

Review by DJ Tyrer

## Kabbalah

### *Secrecy, Scandal and the Soul*

By Harry Freedman

Hardback, ISBN 9781472950987, £18.99

Also available on the [Kindle](#)

In **Kabbalah: Secrecy, Scandal and the Soul**, Harry Freedman sets out to chart the history and development of Kabbalism from its roots in earlier Jewish mysticism who sought to attain access to Heaven and God, with a look at other influences on it and parallel movements in Judaism, through its various branches, developments and offshoots into other philosophies, including following the development of the Christian Cabala, to its present-day manifestation in the New Age and the contentious Kabbalah Centre that attracted the interest of celebrities such as Madonna.

In addition to Kabbalism, the book takes a look at such topics as the ecstatic, Sufi-influenced Jewish mysticism of medieval Egypt and the German Pietists whose response to anti-semitic persecution was one of pessimism.

Freedman is surprisingly successful in creating a highly-readable single-volume treatment of a complex and potentially-confusing subject that treads the fine line of being comprehensible to general readers unfamiliar with the subject *and* being sufficiently meaty that those who are knowledgeable will find it useful and fascinating. Unless you know absolutely nothing about the Kabbalah, in which case you are unlikely to be interested in this book, at least not before reading some general pieces about the subject first, or you are an actual expert in its multi-faceted history, you are guaranteed to get something out of this book. (Indeed, even experts may find it useful to have an outline of everything in one place: I'm well read on most elements covered, but I found being able to follow all the threads like this both fascinating and informative, helping to put events in context.)

What this book *isn't* is a description of Kabbalistic belief in any detail. There is some basic information, it would be impossible to cover the subject without anything, but nothing you wouldn't find elsewhere. Indeed, not only would an overview be difficult to achieve in a book this size, given the many and various interpretations and reinterpretations of Kabbalism over time, but it also brings in the Christian Cabala alongside Jewish thought and

various other movements the Kabbalah has influenced down the ages, to a greater or lesser extent, all of which have also evolved over time, creating an almost-impossible task, even for an overview.

So, if what you want is a book about the Kabbalah itself, this isn't it, although Freedman does an excellent job in sketching the salient points and how they changed, as well as the various arguments launched against them.

Amongst those other movements covered in the volume are such ones as Sabbateanism, followers of a self-appointed Messiah who converted to Islam to save his life, Hasidism, a major strand of modern Judaism, Rosicrucianism, and the Golden Dawn. There is also a look at Eliphaz Levi's writings on the Tarot. Again, none of these are covered in much detail, but they are set in a wider context that has its own value.

Although one shouldn't judge a book by its cover, this is a beautifully-presented hardback book that does justice to its excellent contents. Freedman has achieved exactly what he set out to do, an impressive task.

I own quite a few books on the subjects this relates to and have read many more and **Kabbalah: Secrecy, Scandal and the Soul** ranks amongst the best for general readers I've read, and the best such on the Kabbalah.

The book, of course, would be most valuable to those with an interest in the Kabbalah (or Cabala) who wish to better understand its history and development, but it should also be on the wish lists of anyone with an interest in Judaism, religion, philosophy, mysticism, or the occult. Because it is written in an accessible style without sacrificing its quality or scope, it is also perfect for anyone intrigued by the subject who want to learn more about the Kabbalah's part. In addition, it would make an excellent resource for fiction writers who wish to delve into this fascinating history for inspiration, and for historians of the Middle Ages and Renaissance who wish to better understand this key strand of thought. Yes, that does mean almost everyone will find this book fascinating and informative! And, you can't really have a better recommendation than that.

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