed!

Unfortunately, almost daily we hear of yet another "Kabbalist" who, for the right price, dispenses harmful advice and meddles in personal family matters, with often disastrous and even fatal results. A patient who has been advised by competent physicians to undergo necessary medical treatment will

5. See *Shaarey Kedushah* 3:6 and 2:6.

consult with an irresponsible “Kabbalist” “wonder-worker.” The “miracle man” advises him to ignore the doctors; instead he need only hand the “Kabbalist” a sizable sum of money, which he promises will resolve the problem. In a sense, it does—for the trusting patient soon passes away, and is relieved of his medical concerns. In addition to inducing the death of the supplicant, the “Kabbalist’s” “wise advice” causes homes to break up and various other troubles to surface. But these misfortunes are dismissed by the “*Mekubal*” as a *tikun* necessary for the rectification of the injured party’s soul. Many such victims have turned to me with chilling stories of this type of sheer wickedness. Unfortunately, more often than not they only seek counsel after the damage has already been done.

To any knowledgeable person, it should be obvious that these “Kabbalists” cannot be genuine. In his Introduction to *Etz Hayyim*, Rabbi Hayyim Vital, the Ari-zal’s foremost disciple, lists the prerequisites for the study of Kabbalah. Among them are great sanctity, profound and extensive knowledge of the revealed Torah, exceptional refinement in character and personal conduct, and meticulous, exacting fulfillment of mitzvot. These are the basic requirements needed to engage in this profound, holy, and complex study. On the other hand, these “Kabbalists” are usually shockingly ignorant even of the revealed Torah. At best they may have spent some time in a yeshivah for beginners, and have perhaps leafed through some Kabbalistic texts, gleaning from them various impressive terminologies and concepts which they then employ indiscriminately. Not only are they not *Mekubalim* in any sense of the term; they are not even Torah scholars in the basic areas of the revealed Torah.

The profit motive has caused this phenomenon to reach alarming proportions. There have been people with reputations as Torah scholars who have, in order to raise urgently needed funds for a variety of charitable needs, stooped to allow themselves to take on the role of *Mekubal*, by claiming to be able solve personal problems, predict the future, and make grand, “guaranteed” promises. This is obviously not honest and not proper, and certainly not Kabbalah.

Throughout our history, the study of Kabbalah was only undertaken by pious Torah scholars with a very thorough, comprehensive knowledge of the revealed Torah. Because of their other spiritual qualifications, some of these special individuals, among them the Ari-zal, merited Divine inspiration and

levels approaching prophecy. However, the converse is not true: someone who studies Kabbalah does not by definition have Divine inspiration and the ability to foretell the future. In more recent generations, the lofty spiritual levels of *tzaddikim* like the Ari-zal are far beyond anyone's reach, and certainly beyond the reach of these modern-day frauds.

Recognizing a True *Tzaddik*

The fact that these charlatans portray themselves as saintly miracle workers is the greatest evidence that they are not. It is difficult to recognize a true *tzaddik*, because he carefully avoids any sort of recognition. A well-known incident in the life of the saintly Hafetz Hayyim is a vivid illustration.

A Jewish couple had been married for twenty years and still had no children. The husband went to see the Hafetz Hayyim, at that time in his late sixties, to ask for his blessing. The Hafetz Hayyim blessed him, and further advised him to seek the blessing of the rabbi of a certain small town, instructing him not to divulge this information to anyone. The childless man sought out this unknown rabbi and obtained his blessing. Shortly afterwards, the couple had their first child.

For some twenty years, the husband kept his word to the Hafetz Hayyim and never told anyone exactly what had happened. After many years, though, he finally allowed himself to reveal the secret to another childless man, who made his way to the same small town rabbi for a blessing. For this second man, however, it did not work.

The first man went back to the Hafetz Hayyim, by then very old and frail, and told him what he had done, and that this time, the anonymous saint's blessing had not been effective, as it had been for him so long ago. The Hafetz Hayyim was shocked to hear that the "secret" had been revealed. But as it turned out, the real secret was something no one had ever dreamed of.

When the first couple had asked for a blessing for children, the Hafetz Hayyim immediately began to pray and fast on their behalf. He had sent them to another rabbi not because he specifically was the one who would be able to bless them with a child, but in order to cover up for the great physical and spiritual efforts the Hafetz Hayyim personally invested for them. Now, faced with this other couple's problem, he wept because at his advanced age, he no

longer had the strength for such arduous exertions. The Hafetz Hayyim had no interest in a reputation as a miracle worker, and in fact made sure to conceal his role in the miraculous birth of this couple's child.

In another instance, the Steipeler Gaon blessed a long childless couple with children, and the blessing was fulfilled. When the new father returned to thank him, the Steipeler brushed him off, saying "*sheker v'hanufah*"—"lies and flattery!" In other words, he denied that his blessing had anything to do with the miraculous birth.

These were the ways of truly great *tzaddikim*. Today's pretenders take a different route. Their great deeds and amazing miracles are given generous coverage in eye-catching posters plastered on the street corners, announcing their upcoming arrival in a city or neighborhood along with details about where they will be receiving petitioners. These are supplemented by full-color newspaper and magazine feature articles, conveniently placed in various publications. They usually are not shy about having their accomplishments discussed in public—they will even do it themselves. The stories and eyewitness accounts are convincing, and the gullible public easily believes them.

To cite only one example, after the recent fatal shooting at a Jewish school in Toulouse, France, a certain rabbi with a sizable following revealed to a gathering of his devotees that one night he had woken up trembling and drenched in sweat. He related that he had seen a terrifying vision of an enormous explosion in France which wiped out thousands of Jewish lives. He immediately got to work, he said, praying and fasting and beseeching the Al-mighty to spare His people. After a great deal of effort, the rabbi was granted another Heavenly vision in which he clearly saw how his prayers and fasts toppled the Forces of Evil behind the impending disaster. Shortly afterwards, four people, three students and a teacher, were killed in Toulouse. In other words, thanks to him, the tragedy had been pared down from untold thousands to only four. When he finished his tale, the listeners applauded.

Far too many people are gullible enough to readily believe such stories, with no questions asked. They know so little about what a true Torah leader is, and what a genuine *Mekubal* is, that they do not even realize that the very fact that such stories are bandied about proves that they are false. Had this or any other rabbi been able to bring about miraculous salvation for our people, he would have kept it to himself. It would never be a subject for a public presentation, greeted with applause.

How can we distinguish between a true *tzaddik* and an imposter? In his commentary on the Torah, Rabbi Meir Simhah of Dvinsk (the author of *Ohr Sameah*) writes that we should trace the trail of his fame and reputation—where did they begin? The reliable path begins at the top: our nation’s great Torah leaders are the first to recognize an unknown scholar’s outstanding qualities. He gradually becomes known to other Torah scholars and students as well, until eventually, his name also becomes familiar to the masses. Alternatively, the process may be reversed, beginning at the bottom. Someone first develops a reputation among the masses, who spread his name like wildfire. With time, this favorite of the simple folk may also come to the attention of prominent rabbis, gaining credibility by the back door, so to speak. However, it is the first type of scholar who is truly legitimate and worthy of respect.

Rabbi Meir Simhah writes that we can learn this principle from the Torah’s description of the progress of Moshe Rabbenu’s fame in Egypt: “And the man Moshe was very great in the Land of Egypt, in the eyes of Pharaoh’s servants, and in the eyes of the nation.”⁶ Pharaoh’s servants were the palace elite, the nation’s intelligentsia. They were the first to recognize that Moshe was a great man. From there, his fame went out to the nation at large; not the other way around.⁷

To this day many outstanding Torah scholars continue to live by the principle, “Wisdom is with the modest.”⁸ Their time is spent studying and perhaps teaching Torah but they are not widely known, and no one lauds them as great and holy. They are not interested in publicity and will even do their best to stay away from it. In contrast, the ignorant modern “Kabbalists” are frighteningly vocal and adept at forcing their way into the spotlight in print, on electronic media, and in broadcasts on religious radio stations.

One especially effective avenue which they exploit is the political arena in Israel. Voicing an opinion on current issues or endorsing a party earns an aspiring rabbi an automatic network of supporters. The endorsed party now has a great interest in promoting this rabbi as a major figure in the Torah world, because the bigger he is, the more valuable his endorsement.

This can be much more problematic than merely providing a relatively ordinary rabbi with some exaggerated publicity. Prior to the most recent elections in

6. *Shemot* 11:3.

7. *Mesbech Hochmah*, *ibid.*

8. *Mishley* 11:2.

Israel, a certain “rabbi’s” signature appeared on a political endorsement alongside those of extremely prominent Torah scholars. Since he had a large following, his name was well placed and accorded due respect. A week later, this same man fled the country to avoid charges of the very worst type of immoral behavior.

Unfortunately, the same can be also true of various charitable causes. A rabbi endorses a certain charity, and promises great blessing to its supporters. In order for his blessings to attract as many potential donors as possible, the charity will present this rabbi, not necessarily one of the great Torah authorities of the day, as far greater than he is. Such ruses bring in enormous sums of money, as well as garner votes during election season.

We can appreciate the shallowness of a media-generated reputation by realizing that even in the Torah world, photography has become an important tool in image-building. A number of publications geared to the Orthodox community feature full-page photo spreads of various rabbis lighting Hanukah candles, burning their *hametz*, or attending public functions, continually bringing their names and faces before the public. Some of them are in fact true Gedolim. Others may have no more to their credit than the pictures they pose for. The message sinks in, and who is sending it? The photographers who get the best shots.

These methods of publicizing Gedolim are a stark contrast to the way the arrival of the Chazon Ish in Eretz Yisrael was announced in the summer of 1933. He was preceded by a single letter from Rabbi Hayyim Ozer Grodzenski, who wrote these simple words to an acquaintance: “A lion is ascending from Babylon.”⁹ This is a far cry from the artificial fanfare we are witness to in our times, when photographers and journalists are the ones who appoint new “Gedolim.”

Why Does It Matter?

Practically speaking, why should this be reason for concern?

The “*Mekubalim* phenomenon” promotes individuals who are neither great *tzaddikim* nor great Torah scholars, and are certainly not well-versed in the Torah’s hidden secrets, and propels them to the forefront not by personal

9. The terminology of the Sages used to describe the arrival in Eretz Yisrael of a great Torah scholar from the Diaspora (*Bava Kama* 117a).

merit, but by manipulation aimed at furthering an agenda, whether their own or that of a body whose interests are served. These overnight leaders are unfit to lead anyone—not even themselves. However, they are nonetheless established as “Gedolim,” and their word carries power and influence. They are able to deceive heartbroken people into parting with large sums of money, a serious transgression on its own. Even worse, they also issue statements, rulings, and directives which are not the product of responsible *daat Torah*, but simply their own views, for whatever they may be worth. They steer the public down risky paths, often with tragic results—may G-d spare us.

As we explained, *Kabbalah* is a branch of Godly wisdom which teaches its students about the Creator and His universe, and how man can perfect himself spiritually through the commandments of the Torah. It is not a ticket to money, fame, or power obtained through supernatural forces. A Kabbalist who attempts to control others or gain wealth is a dangerous, self-serving fraud. Ultimately, his use of the *tagga*, the crown of Kabbalistic knowledge to which he has no claim, will cause him to pass on, because “one who derives benefit from words of Torah,” both hidden and revealed, “removes his life from the world.”

Our Sages’ warning has been fulfilled often enough, and yet many still do not take the message to heart. The choice should be clear, but unfortunately, many of our people still choose wrongly.¹⁰

The Source of the Problem

The source of the problem is the superficiality of the modern Jew’s relationship to the Al-mighty. The average modern Jew does not know or demand of himself inner devotion to G-d, reliance on Him, and love and fear of His greatness. He is not prepared to subordinate himself and his desires to G-d’s will; rather, he wishes to subordinate G-d’s will to his. He needs G-d to enable him to reach his self-determined goals. Thus if success in the marketplace is his ultimate goal, he will attempt to enlist G-d to help him reach it. He views the

10. Twenty-five years ago, I published a work entitled *Tamim Tihiyeh* (Ahavat Shalom Press, 1987) to alert the public to the dangers posed by false *Mekubalim*. This work was later translated into English under the title *Faith and Folly* (Ahavat Shalom Press, 1990).

CHOOSING FAITH OVER FOLLY

“Kabbalist” as the proprietor of occult forces which can bend G-d’s will to his. He therefore seeks him out and is willing to pay vast sums for his services.

Eager for an instant fix for all their problems, people prefer the tragic folly of believing in unscrupulous charlatans, rather than living their lives with untainted faith in the Al-mighty. May this vital message soon reach the hearts and minds of our Jewish brethren, for the benefit of our people everywhere. Amen.