

The Telegraph

Peter Stanford reviews *Kabbalah: Secrecy, Scandal and Soul* by Harry Freedman.

15 FEBRUARY 2019

There was a time, a decade ago, when a certain type of attention-seeking celebrity wouldn't dream of being seen in public without wearing a knotted red string on their left wrist. David Beckham sported one prominently over his tattoos at the Euros in 2004 (including when he missed a penalty). Kylie Minogue, Demi Moore and Mick Jagger, among others, brandished theirs as a hint that, when away from the cameras, they were in fact deeply spiritual people.

The bracelet in question is the outward sign (to devotees) of the inner grace of Kabbalah, a mystical tradition within Judaism that, in its many manifestations over the past 900 years, has appealed to those hankering after one-to-one spiritual intimacy with a divine creator who sustains the universe. Nothing so unusual in that, and both Islam and Christianity also have their own mystical traditions in Sufism or the likes of Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen and Ignatius of Loyola, all of whom experienced visions of God.

Mainstream religion, though, has generally been rather suspicious of mystics because they tend to be solitary, ungovernable types, whose revelations of the divine attract devotees, but diverge significantly (and dangerously, from an orthodoxy point of view) from the doctrines of their faith traditions. And so it has been with Kabbalah, long before the Catholic-raised Madonna latched on to it in the Nineties and made it – as is her way – simultaneously fashionable, newsworthy and controversial.

Her plans, for instance, to fill her swimming pool at the Wiltshire estate she shared with Guy Ritchie with “Kabbalah water” at £3 a bottle were lampooned when it turned out that she was being overcharged for tap water by a network of Kabbalah Centres whose sincerity was called into question by their business practices. “Unfortunately,” reflected Madge's mate, Sandra Bernhard, another one-time devotee, “money corrupts everything, even spirituality”.

It is that core spirituality, however, what lies behind all the hype and stunts, that fascinates Harry Freedman. He has academic bona fides (a PhD in Aramaic, the language spoken by the Jews of Galilee, including Jesus, in the first century, and by Kabbalists), but in this book he is on a quest to explain (rather than sell) Kabbalah to a general audience.

It is quite a daunting challenge, not just because of the recent clouds that hang over its reputation, but on account of it being so self-consciously esoteric. The roots of Kabbalah, he shows, lie in the visions of heaven and hell that were found in Jewish holy books and teaching from the third century BC onwards, which had been prompted by a series of military reverses the Jewish people had suffered. They were questioning whether they could any more claim to be God's chosen people, and found solace in apocalyptic visions shared by mystics of an almighty cosmic battle where God would defeat their enemies and establish a heavenly kingdom on Earth.

Those texts continued to resonate from the third to ninth centuries – where there were further reverses for the Jews – but it wasn't until the 12th century that Kabbalah (which means “reception”, in the sense of a received tradition) first emerged among the small, inward-looking, Jewish community in Provence, and then spread into Muslim-controlled northern Spain. The Kabbalists hold that it was an oral tradition stretching back centuries,

but its first written version is found in the Zohar (meaning “splendour” or “radiance”) in 13th-century Castile.

This is claimed to be a lost-and-found second-century text in Aramaic by a noted teacher, Shimon bar Yohai, which somehow had made its way from a cave in the Israeli desert into the hands of one Moses de León, who had translated it into Hebrew. Some Kabbalah devotees still accept this version, but the consensus now is that de León either made it up or assembled it from a variety of older sources. There was no single original he had worked from.

At the time, though, such was the Zohar’s impact that it spread across Europe, even prompting a Christian version, known as Cabala, in the Renaissance Florence of the Medicis. But when the Jews were expelled from newly reunited and Christian Spain in 1492, the Zohar was taken to Israel, where a community of Spanish exiles established a community at Safed in Galilee. A succession of great teachers there – Moses Cordovero, Joseph Karo and especially Isaac Luria – attracted many followers and created the version of the Kabbalah that we still have today.

Many aspects of that core story are disputed and, like all mystical teaching, Kabbalah has been a dancer to the music of different times. Freedman navigates the story with great skill and good judgment, explaining the “how” of Kabbalah’s survival and regular revivals, but provides too little on the “why”. Why has this complicated, often unfathomable tradition, with its multitudes of angels and talk of sefirot, or channels of divine energy flowing backwards and forwards between the created world and “concealed” world, continued to strike such a chord with individuals right down to Madonna?

In a secular age such as our own, when popular theological literacy is at an all-time low, Freedman has undoubtedly done a great service by rescuing Kabbalah from the pile that a sceptical world labels “mumbo-jumbo”. Yet by the end of his account, there is no real sense of having nailed down his subject. Perhaps the impossibility of defining it is, in fact, the real reason for Kabbalah’s continuing appeal.