

WHAT IS KABBALAH?



The term “*Kabbalah*” comes from the Hebrew verb “*kabal*” (*kuf-bet-lamed*) which means “to receive.” Thus, the word *Kabbalah* has often been translated as “received tradition” which, in turn, is a reference to its teachings allegedly being transmitted from master to disciple over the centuries.

The word itself is thought to have originated either in the 11th century with the Jewish philosopher *Solomon ibn Gabirol* or in the 13th century writings of *Rabbi Bahya ben Asher*.

Either way, most people use the word “*Kabbalah*” to refer to Jewish mysticism from that period onward. I, however, do not. I often use the term as a general reference to all Jewish mysticism, and my reasoning is simple. None of the mysticism of the later centuries came out of nowhere. Instead, there has been a continuous development and evolution from Jewish mysticism’s beginnings all the way up to the present. Furthermore, the danger in starting *Kabbalah* in the 11th century is that many people then study only from this point on, and that’s like trying to learn calculus without first mastering arithmetic and algebra. You miss out on a lot of very important stuff. Thus, I generally use the word “*Kabbalah*” to refer to all the various forms of Jewish mysticism that have existed throughout the entire history of Judaism. It’s all very important!

Many people today also use the word “*Kabbalah*” to refer to that version of the subject that is taught by the Hasidic movement. Again, this is not the practice that I follow. Even though the Hasidic world has produced some fine things, I am not at my core a Hasidic Jew. Furthermore, keep in mind that the Hasidic movement originated in the 18th century and, thus, it comprises only a small part of the entire history of Jewish mysticism. Hence, the Hasidic movement does not own *Kabbalah*, and there is much that happened and took place in *Kabbalah* before the Hasidic movement even existed.

Consequently, while my focus is on authentic, Jewish *Kabbalah*, it is also the earlier, non-Hasidic forms that I am most interested in, and that is what I will talk about in these slideshows.

So, getting back to the meaning of the word “*Kabbalah*,” this is probably a good time to mention that every letter in Biblical Hebrew is also a number. That is, in ancient times the letter system was also the mathematical system.

In the table on the right, you can see the numerical value of each Hebrew letter.

NAME	LETTER	VALUE
<i>aleph</i>	א	1
<i>bet</i>	ב	2
<i>gimmel</i>	ג	3
<i>dalet</i>	ד	4
<i>hey</i>	ה	5
<i>vav</i>	ו	6
<i>zayin</i>	ז	7
<i>chet</i>	ח	8
<i>tet</i>	ט	9
<i>yud</i>	י	10
<i>kaf</i>	כ	20
<i>lamed</i>	ל	30
<i>mem</i>	מ	40
<i>nun</i>	נ	50
<i>samech</i>	ס	60
<i>ayin</i>	ע	70
<i>peh</i>	פ	80
<i>tzaddi</i>	צ	90
<i>kuf</i>	ק	100
<i>resh</i>	ר	200
<i>shin</i>	ש	300
<i>tav</i>	ת	400

Part of the intricacies of Jewish mysticism is the notion that words that have the same numerical value are often connected or related in some way.

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<i>tav</i>	ת	400

This practice is called “*gematria*,” and this word, interestingly, comes not from Hebrew, but from Greek. Both *gematria* and our word *geometry* come from a Greek word meaning “to measure.”

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<i>shin</i>	ש	300
<i>tav</i>	ת	400

In proper application, however, *gematria* often gives us insights that we might not have otherwise.

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For example, the most sacred name for *God* in Hebrew (*yud-hey-vav-hey*) has a numerical value of 26, and 26 is the sum of *love/ahavah* (*aleph-hey-bet-hey=13*) and *oneness/echad* (*aleph-chet-dalet=13*). Thus, a simple equation, $13+13=26$, teaches us that *God* is the combination of love and oneness.

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<i>tav</i>	ת	400

For another example, consider the following well-known passage from *Deuteronomy*:

“Man does not live by bread alone, but by every utterance that comes forth from the mouth of God.”

–Deuteronomy 8:3

The Hebrew word that translates as “utterance that comes forth” is *motzah* (*mem-vav-tzaddi-aleph*), and what is important is that this word has the same gematria (numerical value) as the word *Kabbalah* (*kuf-bet-lamed-hey*).

“Man does not live by bread alone, but by every utterance that comes forth from the mouth of God.”

–Deuteronomy 8:3

Both of these words have a numerical value of 137, and this connection stimulates my creativity.

“Man does not live by bread alone, but by every utterance that comes forth from the mouth of God.”

–Deuteronomy 8:3

In particular, to me *Kabbalah* is our attempt to study and understand those utterances from *God* that have resulted in this creation.

“Man does not live by bread alone, but by every utterance that comes forth from the mouth of God.”

–Deuteronomy 8:3

And that's what *Kabbalah* is all about.

“Man does not live by bread alone, but by every utterance that comes forth from the mouth of God.”

–Deuteronomy 8:3