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Making a fashion statement with Kabbalah

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If David Shamouelian has his way, millions of people will not be wearing their hearts on their sleeves, but their souls on their chests.

Shamouelian, the CEO of the Sharagano fashion label and a long-time student of the Jewish mystical system of Kabbalah, has designed a line of shirts that feature one of the 72 "Names of God" on the front.

The 72 "Names" also are being presented to a general audience in a book that will be published next spring.

The black and white shirts, which were designed in consultation with the Kabbalah Centre, use the Hebrew letters "lamed," "aleph" and "vav" — the same letters music icon and Kabbalah student

Madonna used in her recent controversial but popular video for the song "Die Another Day."

The "Lamed Aleph Vav" combination, like all of the 72 "Names," does not spell a pronounceable word, but represents a phrase meaning "no more ego" or "destroy your ego."

Shamouelian, 36, says the simple act of wearing the letters is a spiritual step toward greater consciousness.

"The eyes are a connection to the soul. Just by looking at these letters, we make the spiritual connection," he said in a phone interview from Paris, where the design side of his business is headquartered.

Sharagano, which is an Aramaic word meaning "ray of light," plans to put other products on the market with the 72 "Names of God," including henna tattoos, hats, journals and decks of cards. Shirts containing other names also are planned.

The company was founded by Shamouelian, who was born in Iran, and another man, when the two met 10 years ago at a High Holy Days service at a Kabbalah center.

At the time, Shamouelian was "an observant Jew" who was "not being fulfilled" by his religious practice. Kabbalah, it turned out, was the answer for him.

Codified in Spain with the publication of the mystical work called the Zohar in the 13th century, Kabbalah is a philosophy

and practice that uses the power of auras, sacred utterances and mystical interpretations of the Torah to allow adherents to get closer to God.

It is also — particularly through the 72 Names of God — a system of managing daily life, with tools for facing issues such as illness, depression and ego.

Madonna, who has publicly declared her devotion to the Kabbalah, is a perfect example, Shamouelian says, of someone who was "transformed" by the "no ego" spirit of the "Lamed Aleph Vav" name, which in her video helped her escape from captors.

"She was all about material, all about physicality, and now she's all about spirituality," he said.

Likewise, Shamouelian admits, his own business of fashion design is one of "illusion."

"It's all about outside," he said. But "we can make a difference to the person wearing those clothes. We thought of taking something that is very physical and making it spiritual."

The shirts — and the Kabbalah — are not only for Jews, insists Rabbi Yehuda Berg, the co-director of the Kabbalah Centre. The spirituality of the Kabbalah, he says, has been studied by non-Jews throughout history, including Isaac Newton, William

Shakespeare and Carl Jung. And today, non-Jewish celebrities including Madonna, Sharon Osbourne and Rosie O'Donnell study Kabbalah.

"It was meant from the beginning of time to be shared with anyone," Berg said.

The Kabbalah Centre, which has 40 individual centers across the country, estimates that, in the last 10 years, 300,000 people in the United States have studied Kabbalah with them.

And their Spirituality for Kids program, which brings inner city children spiritual instruction and will receive all of the proceeds from the shirts, is growing. The center has schools as well, with 80 to 100 children currently enrolled in one in Los Angeles and another school planned in New York.

Berg, whose book "The 72 Names of God" will be published by the center in April, says that the names are accessible "tools of personal transformation" that can help people simply by appearing on the front of a shirt, and hopefully lead to deeper contemplation and study.

"A person may not want to take a book or a tape for their spirituality, but a cool-looking shirt — the energy itself may start accessing something," he said.



David Shamouelian, CEO of the Sharagano fashion label, has designed a line of shirts that incorporates the Jewish mystical system of Kabbalah.



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