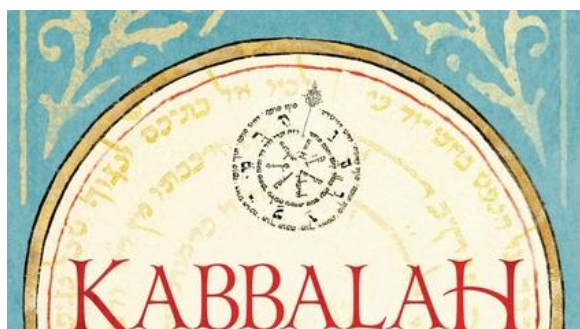


A colourful, pacy history of the Kabbalah

Kabbalah: Secrecy, Scandal and the Soul, Harry Freedman, Bloomsbury, £18.99



Harry Freedman has produced yet another colourful, pacy history to follow his highly-readable historical surveys on Bible translations and the Talmud. This time the focus is the Jewish mystical tradition, from its ancient roots to contemporary manifestations.

Kabbalah, a word meaning “reception”, implies a received tradition, but as Freedman shows, Kabbalah involves innovation as much as continuity and has not always been embraced even by Jewish traditionalists.

The Sefer Yetzirah, the “Book of Formation”, the thought of Abraham Abulafia, the Zohar, Yitzchak Luria, and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook — which all feature in Freedman’s book — took Jewish mysticism in new directions.

Kabbalah also has a habit of breaking from its halachic moorings. It was relied on by the followers of Shabbatai Zvi, the 17th-century false messiah, to justify various excesses and has in our own times been adapted and packaged for mass consumption and celebrity appeal.

From the 14th century, Kabbalah also became of interest to Christian mystics, including Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, a prodigy who saw it as his mission to unite philosophic, esoteric and magical knowledge. All this raises the issue of which Kabbalah is the “real thing”.

Freedman draws the circle very widely. He claims that no one has proprietary rights to the name Kabbalah. For this reason, he finds it difficult to condemn the system promoted by the present Kabbalah Centre as inauthentic or a distortion, despite the controversy surrounding the centre.

While no one may own the name “Kabbalah”, we should still be able to pass judgment on whether a system is faithful to tradition, coherent, or genuinely insightful. Freedman’s book does not provide enough detail to allow us to reach such judgments, particularly when it comes to contemporary developments, many of which he passes over.

What accounts for the continuing interest in Jewish mysticism? How has Kabbalah come to function alongside halachah? How are committed, yet scientifically-minded Jews, grappling with Kabbalah? The answers to these questions remain largely hidden.