

Sparks

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The ABC of Kabbalah

Many years ago, when I first began the study of the Kabbalah, the ancient mystical interpretation of Judaism, I stumbled upon the learning center of a great Kabbalistic master. The place was crowded, so I figured there must be some kind of public event going on, and went in. The great Kabbalist was speaking, but suddenly he stopped. I heard him utter a sigh. I realized that he had noticed me come in and was staring in my direction. Trying to be as unobtrusive as possible, I made my way to a seat on the sidelines, but his eyes followed me across the room. I got a very uncomfortable feeling, which only intensified when he pointed at me and motioned me to come forward.

The entire room was looking at me now. My heart was pounding. I had heard that these masters have the ability to look right through you, to your soul. I didn't know what to expect as I approached him, and I was scared. He was quite old and had a long white beard and bright blue, penetrating eyes. He spoke in a soft voice with a thick accent, but he only asked me a few innocuous questions about my family and myself. Then he held out an apple in his hand and dramatically raised it before me, dangling it by its stem.

This great man wanted to give me an apple? I had no idea what this was all about. I reached to take the apple. But the whole crowd shouted, "No!" I became flustered and withdrew my hand. He offered the apple again and again I tried to take it. Again the crowd yelled, "No!" Then I saw that people were motioning for me to cup my hand and hold it beneath the apple. I did so. The great Kabbalist smiled and dropped the apple into my hand. He then bent over and, in a tone that seemed to admonish me, whispered in my ear, "What have you been learning?" Before I could answer, he turned and walked away.

It took years before I realized what all that meant. "Kabbalah" literally means "receptivity"—indeed, it is the art of learning to receive. The master was trying to show me that I had not yet learned the real meaning of the Kabbalah. The lesson was: when you are offered a gift, do not take it; instead, make of yourself a space that can receive it.

Kabbalah is not only about getting more out of life; it is about receiving life as a gift. It is about the art of receiving life's gifts of love, spiritual growth, awareness, creativity, freedom, inner peace, happiness, and holiness. Mastering the art of receiving is not merely a private matter for each of us. The Kabbalah and the Torah both teach that our individual lives reflect a universal process. Human psychology is really a particular manifestation of cosmology. All of reality shares in our struggles, feels our pain, celebrates our joy, and cheers us on to live fully. Conversely, all of reality hurts when we inflict pain upon others and ourselves. We are all connected to one another—individually

and collectively, to the universe, and to all that is. We are not alone. Knowing this gives us strength, hope, courage, and energy.

Want a Light?

A story is told about three men who were imprisoned in a dark dungeon. Two of them were intelligent but the third was not very smart. Everyday, when their food was lowered into the dark dungeon, the third fellow would fumble with the utensils, break the plate and cut himself with the knife. One of the clever fellows would help him by practicing a routine with him to handle the darkness, but because the food was presented in a different way each day, it always confused him. The other prisoner then said, "Let's bore a hole in the wall and let a ray of light in, and then he will be able to see and eat without help."

The Kabbalah is all about light. It's main message to us is that we have the power to increase the spiritual light in the world or decrease it. All our actions, words and thoughts control the dimmer switch that turns the light up or down. What is the power of light? When you turn the light on in your room it lets you see what is there. Otherwise you grope in the dark, knock things over, bang your knee and walk into walls. This is also true with spiritual light. Without it, your spiritual world is dark. Without spiritual light you can't see love even when it is right in front of you. You knock over people who love you. You step on souls. You walk right past meaningful moments. And you have no sense of direction.

According to the Kabbalah a person who only has access to physical light lives in the World of Shells or Peels--called *Olam HaKlipot*. Such a person only sees physical things, those which are external and superficial. The shell or the peel is only the outside of the fruit and is therefore secondary to the fruit. If you can only see the shell or peel, you confuse the wrapping with the true contents. You are impressed with the packaging and miss the true gift inside.

Kabbalah teaches us the secrets of how to access the spiritual light that lets us see what's inside. Given that what you see is what you get, when you want to receive the eternal spiritual gift wrapped in this world, you need to increase the spiritual light to see and get inside. This physical world is only the packaging but what is the gift inside?

What is the greatest gift you could ever give or get? Presence. Not presents but Presence. When I think of my childhood, my most precious memory is of my mother sitting by my bed and reading to me Winnie the Pooh. What is so great about that? My parents gave me lots of gifts. I got a terrific train set and lots of other toys. But they didn't last and they mean very little to me today. What I still treasure and continue to enjoy are those precious moments when I knew my mother was there for me. She wasn't interested in Pooh Bear or Piglet. She never read those stories at any time for herself. My mother concentrated her entire being into those moments and was completely there for me. She gave me the greatest gift you could ask for – her Presence.

What is Presence? Presence is like chocolate cake. I can't tell you what chocolate cake tastes like; you will only know how delicious it is when you taste it yourself. I could tell you what the ingredients are, but the cake is greater than the sum of the ingredients. Presence is like the color green. I can't tell you what it looks like, but when you will see it, you will know. I could tell you that it is a combination of blue and yellow but even those are colors that you can only know experientially. And of course even after you see blue and yellow, green is greater than the sum of the parts. So I can't tell you what Presence is. I can tell you that its ingredients are love, care, respect, honesty, meaning, beauty, kindness, wisdom and much more. To know Presence you have to experience it.

According to the Kabbalah, God created you and I and put us into this world to give us the greatest gift imaginable. Divine Presence. Kabbalah calls this "Shechina". Divine Presence or the "Shechina" fills everything.

But how do we turn on the light that lets the eyes of our soul see it? How do we become receptive to the ultimate gift of G-d loving presence? By giving our loving presence to each other so that we become receptive to the Divine Presence. And the more you give, the more you receive.

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