

Mysticism for the masses

According to the classic kabbalistic text, the Zohar, "All the good in the world flows from heaven to Jerusalem, and all are nourished from there."

If the path of goodness can be found with the aid of kabbalistic wisdom, then Jerusalem is certainly the place to hang out. The old image of Jewish mysticism as a subject studied largely by white-bearded Talmudic scholars pondering obscure, ancient texts no longer applies.

"Kabbala was once an area of study just for small, select circles of experienced Jewish scholars," says Hannanya Goodman, editor of the Jerusalem-based, English *Kabbala* newsletter. "In the past 25 years, through work at the academic level by such scholars and rabbis as Gershon Scholem and Aryeh Kaplan, kabbalistic concepts were put into a language that most people could understand, and this spurred its becoming a popular area of study."

Goodman's publication has included a list of local yeshivas, study centres and individual teachers to aid the novice entering the world of kabbalistic study.

Kabbala is a general term for Jewish mysticism. The major sources of the subject include the Zohar (which concentrates on the study of the books of Genesis and Ezekiel), hassidic writings and works by the Ari, Rabbi Isaac Luria of Safad.

Each has its own distinctive features, but all attempt to explain how the workings of the universe relate to the nature of God. With this knowledge, a Jew can supposedly come closer to an understanding of,

Calev Ben-David

and relationship with, the Supreme Being.

Though it has acquired a negative image -- many gentiles think it refers to some kind of Jewish witchcraft -- Kabbala has evolved into a traditional area of Jewish study.

Kabbala's current popularity is due to several factors, according to Goodman.



Californian Stan Tenen displays his kabbalistic 'Rubik's cube.'

"The spiritual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s that influenced Jews and Gentiles is a major one. At first, young Jews were touched by an interest in Eastern mysticism and later began to search for the mystical elements in their own heritage," he explains.

"These 'new-age' Jewish scholars studied Kabbala under the auspices of hassidic groups such as Habad and felt less constrained by the traditional inhibitions against the widespread learning of Kabbala. They helped bring the basic kabbalistic concepts to its first wide audience

outside of hassidic circles," Goodman says.

Many young kabbalists Goodman mentions live and teach here in Jerusalem. Among them is Rabbi Gedalia Fleer, who presents well-attended talks on the famed hassidic mystic, Reb Nachman of Bratslav.

Fleer has no compunctions about bringing previously obscure kabbalistic concepts to mass audiences that often have a limited background in traditional Judaism. The Shulhan Aruch, the standard guide to Jewish law, recommends Kabbala study only to those over 40 with, as Fleer says, "a bellyful of Talmud."

Yet these days, no such credentials are checked at the doors of popular lectures on the subject given by Fleer and others at the Hebrew University, various yeshivas, the Israel Centre, the Tora Outreach Programme (TOP) and even at Hechal Shlomo, the seat of the Chief Rabbinate.

"Most of the traditional restrictions against teaching Kabbala deal with what is called 'practical' Kabbala, which sometimes involves working yourself into a deep, meditative trance, and not with Kabbala as a field of study," says Fleer. "Today, even many of the traditional yeshivas are bringing Kabbala into their curriculum to develop the spiritual side of the students."

"Some of the yeshivas in the city can be a little like Jewish factories turning out 'Orthodox lawyers.' Kabbalistic learning, prayer or meditation, can help these students develop a more personal relationship with God."

All this activity inspires Goodman to say, "If Kabbala can be said to have a centre, then Jerusalem is now in the position that Safad was in the 16th and 17th centuries."

This reputation recently attracted from California a young Jewish mathematician named Stan Tenen, who is conducting some intriguing research on the connection between Kabbala and modern science. Tenen does advanced mathematical analysis of the book of Genesis, searching for hidden meanings in the patterns of its Hebrew letters.

"What I've found," says Tenen, "is that these patterns correspond to

the numerical patterns of some of the basic geometrical forms found in the physical world, for example, the double helix, which is the form of the DNA molecule."

Tenen has gone as far as constructing small three-dimensional models of kabbalistic patterns of Hebrew letters, including a "kabbalistic Rubik's cube." His work bears some relation to the mystical Jewish practice of *gematria*, which finds hidden meanings in the numerical equivalents of the Hebrew alphabet. Tenen takes this concept to an extreme, which is why he made his trip to Jerusalem.

"I wanted to show my work to more established kabbalists here to get their approval for the direction I'm taking, to deem it 'kosher.'" (A videotape of Tenen's lecture is available at the TOP Centre.)

It is not surprising that the current interest in the subject has drawn criticism. Shlomo Mallin, a Kiryat Arba resident, is currently circulating a pamphlet he put together which attacks Kabbala as a way in which non-Jewish, Eastern religious concepts are introduced into Judaism. He says the reaction to his charges has been harsh.

"The chief rabbi of Kiryat Arba has issued a *herem* [ban] against the pamphlet," says Mallin, "and some local kabbalists are using *gematria* to say my name is equivalent to Samael," a Jewish name for Satan.

It is ironic that an opponent of Kabbala is now attacked by rabbinical authorities who, in the past, issued similar condemnations against some of its adherents. One of the places that refused to distribute Mallin's pamphlet or consider him as a lecturer is the Israel Centre on Rehov Straus.

"We didn't feel Mallin was making his charges in a totally responsible way, but I admit I'm sympathetic to some of his points," says Phil Chernofsky, the centre's programming director. "I have mixed feelings about presenting the subject to laymen, even though we did run very popular Kabbala study sessions. We used to joke beforehand that we should check to make sure the building is tied down securely so it wouldn't float up to the heavens."

(Frank Smith)