

THE 72 NAMES OF GOD

Technology for the Soul™

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BY JIM N

T yet could the deliv-
erance of the
trapped Israelites
from the pharaoh's
pursuing army also be attributed
to the mysteries of Kabbalah?
Rabbi Yehuda Berg, director of
Kabbalah Centres in Manhattan, Los
Angeles and six other U.S. cities,
thinks so.

**RABBI
SHNEUR
WOLOWIK**
says he
teaches
Kabbalah to
enrich Jews'
lives.

"If you read cor-
rectly in the Bible,
you see that
Moses, not God,
split the sea," says
Berg, whose recent
Kabbalistic book is
"The 72 Names of
God: Technology
for the Soul" (Kabbalah Publishing).

The same mystical forces Moses
harnessed can be used to "split our
own red seas" — including anger,
excessive ego and childhood trauma — Berg says.

Orthodox Jewish Kabbalists dis-
agree. "When Torah says that God
himself has created a strong, stern

See **KABBALAH** on B90

The meaning of Kabbalah

PHOTO BY RICHARD SLATTERY

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THE 72 NAMES OF GOD

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The meaning of Kabbalah

KABBALAH from B92

wind, and with that he split the Red Sea, who are we to say otherwise?" asks Rabbi Shneur Wolowik, spiritual leader of the Jean Fischman Chabad Center of the Five Towns in Cedarhurst.

When Wolowik teaches the Jewish Learning Institute Kabbalah courses of the Worldwide Chabad Lubavitch Resource Center in Brooklyn, he's assisting other Jews in enriching their spiritual lives. "We're not looking to convert others to Torah; we are looking to introduce those born to a Jewish mother to their heritage," he says.

These interpretations of Kabbalah, a Hebrew word meaning "tradition" or "that which is received," come at a time of intensified interest in Jewish mysticism, fueled in part by celebrities such as Madonna, Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher.

Ancient and New Age

Every month, about 30,000 people take Kabbalah Centre distance learning courses, and about 120,000 visit the organization's Internet site, Berg says. At centers in the United States, and meditation sessions and participate in workshops, which may mix Kabbalah with

yoga or reiki, Berg says.

That mix of New Age and old-time religion troubles some observers. "If Madonna or any other celebrities are taking [Kabbalah] seriously, then God bless their heart," says Shimon Shokek, professor of Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah at Baltimore Hebrew University. "But I'm not sure they are being taught the way it should be taught."

As widespread a trend as Kabbalah has become, it is a distinctly Jewish philosophy with a several-millennia-old history that some date as far back as the Garden of Eden.

"Adam was the first Kabbalist," says Rabbi Mendy Goldberg, associate director of the Lubavitch of the East End in Coram. "The Torah tells us that Adam gave all the animals names, so Adam had to actually see the spiritual aspect of the animal, and how he was able to do that was through Kabbalistic interpretations."

Kabbalah is based on the belief that every word, letter, number and accent of the Torah, or Five Books of Moses, contains keys to understanding the human soul, Shokek says. Kabbalah basically is a "philosophical theology that seeks to under-



PHOTO BY RICHARD SLATTERY

ON THE COVER and above, Rabbi Shneur Wolowik teaches the Kabbalah in Cedarhurst.

stand the mystical dimensions of God, the deeper meaning of existence and being and the ways through which the human being can commune with God."

Spanish origins

Although the movement began several millennia ago, Kabbalah's central text, the Zohar — or the Book of Splendor — a mystical, multivolume commentary on the Torah, first appeared in 1280. For many centuries, Kabbalah study was reserved for scholars who could understand the great

theological and existential questions that were hidden in the Torah. After the 18th century founding of Hasidism by the rabbi known as Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, Kabbalah studies flourished and began to spread beyond the purview of scholars. The modern interpreters of Kabbalah include the Hasidic Jews, whose Chabad Centers offer courses from

Manhattan.

On a recent Wednesday evening at the Chabad Center of the Five Towns, inside a study room lined with holy books, Wolowik stands at a lectern teaching seven Jewish adults how to benefit from "The Kabbalah of Prayer."

Describing prayer as "uploading and downloading" between the spiritual and physical worlds, the rabbi says Kabbalists ask for "blessings and a higher consciousness."

An aid to prayer

Kabbalah student Paula Friedman, 44, a Cedarhurst homemaker, says she is taking Wolowik's course because "as an observant Jew, I wanted to improve my praying." And, she says, the class is "making every day more meaningful for me because when I pray, I am concentrating more on connecting with God."

As Jews begin the celebration of Passover, which begins at sundown April 5, Kabbalah demonstrates that "everything in Judaism has a body and soul — the body is the actual deed and the soul is the spiritual part, the esoteric understanding behind it," Goldberg says. Kabbalah manifests itself in every religious detail, from the order of prayers to the drinking of wine and eating

of matzo on Passover.

"We eat matzo because this is what the Jewish people ate when we left Egypt, but the Kabbalistic reason why we eat matzo is matzo is a sign of humility, that's why it's thin; it doesn't rise, in contrast to leavened bread," Goldberg says.

Berg also believes Kabbalah ad-

Embraced by celebrities

Call it Kabbalah chic. Certain Hollywood stars — among them, Madonna, Demi Moore and Britney Spears — have been seen wearing a red wristband that was once reserved for Jewish babies.

Paula Friedman of Cedarhurst said Jewish babies will often be outfitted with "a little red bendele" that goes hand in hand with the traditional Jewish mothers' wish that "no bad eye should harm you."

The string, worn on the left wrist, protects children and adults alike from "negativity from other people who are jealous and want our energy," says Rabbi Yehuda Berg, director of the Kabbalah Centre. The "evil eye" can harm even those "who have everything," he says.

According to tradition, the red string is wrapped around Jerusalem's Holy Tomb of the Matriarch Rachel before being sold for spiritual protection.

The Torah Codes, which purport to predict the future from numerical values in the Bible, are other popular derivations of Kabbalah, says Rabbi Mendy Goldberg, associate director of the Lubavitch of the East End in Coram.

For all the positive attention, there may be a downside to celebrities and other non-kosher kabbalists stringing along with Kabbalah. "I'm really sorry that it was popularized to that extent," says Shimon Shokek, professor of Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah at Baltimore Hebrew University. "I don't want to see Kabbalah as another mumbo jumbo."

— JIM MERRITT



GETTY IMAGES PHOTO

MADONNA has studied Kabbalah.

Kabbalah Web sites recommended by Rabbi Mendy Goldberg of the Lubavitch of the East End in Coram:

- www.kabbalahonline.org
- www.chabad.org/library/article.asp?AID=109853
- meaningfullife.com/spiritual

For course information, visit the Jewish Learning Institute at www.jlicen trai.com/index2.shtml or the Kabbalah Centre site at www.kabbalah.com/k/index.php

dresses issues of daily life, albeit for a wider audience. In recent years, New York has become one of the "anchors" of Kabbalah in the United States, and the biggest spike in attendance at the Manhattan Kabbalah Centre happened after Sept. 11, 2001, he says. "People started thinking, 'Anything can happen at any time.'"

"There is no difference if you are Jewish or not Jewish," says Berg, who sees Kabbalah as a system that helps deal with problems "through meditation, some prayer, some physical actions that you need to do to gain strength."

"It's easy to focus on what separates us, to find a divide between people," he says. "It's harder to figure out what brings us together. The thought of bringing people together is what Kabbalah focuses on. It helps us deal with hatred and fear and different feelings you go through. In Kabbalah, you embrace people."

Jim Merritt is a freelance writer.