

The Kabbalah Centre

By Bob Waldrep

Founder: Phillip Berg (Feivel Gruberger) aka Rav Berg and Karen Berg.

Date: Though probably established in Los Angeles in 1984, other dates of origin have also been claimed, the most common being: 1922, 1969, and 1971. “Officially”, the Centre traces its origin to Jerusalem’s Kol Yehuda Seminary founded by Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag in 1922.

Publications: *The Zohar (The Book of Splendor)* is claimed to be the primary reference source. Numerous other books and teaching courses developed by the current leadership and supposedly based upon the teachings of the *Zohar* (i.e., *The Power of Kabbalah*, *Becoming God*, and *God Wears Lipstick*) are also used and heavily promoted.

Unique Terms: Ein Sof, Ten Sefirot, Tikkun, Klippot, Ayin Hara, Bendel/Red String, Scanning.

HISTORY

Phillip Berg was born Feivel Shraga Gruberger in Brooklyn, New York, in 1929 (some records have 1927). He became a Jewish Rabbi in 1951 but in 1953 he changed careers, becoming an insurance salesman and married Rivkah Brandwein (they would have eight children). Her uncle was Rabbi Yehuda Tzvi Brandwein, a well known teacher of “traditional” Kabbalah and the director/dean, of Yeshiva (a Jewish religious school/seminary) Kol Yehuda, in Jerusalem. During a 1962 trip to Israel, Berg met Brandwein and became a devoted student. “Berg took a leave of absence from his business and began studying with his new teacher.”¹ The relationship was so intense that Berg said, “I did not leave my teacher...even for a second; we were together 24 hours a day, ’...adding that in 1967, by channeling the forces of Kabbalah, he and Brandwein controlled the events that led to Israel’s victory in the Six-Day War.”²

Though his marriage to Rivkah was crucial to his meeting her uncle, she does not appear in the Centre’s “official” history. Rather, the emphasis is on Berg and his second wife (and his former insurance secretary), Karen (Kathy Mulnick³), of whom the Centre stated: “Surprisingly, it wasn’t a charismatic rabbi, guru, or mystic that was responsible for injecting some spiritual sanity into our world. Rather, it was the spark of one woman, that ignited the single largest Kabbalistic revolution in history. One woman who dared to do what no one person had done since time began. Her name is Karen Berg.”⁴ What she “dared to do” is learn Kabbalah. Regarding this, in an account Karen gave of her 1969 reunion with Berg, she said,

The two had not seen each other since Karen had worked as Berg’s secretary eight years earlier. After a mutual colleague mentioned her name, Berg inexplicably called...[and during the conversation] Karen offered to work for him for free if he agreed to teach her Kabbalah. They got together that very night to work out the details. “We knew instantly,” she writes, “that we were meant for each other.”⁵

Initially, Berg refused to teach her but agreed after she told him that a man (he interpreted to be Brandwein) had appeared to her in a dream giving her his blessing. In 1971 they married in Jerusalem, established residency in Israel, and had two sons there, Yehuda and Michael, who now lead the Centre. For several years they spent time, in both Israel and the United States, teaching students the “new” version of Kabbalah they were developing. In 1984, they settled in the US, founding the Los Angeles Kabbalah Centre. Most likely, that is the origin of The Kabbalah Centre, as it exists today; but, other dates have also been put forth. For example, their website states:

The Kabbalah Centre was founded in Jerusalem in 1922 by Rav Yehuda Ashlag, one of the greatest kabbalists of the 20th century. When Rav Ashlag left this world, leadership of The Centre was taken on by Rav Yehuda Tzvi Brandwein [who] designated Rav Berg to continue the lineage of Kabbalah as Director of The Kabbalah Centre.⁶

Berg claims a 1967 letter from Brandwein appointed him successor. Investigative reporter, Elena Lappin reviewed the letter and wrote, “[It is] simply a form letter confirming Berg’s ordination from his US yeshiva, without mention of Berg becoming a legal successor.”⁷ Of the letter, *Radar*

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adds, "...the position he blesses Berg for...is most likely an administrative post in America."⁸ Brandwein's son, Avraham, who became the school's dean after his father, also questions Berg's claim. "[He] angrily disputed Berg's claim to succession. Indeed, the seminary has insisted that it 'has no connection, in any way, shape, or form' with Berg's organisation."⁹

All this confusion over the Centre's history and date of origin was created by Berg. As Lappin points out,

Versions of his biography, as presented on dustjackets of his books and on his organisation's website have varied over the years. In a book he wrote and self-published in 1983, entitled *The Kabbalah Connection*, Berg is described as 'an ordained rabbi who'... following the death of his master [Brandwein] in 1969, 'assumed the position of dean of the centre [the Research Centre of Kabbalah]'...On the dustjacket of a book published in 2000, *Immortality: The Inevitability Of Eternal Life*...it says, "Along with his wife, Karen, Rav Berg opened the doors of the KC [as their organisation is now known] in 1971".¹⁰

Much of the interest in the Centre (particularly media attention) is related to high profile-celebrities, who are, or have been, associated with it. As *ABC News* pointed out in a 2005 story, "Most people don't have a clue what the spiritual movement Kabbalah is, though they may be aware it has something to do with a parade of stars – from Madonna to Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher to Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan and Paris Hilton".¹¹ And while the Centre's leaders may publicly downplay the role of celebrities, without question, they are important to its recruiting and funding. According to her spokesperson, Madonna, one of the first celebrities to study at the Centre, and probably the one most identified with it, gave approximately \$5 million – personally, and from book sales in 2004.¹² She is also on the Board of, and donates the proceeds of her children's books, to one of Karen Berg's programs, Spirituality for Kids.

Along with the increase in public awareness, the Centre has also dramatically increased its income during the past few years. *ABC News* referred to it as "a multimillion dollar empire"¹³ and *Radar* reported, "Tax documents filed between 2000 and 2003 show assets of approximately \$60 million for five of the nonprofit entities controlled by the Bergs."¹⁴ Critics maintain much of this income is at the expense of adherents who work for free or little pay as chevres (volunteers) and from aggressive fundraising, including the sale of expensive Kabbalah products, such as translations of the Zohar (\$415) and the popular red string bracelets (\$26). When interviewing Yehuda Berg, Lappin asked why the red string is so expensive. He replied,

...to get the red string, we have to get an armoured car to Rachel's Tomb; they get shot at every time they go...We have to pay a private security firm. So there's a lot of money that's laid out by the centre...people who wear it from elsewhere don't necessarily get the benefit. We give them the whole technology...The minimum people should do is appreciate that and pay for it.¹⁵

Interestingly Lappin writes, "Later, when I ask the rabbis who have a permanent presence at Rachel's Tomb and have been there for the past 10 years whether they have ever seen this going on, the answer is a definite no: no armoured vehicles...no shootings of this description, no one observed arriving with large quantities of red string."¹⁶

Despite the controversy over its origin, celebrity involvement, income revenue stream, and beliefs and practices, the Kabbalah Centre continues to grow. At the end of 2006, the Centre's website listed over twenty study group locations in the US and over sixty worldwide. In a 2003 interview, Yehuda Berg maintained, "more than 18,000 students are enrolled in its classes in the United States and an additional 90,000 are 'active members'."¹⁷

DOCTRINES

Though its teachings and practices are rooted in those of the 16th Century Kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria (see *Kabbalah Profile*), they are vastly different, expressing the more contemporary (some would say New Age) views of its founders and their sons. Reporter Nick Johnstone said the lecture he attended reminded him of "...some New Age, self-help nightmare, visions of Tom Cruise in Magnolia passing through my mind as the rabbi talks endlessly about how the Kabbalah could make our lives so much richer...We are told that financial wealth, career success, love, happiness – all these things are within reach."¹⁸ Laurie Hibberd of CBS News described it as, "...custom fit for today's spirituality seekers".¹⁹ As a Jewish reporter noted,

[It] is hardly the first California-based faith to combine self-help techniques, a smattering of post-modern physics, and *Star Wars* spirituality (the "emperor of evil" versus the "light force"). But, unlike, say, Scientology, the Centre has co-opted one of the world's great mystical traditions. It draws on just enough authentic Kabbalah to make the deception credible to the credulous.²⁰

Kabbalah and Judaism: A primary factor distinguishing it from more traditional Kabbalah is who can study it. Traditionalists have long held Kabbalah is for Jewish males only. Berg not only violated this tenet by teaching Karen, but more startling, also agreed to open it up to all, including, non-Jews. This occurred in the fall of 1971 after Karen told him, “The time has come for the Centre to open its doors to every man, woman, and child who has a desire to learn.”²¹ His response indicated he realized this was a radical and risky departure from the Kabbalah he had been taught: “The very idea made me unsteady on my feet. I found a bench and sat down. ‘It’s impossible! It just won’t work,’ I said. ‘The establishment will kill us!’”²²

Berg knew Kabbalah, as handed down to him, was not intended to be separated from Judaism but rather was to reveal the inner, or mystical, teachings of the Torah. As Rabbi J. Immanuel Schochet, author of 30 books on Jewish mysticism, points out, “All the Kabbalists without exception emphasize that there has to be a preliminary commitment to Torah and halacha [Jewish law] before one can engage in it.”²³ That Berg departed from this basic principle is evidenced by eldest son Yehuda’s statement that, “When I grew up I thought I was Jewish. Now I don’t consider myself Jewish. I consider myself a Kabbalist.”²⁴

Of the brand of Kabbalah offered by the Kabbalah Centre, Hasidic Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz has said, “The connection between pop-culture Kabbalah and the real thing ‘is the relationship between pornography and love.’”²⁵ Adds Schochet, “What they teach is heresy.”²⁶

The Zohar and Scanning: The 13th Century Spanish Kabbalist, Moses de Leon, claims to have discovered an ancient Aramaic text, the Zohar, which provides a deeper, “mystical” insight into the Torah. Traditional Kabbalah stresses the importance of intellectually studying and understanding the Zohar. The Kabbalah Centre approaches it differently, teaching it is not even necessary to read Aramaic or know Hebrew letters to benefit from the Zohar; simply scanning it (running one’s eyes over the letters) is just as effective. The Centre claims, “Scanning the letters—just letting your eyes pass over them—opens an unlimited channel to the Light...Nothing is required but worthy desire, the certainty of a trusting heart, and an open and receptive mind.”²⁷ A claim, “[Jewish] scholars say is ridiculous.”²⁸

Ein Sof (boundless essence of God) – Creation: “Kabbalah teaches the universe began not with an atom or a subatomic particle, but with a thought of God.”²⁹ The Centre teaches

...the universe originally started as a perfect ten-dimensional universe with nothing in it...[that]... ‘cracked’ into two pieces...: a four- and a six-dimensional universe...the six days of creation described in the Bible is a code...[and] ...actually refers to six of the ten dimensions of the Tree of Life that contracted and unified into one dimension. The remaining four dimensions became our physical world, known as Malchut, which is made up of the three spatial dimensions plus the fourth dimension of time.³⁰

Ten Sefirot: Everything that manifests in the universe contains the ten Sefirot.³¹ They are emanations through which Ein Sof interacts with the Creation. Commonly known as the “Tree of Life”, they include both masculine and feminine qualities.³² The Tree of Life image in Kabbalah...can be understood as the healing symbol of Kabbalah.³³ Healing is needed as the original intent that “every human being would enjoy total happiness and fulfillment, free from any form of chaos or pain”³⁴ did not occur. Thus, humanity needs to “erase negativity and replace darkness with Light.”³⁵ The process of doing this is referred to as “Tikkun”, also known in Chassidic circles as, “Tikkum Olam, the repair of the world”.³⁶ Mankind’s mission to expel the negative energy is hindered by klippot.

Man: The Kabbalah Centre’s views on man are much like that of New Age proponents and remarkably like many Word-Faith teachers, regarding man being able to do the very things that God does. Micahel Berg has said that to be created in the image of God means, “...that every one of us is built with the essence of God. Our soul is the essence of God, and that means that every single one of us has the potential to become like God and to heal, to bless, to do almost everything that God can do.”³⁷

The Human Problem – Klippot (barriers to become like God): Michael Berg says,

Both of these problems - the lack of strength to fight the ‘other side’ (also known in Aramaic as *sitra achra* - evil inclination) and our spiritual blindness - have one singular source: *klippot*. *Klippot* are spiritual shells that we have brought upon ourselves through our negative actions, both in this incarnation and previous ones. As long as these shells cover us, we cannot attain the spiritual level that we came to this world to achieve.³⁸

Kabbalah “technology” overcomes this.

Reincarnation: The Kabbalah Centre teaches reincarnation (past lives) as alluded to in our negative actions carrying over from “previous incarnations”. Also, regarding Tikkun, the Centre states, “...souls come to the world many times in order to attain their spiritual correction, and they will continue to do so until they finally achieve the correction once and for all.”³⁹

Cause and Effect: Much like the belief in karma held by many Eastern religions and New Agers, the Centre teaches that, “All of our negative actions towards other people carry repercussions, as dictated by the universal law of cause and effect...for every envious glance, unkind word, and short-tempered response that we put “out there,” there is an equal negative consequence coming our way.”⁴⁰

Ayin Hara (the Evil Eye):

The negative energies of jealousy and envy emanate through the eyes—which gave rise to the very vivid and very ancient term, the Evil Eye...According to the kabbalists, this form of negative energy can affect our lives and well-being. It can hold us back from achieving our destinies and it can also cause us to lose what we have already achieved.⁴¹

According to the Centre, protection from the “evil eye” comes in the form of a red string, or bendel bracelet: “Worn around the left wrist, the Red String works in the same way as the vaccines of modern medicine...By binding a Red String to ourselves in a very specific manner, we shield ourselves against the dangerous negativity that might be directed our way—a spiritual vaccine against the destructive forces of the Evil Eye.”⁴² On this topic, Jewish author, Rabbi Shmuley Boteach stated, “The whole idea of the evil eye in Judaism is to become more humble so people don’t envy you...Anything else is just selling snake oil.”⁴³

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Man’s problem is not an inability to fight evil inclinations causing the need to erase negativity and restore order to creation by becoming as God. Man’s problem is sin the only solution is found in the work of Jesus, not our own effort. (Jn 14:6; Acts 4:10-12; Rom 3:25-26; 8:3; 1 Jn 2:2; 1 Thes 5:8-10; 1 Tm 2:5).

The Bible does not teach reincarnation. God has not given mankind many lives to get it right; rather, each person is given one life and with that life will come death, after which is the judgment (Heb 9:27). With this life is the responsibility to enter into a personal relationship with Jesus through the free offer of the gospel. (1 Cor 15:1-4)

For more information, see Watchman’s *Profiles on The New Age Movement and Kabbalah*.

Notes

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