



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. Bring in a physicist, chemist, physician or nutritionist to talk about their work and how small, hidden things make up what we call “reality”.
2. Let the learners demonstrate fads that have come and gone through art projects.
(For example, classic fashion keeps looking good over the decades while fads look laughable ten years later.)

Chapter Two: The Journey

This chapter introduces this book’s main analogy of the mystical journey to readers, i.e., 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. Have speakers come to your class and then compare their ideas with those in this book.



Chapter Three: The Choice is Yours

This chapter addresses the issue of why some learners 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.

Activity/Discussion Questions:

19 וַיִּסַּע מִלֶּאֱדָה הָאֱלֹהִים הַהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי מַחֲנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּלֶךְ
מֵאַחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּסַּע עִמּוֹד הָעֵנָן מִפְּנֵיהֶם וַיַּעֲמֵד מֵאַחֲרֵיהֶם:
20 וַיָּבֵא בֵּין מַחֲנֵה מִצְרַיִם וּבֵין מַחֲנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיְהִי הָעֵנָן וְהַחֲשָׁךְ
וַיָּאֵר אֶת־הַלַּיְלָה וְלֹא־קָרַב זֶה אֶל־זֶה כָּל־הַלַּיְלָה:
21 וַיֵּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיֵּלֶךְ יְהוָה אֶת־הַיָּם בְּרוּחַ קָדִים
עֲזָה כָּל־הַלַּיְלָה וַיִּשָּׂם אֶת־הַיָּם לְחָרְבָה וַיִּבָּקְעוּ הַמַּיִם:

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. Complete the assembling of this name. What do you think is the significance of these three verses in the Torah? 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 every learner.

Activities/Discussion Questions:

1. Read *Genesis*, chapter one, very 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 וַיֵּדְבַר 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, i.e., the Zohar.

Discussion Questions:

1. With which *sefirah* do you most closely identify? Why? Do you think that 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. To what other people might the *sefirot* be connected? (See *A Family Sukkot Seder*. Kar Ben, 1993.) Have a “party” for the *sefirot*. 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 that 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 required 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. Doubtlessly, 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 that 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:

1. *And it came to pass after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, Abraham; and he said, Behold, here I am.*
2. *And he said, Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you.*
3. *And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and broke the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went to the place of which God had told him.*
4. *Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place far away.*
5. *And Abraham said to his young men, Stay here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come back to you.*
6. *And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.*
7. *And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father, and said, My father; and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?*
8. *And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering; so they went both of them together.*
9. *And they came to the place which God had told him; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.*
10. *And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.*
11. *And the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham; and he said, Here am I.*
12. *And he said, Lay not your hand upon the lad, nor do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you did not withhold your son, your only son from me.*
13. *And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in place of his son.*



14. *And Abraham called the name of that place Adonai-Yireh; as it is said to this day, In the Mount of the Lord it shall be seen.*
15. *And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven the second time,*
16. *And said, By myself have I sworn, said the Lord, for because you have done this thing, and have not withhold your son, your only son;*
17. *That in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies;*
18. *And in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because you have 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” between us and God 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 possesses fifty zuz and trades with these must not take [peah]. And anyone who is not in need of taking and does take will not pass from the world before he will become dependent on other [people for charity]. And anyone who is in need of taking and does not take will not die of old age before he will support others from his own [wealth] and of him Scripture says, "Blessed is the man who trusts in God and God shall be his trust. (Jeremiah 17:7)" And thus [it is also true of a] judge who judges according to the true law. And anyone who is not lame or blind or limping and makes himself [appear to be one of these] will not die of old age until he becomes like one of them, as it is said, ("And he who seeks evil, it shall come to him"; and it is [further] said,) "Justice, justice shall you pursue (Deuteronomy 16:20)". And any judge who takes bribes and perverts justice will not die of old age before his eyes have grown dim, as it is said, "And a bribe you shall not take, for the bribe blinds the seeing (Deuteronomy 16:19)". (M. Peah 8:9 // Mekhilta Kaspa 3 on Exodus 23:8 // Sifre D. 144 // B. Ketubot 105a-b)

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 Shlach L’cha*.)



1. *And Joshua the son of Nun sent from Shittim two men to spy secretly, saying, Go view the land, Jericho. And they went, and came to an harlot's house, named Rahab, and lodged there.*
2. *And it was told the king of Jericho, saying, Behold, men came here tonight of the people of Israel to search out the country.*
3. *And the king of Jericho sent to Rahab, saying, Bring forth the men who have come to you, who have entered into your house; for they have come to search out all the country.*
4. *And the woman took the two men, and hid them, and said thus, There came men to me, but I know not from where they were;*
5. *And it came to pass about the time of the closing of the gate, when it was dark, that the men went out; where the men went I know not; pursue after them quickly; for you shall overtake them.*
6. *But she had brought them up to the roof of the house, and hid them with the stalks of flax, which she had laid in order upon the roof.*
7. *And the men pursued after them on the way to the Jordan, to the fords; and as soon as those who pursued after them were gone out, they closed the gate.*
8. *And before they lay down, she came up to them upon the roof;*
9. *And she said to the men, I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that your terror has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land faint because of you.*
10. *For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you, when you came out of Egypt; and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites, who were on the other side of the Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom you completely destroyed.*
11. *And as soon as we heard these things, our hearts melted, nor did courage remain in any man, because of you; for the Lord your God, he is God in heaven above, and in earth below.*
12. *Now therefore, I pray you, swear to me by the Lord, since I have shown you kindness, that you will also show kindness to my father's house, and give me a true sign;*
13. *And that you will keep alive my father, and my mother, and my brothers, and my sisters, and all that they have, and save our lives from death.*
14. *And the men answered her, Our life for yours, if you do not utter our business. And it shall be, when the Lord has given us the land, that we will deal kindly and truly with you.*
15. *Then she let them down by a rope through the window; for her house was upon the town wall, and she lived upon the wall.*
16. *And she said to them, Go to the mountain, lest the pursuers meet you; and hide yourselves there three days, until the pursuers return; and afterwards may you go your way.*
17. *And the men said to her, We will be guiltless with respect to this oath of yours which you have made us swear.*
18. *Behold, when we come to the land, you shall bind this line of scarlet thread in the window from which you let us down; and you shall bring your father, and your mother, and your brothers, and all your father's house hold, home to you.*
19. *And it shall be, that whoever shall go out of the doors of your house to the street, his blood shall be upon his head, and we will be guiltless; and whoever shall be with you in the house, his blood shall be on our head, if any hand be upon him.*
20. *And if you utter our business, then we will be quit of your oath which you have made us swear.*
21. *And she said, According to your words, so be it. And she sent them away, and they departed; and she bound the scarlet line in the window.*
22. *And they went, and came to the mountain, and stayed there three days, until the pursuers returned; and the pursuers sought them throughout all the way, but found them not.*
23. *So the two men returned, and descended from the mountain, and passed over, and came to Joshua the son of Nun, and told him all things that had befallen them;*
24. *And they said to Joshua, Truly the Lord has delivered to our hands all the land; for 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 a student 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 the reader 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.

