



The Secret World of **KABBALAH**

Study Guide

By Rabbi Judith Abrams

This study guide is designed to help students, teachers, and families discuss The Secret World of Kabbalah. It contains study questions and activities for each of the book's 15 chapters for students in grades 7 and up.

Chapter One: What Is Kabbalah?

This chapter offers a definition of kabbalah and an introduction to the subject.

Discussion Questions:

1. What other kinds of hidden wisdom are there?
2. How can you think meaningfully about infinity? About atoms and whatever makes up atoms?
3. View this web page to help you see things from a microscopic and macroscopic point of view:
<http://micro.magnet.fsu.edu/primer/Java/scienceopticsu/powersof10/index.HTML>
Does this help you put things in perspective?

Activities:

1. Talk to a physicist, chemist, physician, or nutritionist about their work and ask them to explain how small, hidden things make up what we call "reality."
2. Think about fads that have come and gone through the years.
(For example, classic fashion keeps looking good over the decades while fads look laughable ten years later.)
Create an art project to illustrate a fad.

Chapter Two: The Journey

This chapter introduces the book's main analogy of the mystical journey: climbing Mount Everest.

Discussion Questions:

1. What happens when you try using more than one path at a time to climb the mountain?
2. Does it take a certain type of person to try to climb Mount Everest? What kind of person would that be? Do you have any of those characteristics?
3. Is there value to trying to climb to the top of Mount Everest but only making it, say, to Camp One? If so, why? If not, why not?



Activities:

1. Learn about other religions' mystical traditions through research or through talking with experts. Compare their ideas with those in this book.

Chapter Three: The Choice Is Yours

This chapter addresses the issue of why some people might want to make the mystical journey while others might want to simply read about it.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you want to take the journey? If so, why? If not, why not?
2. Do you have the qualifications to make the journey?
3. If not, what can you do to get ready to do so (e.g., study, do mitzvot)?

Activity:

1. Climbers on Mount Everest carry what they need in their backpacks. What would you put in a backpack for making the mystical journey? Remember that you'll have to carry it a long way.

Chapter Four: Hiding in Plain Sight

This chapter tells a parable of the mystical journey, and how it is full of apparent contradictions to common sense.

19 וַיִּסַּע מִלֶּאֱדָה הָאֱלֹהִים הַהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי מַחֲנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּלֶךְ
מֵאַחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּסַּע עִמּוּד הָעָנָן מִפְּנֵיהֶם וַיַּעֲמֵד מֵאַחֲרֵיהֶם:
20 וַיָּבֵא בֵּין מַחֲנֵה מִצְרַיִם וּבֵין מַחֲנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיְהִי הָעָנָן וְהַחֹשֶׁךְ
וַיִּאָר אֶת־הַלַּיְלָה וְלֹא־קָרַב זֶה אֶל־זֶה כָּל־הַלַּיְלָה:
21 וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיּוֹלֶךְ יְהוָה אֶת־הַיָּם בְּרוּחַ קָדִים
עֶזְרָה כָּל־הַלַּיְלָה וַיִּשָּׂם אֶת־הַיָּם לְחַרְבָּה וַיִּבָּקְעוּ הַמַּיִם:

Translation:

The angel of God, who went in front of the Israelite camp, moved and went behind them. And the pillar of cloud that was usually in front of them stood behind them. And it came between the Egyptian camp and the Israelite camp. And the pillar was a cloud of darkness and light in the night so that the Israelites and Egyptians did not come near each other all night. And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. And God drove the sea back by a strong east wind all that night and made the sea dry land and the waters were divided.

Activity/Discussion Questions:

One of the names of God that is considered to be most powerful by some is one that is the easiest to find. The 72-syllabled name of God is based on three verses, Exodus 14:19-21, each of which has 72 letters. The syllables of this name are formed by taking the first letter of verse 19, the last letter of verse 20 and the first of 21. The second syllable is made of the second letter in verse 19, the penultimate letter of verse 20 and the second letter of verse 21 and so on.

1. Complete the assembling of this name.
2. What do you think is the significance of these three verses in the Torah?
3. Why do you think this name of God is so easy to find, yet so mysterious?

Chapter Five: The Tanach Is a Mystical Text

This chapter demonstrates that the Torah and Tanach are powerful mystical texts that are readily available to everyone.

Activities/Discussion Questions:

1. Read Genesis, chapter one, carefully, searching for mystical meanings. What did you find?
2. Explore another mystical relationship:
In Exodus 3:14 we find the name of God “*Eheyeh asher eheyeh.*” Check different translations to see what this name means. Count how many letters there are in this name.

אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה

Now turn to Numbers 12:1-13, the story of Aaron and Miriam rebelling against Moses, and Miriam being afflicted with leprosy. Moses cries out a very short prayer to God. Count how many letters there are in his prayer to God in Numbers 12:13.

אֵל נָא רַפָּא נָה לָהּ:

What relationship does this prayer have with the name of God revealed at the burning bush? Do people who are very sick lose their confidence that they have a stake in a future life for themselves? How would this prayer help them see otherwise?

Chapter Six: Finding Kabbalah through the Hebrew Alphabet

This chapter demonstrates how the Hebrew alphabet itself has mystical characteristics.

Activities/Discussion Questions:

1. One of the ways that word play is used with the Hebrew alphabet is seeing words as acronyms. For example, the word *shema*, *shin-mem-ayin*, can be an acronym for *ol-malchut-shamayyim*, the yoke of the kingship of heaven. This is what we do when we recite the *Shema*, we take on the yoke of God’s kingship.

Some of the Bible “codes” are pretty easy to reveal. Take the first sentence of Leviticus. Start by circling the letter *yud* in the first word. Then count seven letters and circle the next letter. Do this until you’ve circled four letters. What do the letters spell? What does this tell you about what is important in this book of the Torah and, particularly, which name of God is most important in this book of the Torah?

וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֵלָיו מֵאֵהָל מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר:

(Answer: It should spell out the four-lettered name of God: *yud-hey-vav-hey.*)



Chapter Seven: Where Can I Find Kabbalah in the Prayer Book?

This chapter demonstrates where mystical texts can be found in Jewish prayer books.

Discussion Questions:

1. Does the information in this chapter help you understand the *kaddish* better? If so, how?

Activities/ Discussion Questions:

The *Kedushah*, the prayer where we say, “Holy, holy, holy,” is very important in *Heikhalot* liturgy. Each time we say it, it signals that we’ve reached a new, higher level of connection with God. Try to experience each prayer session, whether in synagogue or by yourself, as a journey toward God. Do you feel more excitement the closer you come to ultimate contact with God? How do the words “Holy, holy, holy” help express your feelings?

Chapter Eight: What Are the Basic Kabbalistic Texts?

This chapter introduces one of the foundational kabbalistic texts: the Zohar.

Discussion Questions:

1. With which *sefirah* do you most closely identify? Why? Do you think this is a helpful understanding of God’s inner life? If so, why? If not, why not?
2. Can we really know what is going on inside God? If so, to what extent can we know what’s going on inside God? Do you want to know about God’s inner workings or is it too scary to do so? Why?

Activity:

Think of the *sefirot* as guests you are inviting to your table. The *sefirot* are traditionally identified with these important Biblical personalities:

Chesed = Abraham

Gevurah = Isaac

Tiferet = Jacob

Netsach = Moses

Hod = Aaron

Yesod = Joseph

Malchut = David

To what other people might the *sefirot* be connected? Have a “party” for the *sefirot*. (See *A Family Sukkot Seder*, Kar Ben, 1993). How do they interact with each other?

Chapter Nine: Why Is Kabbalah Kept So Secret and Why Do You Have to Be Ready to Learn It?

This chapter outlines some of the risks of engaging in kabbalah.

Additional Study Texts:

As the following texts show, the sages wanted to make sure you wouldn’t do anything rash, dangerous, or harmful to yourself or anyone else with the power that you found in kabbalah:



Three the Holy One, blessed be He, loves: he who does not become angry, he who does not become intoxicated, and he who does not insist on his [full] rights. Three things the Holy One, blessed be He, hates: he who speaks one thing with his mouth and another thing in his heart; and he who possesses evidence concerning his neighbor and does not testify for him; and he who sees something indecent in his neighbor and testifies against him alone. (B. Pesachim 113b)

The forty-two lettered Name is entrusted only to him who is pious, meek, middle-aged, free from bad temper, sober and not insistent on his rights. And he who knows it, is heedful thereof, and observes it in purity, is beloved above and popular below, feared by man and inherits two worlds, this world and the future world. (B. Kiddushin 71a)

One who waves his right to retribution [i.e., is not insistent on his rights] is forgiven all his sins. (B. Megillah 28a //Rosh Hashanah 17a//B. Yoma 23a and 87b)

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think the sages established these prerequisites before a person could learn some of the most powerful aspects of kabbalah?
2. How do you measure up?
3. Does this give you guidelines toward which to work so that you'll be able to use the forty-two lettered name of God?
4. Do you want to be able to use it? Why or why not?

Chapter Ten: What Does Kabbalah Teach about Astrology, Angels, Reincarnation, Karma, and Magic?

This chapter outlines what kabbalah teaches about these religious concepts in Judaism.

Discussion Questions:

First, we have to recognize that what we categorize as magic (as opposed to science, for instance) is very different from what the sage thought of these topics. To them, astrology was as advanced a science as physics is for us today. No doubt, in five hundred years what we consider to be sophisticated science and medicine will look like superstition and magic. Can you think of anything that used to be thought of as “magic” but now is understood through science? For example, for centuries people thought that a particular salt-mine was filled with bad spirits which killed those who entered it. Only in the last century was the mine found to be a source of natural gas, which is now mined and used productively.

Additional Study Texts:

This is the story of the binding of Isaac which is portrayed in the mosaic at Beit Alpha:

God tested Abraham, and said to him: Abraham. And he said: Here I am. And He said: Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will point out to you.

So Abraham rose up early in the morning, saddled his ass, took two of his young men and Isaac his son, with him. He also brought the wood for the burnt offering and went to the place which God pointed out to him. Then on the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far off. Abraham said to his young men: Stay here with the ass, and my son and I will go there, worship and come back to you.

And Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering, laid it upon his son Isaac, took the fire and knife in his hand, and they both went off together. Isaac said to his father: Father. And he said: Here I am, my son. Isaac said: Here is the fire and the wood but where is the lamb for the burnt offering? And Abraham said: God will provide a lamb for the burnt offering my son. So they continued on together.

They came to the place about which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there, laid the wood in order, bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar and the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand, and



took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, saying: Abraham, Abraham! and he said: Here I am. And the angel said: Do not lay your hand upon the lad, nor do anything to him; for seeing that you did not withhold your son, your only son, from Me I now know that you fear God. And Abraham raised his eyes and behold, behind him a ram was caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son....

And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time, and said: By myself have I sworn, said the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, so I will greatly bless you and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand upon the seashore. And they shall prevail against their enemies. And by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth be blessed because you obeyed My voice. (Genesis 22:1-18)

Text Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think the angel appears in this story only after Abraham puts out his hand to kill his son?
2. God never speaks directly to Abraham again. Why do you think that is?
3. Can angels be “buffers” when we need to put some distance between ourselves and God? Why might we need such distance?

Here is a text about Jewish “karma”:

One who has fifty coins and trades with them must not take peah (a form of charity). And anyone who is not in need of charity and takes it anyway will not pass from the world before he becomes dependent on other people for charity. And anyone who needs charity but doesn't take any will not die of old age before he will support others from his own wealth. (Mishnah Peah 8:9)

Text Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever experienced this sort of “karma”? What happened?

Activity:

Create your own model mosaic floor, or make a drawing, that portrays Judaism's beginnings, its present and its future.

Chapter Eleven: What's With Those Red Strings?

This chapter outlines the meaning of red strings in kabbalah.

Discussion Questions:

1. Now that you know the origins of the red string what do you think about wearing one?
2. Are there other physical things you could wear to remind you of your Judaism and/or the deepest wishes of your heart? What might they be?

Activities:

1. Read this article about Rachel's Tomb from the Jewish Encyclopedia:
<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=57&letter=R&search=Rachel>
2. Draw or build a model of Rachel's Tomb.
3. Read this story of a different red thread that was very important in Jewish history.
(It's the Haftara for Parshat Sh'lach L'cha.)

Joshua the son of Nun sent two men to spy on Jericho. So they went to a harlot's house, named Rahav, and lodged there. The king of Jericho was told there were Israelite spies in the city and he said to Rahav: Bring forth the men who have come to you, for they are spies. She went and hid the two men. Then she said to the king: Some men came to me but I don't know where they are from. And when the gates were closed and it was dark, they left and I don't know where they went. But if you chase them quickly you'll catch them. (But she actually had hidden them in her attic.)



So the men chased the spies down to the Jordan river. And when then the men were gone, Rahav told the spies: I know that the Lord has given you the land, that your terror has fallen upon us and all who live in the land faint because of you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you, when you came out of Egypt. And as soon as we heard these things, our hearts melted, nor did we have any courage left for fear of you. For the Lord, your God, is God in heaven above, and in earth below. So please, swear to me by the Lord, that you will show kindness to me and to my family and give me a sign that you will save all of my family from death. And the men answered her: Our life for yours, if you don't tell anyone about us.

Then she let them down by a rope through the window. And she said to them: Go to the mountain and hide yourselves there for three days, until the men chasing you come back to the city. They said to her: Here is the true sign that we will keep our promise. When we return to Jericho, bind this line of red string in the window from which you let us down. Bring your whole family into this house...don't go outside and we will not let anyone hurt you. And she said: So be it. And she sent them away and bound the red string in the window.

*And they went to the mountain, and hid there three days, until those chasing them went back to Jericho. So the two men returned, and descended from the mountain and came to Joshua the son of Nun. They told him everything that had happened to them. And they said to Joshua: Truly the Lord has delivered all the land into our hands and all the inhabitants of the country faint because of us.
(Joshua, Chapter Two)*

Chapter Twelve: How Can I Begin to Put All of This to Use in Real Life?

This chapter describes how a person can begin to put kabbalah into practice in his/her own life.

Discussion Questions:

1. How are you doing in terms of the six questions? Do you have a “passing grade”? On what do you need to work using the six questions as the criterion?
2. Try starting on your five “wows” a day. What about God’s creation attracts your attention the most?

Activities:

Make up blessings to use at “wow” moments, such as seeing a hummingbird, eating chocolate, giving tzedakah, etc.

Chapter Thirteen: How Can You Tell If a Teacher of Kabbalah Is a Good One?

This chapter outlines how people can differentiate between a good teacher of kabbalah and one that is not as good.

Activities and Discussion Questions:

1. Give yourself a “spiritual check up”. How are you doing in all four worlds: physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual?
2. Are you prepared to make the journey up the mountain? If not, what would you have to do to get yourself ready?
3. Research where you can find courses on kabbalah in your area.



Chapter Fourteen: Your Life Is So Much Larger than You Know

This chapter shows how great God's plan is and how little of it we can see from our limited perspective.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you know some people who seem to have it bad without deserving it? Do you know others who seem to have it good without deserving it? Do you know people who have happiness and seem to deserve it? Do you know people who have sorrow and seem to deserve it? Try stepping back to see if you can change your perspective on these people. Can you do it? What happened?

Activity:

Weave a piece of material that has one dark thread in it, making that dark thread the most beautiful aspect of the material. Or make a patchwork quilt using the same idea. Hang up these projects to remind you to try to look at things from God's perspective.

Chapter Fifteen: Where Do I Go from Here?

This chapter wishes the learner well on his/her way.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you want to make the journey now? Do you want to wait? Why did you make the choice you did?

Activity:

The only activity for this chapter is to continue to study and make yourself ready so that your teacher can appear.