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A Newcomer's Guide to Kabbalah

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As today's zeitgeist is focused on science and reason, mysticism and magic are often viewed unfavorably. Kabbalah is an esoteric school of thought that has its roots in Judaism and seeks to understand God through its concept of infinity. People tend to condemn that which they do not understand, and an ancient Jewish practice involving conundrums like how an unchanging god changed into a deity leads scholars and students alike unsure of how to interpret Kabbalah's scriptures. Because of its somewhat secretive nature, conspiracies sometimes develop about Kabbalah, including how it is trying to usher in a New World Order (Aptekman 2006). In reality, when one looks at Kabbalah's background, its modus operandi, and its religious connections, one will find a rich and incisive commentary on society and nature.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Kabbalah finds its root in a popular religion, Judaism. It is rather difficult to pinpoint exactly who started the practice of Kabbalah or when it originated, but the most widely accepted view is that Kabbalah can be dated back to Moses (Jewish Encyclopedia 1964). An integral figure in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, Moses is credited for being the man who led the enslaved Israelites out of Egypt. During his long exodus, God directly spoke with Moses and bestowed upon him the Ten Commandments that, in part, made up the Oral Torah (The Holy Bible 2002). Cabalists believe that back in the 13th century B.C., God gave Moses the Kabbalah as part of the Oral Torah on Mount Sinai (Jewish Encyclopedia 1964).

Kabbalah would begin to spread throughout Jewish communities, and later on, Christian communities as different wise men taught their own unique versions of the Kabbalah. One of the most prominent men associated with the teaching of Kabbalah is "The Ari" Rav Isaac Luria. An expert of Cabalist texts by age 13, this 16th century scholar would go on to write many important pieces of literature for students of the Kabbalah. One of Luria's more notable works is entitled *The Tree of Life*, in which he lays out groundwork for evolutionary theory, centuries before Darwin was born. Luria was so prescient on evolution that he even wrote that primates are the ancestors of humanity (Burstein et al 2014). The reason why Luria is so widely read by Cabalists is because he was able to use his understanding of Ein Sof to deduce practical, scientific truths that would not be elaborated upon for generations. Scholars like Luria give Kabbalah practical legitimacy and act as evidence as to why Cabalism may be more than mysticism.

MAIN PRACTICES, METHODS, AND BELIEFS

Kabbalah's basic belief is the existence of a dualistic nature to the Divine as a concealed and revealed God. The concealed form of God, named Ein Sof, is what mathematical philosophers would refer to as a perfectly infinite figure: a system without any extremes and that all its individual loci have local and universal infinitude (Swedenborg 1906). In contrast, the personifiable God heralded in texts like the Torah and the Bible is a manifestation of Ein Sof in a form that mankind can perceive and better understand Him. By creating this second state of being, Ein Sof creates an aggregate of aspects that make Him temporarily potentially infinite: a- figure that lacks extremes but whose individual constituent points are locally finite (Franck, 1947).

The most important Kabbalist text is the Zohar, a 2nd century book of teachings which compile the work of the Talmudic mystic, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. These teachings were handed down from across generations prior to publication in late 13th century by R. Moshe De Leon (Giller 2001). The Zohar discusses the theory behind Ein Sof, as well as enumerating different degrees of human comprehension of the Torah: Peshat is basic understanding, Remez is allegorical understanding, Derash is comparative understanding, and Sod is the Kabbalistic understanding of the Torah. Kabbalists valorize the Sod level of interpretation (Idel 2002).

Another way that Kabbalists differ from traditional Jews is that they believe in Gilgul Neshamot (reincarnation). Rav Lurian is the man credited for popularizing the idea of samsara Gilgulim into Kabbalah teaching. His argument is that reincarnation is the soul undergoing the cosmic process of rectification. Under this idea, all objects in the universe, whether they be tattered or completely destroyed by imperfection, go through a rectifying process in which the divine might of Ein Sof reverts their existence to a stage of *tabula rasa*. Gilgulim is not, however, an optimization process by which a person's soul is made ideal. It is simply a fresh start granted by the cosmos (Jewish Encyclopedia 1964).

Kabbalism's most important symbol, also one of its most important concepts, is the Ten Sefirot, or the Feminine Divinity. The Sefirot are ten attributes of Ein Sof that balance out the universe into a necessary state of order that keeps it from tearing itself apart through entropy. It is believed that human beings bear a microcosm of the universal Sefirot within themselves, which keeps a human being's mind, soul, and body in perfect balance. Sefirot are organized in a dichotomous and cyclical manner. The dichotomous nature of Sefirot, as seen in the conscious Daat and the unconscious Keter, balances out the universe, while its cyclical alignment ensures its perpetual existence (Burstein & Negoita 2011).

Kabbalah also has a unique creation story. Observant of its Judeo-Christian model, Kabbalah states that creation came from nothing. However, Ein Sof was always present, because He is the never-changing, omnipresent infinity (Burstein 2014). Ein Sof, meaning "the Light of Infinity", functions in a similar

way as bioluminescent animals do when they emit light without producing heat: He is “something”, but He does not leave the evidence that “something” should (Priede et al 2008).

This seeming lack of existence is because the reality of Ein Sof is far beyond human comprehension. Much like the Judeo-Christian revealed God, Ein Sof seemingly arbitrarily decides one day to create yesh, or the human concept of “something”. Ein Sof is met with a conundrum because of His very existence: since He is not actually “something”, He falls into the category of “nothing”, the literal meaning of “Ein”. To create yesh out of ein, though, is a complete paradox which Ein Sof cannot counteract in His current state. Ergo, Ein Sof must create an alternate reality, a different dimension, that is suitable to hold objects that are not God. To do this, Ein Sof condenses his being into a small spherical shape known as tzimtzum, a designated existence in the now multiverse that defies the universe’s laws of physics where He is infinite in all regards. Ein Sof’s contraction into his tzimtzum form leads to a cataclysmic explosion, which is described in the Zohar and Lurianic scriptures in a very similar way to the Big Bang (Giller 2001).

RELIGIOUS CONNECTIONS

As previously stated, Cabalism has ties to both Judaism and Christianity. Christian Cabalism does not surface until centuries after Jewish Kabbalah, and it discusses most of the same concepts that its prototype does. Kabbalah is used as a way for more scholarly, mystic Jews to explore the secrets of life and existence while still staying true to the Torah’s basic principles and assertions. The Kabbalah does not refute any precepts that the Torah or Jewish culture in general passes down; instead, it strives to answer the more in-depth questions people may have about why the Jewish community believes in its sacred texts. The concepts of Ein Sof and the Ten Sefirot, for example, strive to reason the intricacies of God’s existence and the creation of the universe in a philosophical manner. Kabbalist Jews still follow the basic rules that traditionalists do, but in addition, they read the Zohar and Lurianic literature. As such, Kabbalah is an extension of Judaism and is a school of thought that uses traditional Jewish beliefs as its baseline (Jewish Encyclopedia 1964).

STATUS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Kabbalah was never a very popular study because it only really ever allured scholars who the time and inclination to read deep, philosophical literature. Today, the Kabbalah is primarily studied and/or practiced by college professors who study it extensively or by small groups of Jews who want to keep

the long-lasting tradition of Kabbalah alive. Apart from small Kabbalah groups that are few and far in-between, Kabbalah is primarily studied by individuals who purchase literature on it and meditate in some form so that they can focus all their attention on their studies. Because of a lack of organization and solidarity amongst Kabbalists, most students practice their beliefs on their own time (Goldish 2005).

Kabbalah's lasting influence is that it invoked scientific concepts that academia would only begin thinking of centuries later. Also, Kabbalah weaves science into the Jewish faith in order to convince skeptics of its tenets and utility. The explosion that occurs right after Ein Sof condenses into tzimtzum, for example, resembles the Big Bang Theory. Condensing to tzimtzum itself is conceptually similar to the Big Crunch Theory for how the universe will end (Erol & Eksin 2006). Ein Sof is described as a perfect infinity, something scientists and mathematicians scour nature trying to find. Ten Sefirot, much like the Taoist eight trigram formations, discusses superposition and the universe as a constant in time (Cammann 1990). Kabbalah principles for creation and the universe are in alignment with prominent theories in science today.

The arcane Jewish method of Kabbalah strives to discover the truths of life and existence. Albeit not very popular in modern times, its uncanny ability to grasp concepts that scientists had not yet discovered deserves consideration in the wisdom of premodernity. After all, the Kabbalah manages to synthesize religion, philosophy, and scientific thought in the B.C. era into a new creed. Kabbalah should be explored by all people who want to hear an argument for creation from nothing. If one is willing to keep an open-mind, one will see that Kabbalah bears much verisimilitude to contemporary science and refutes claims that science and theology cannot mesh into a cohesive system of beliefs.

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