

Mysticism

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

"Mysticism," so the saying goes, "starts in a mist and ends in a schism." And mysticism has gained a very scurrilous reputation in all religions for misleading, abusing, and taking advantage of the credulous and superstitious, for money and indeed for sex (not to mention power and adulation). Yet it exists and thrives in every religion.

Religions have two sides to them. There is the structure, which includes the theology, the rituals and the authority. Then there is the experience of encountering God or the spiritual world which should come first, but rarely seems to. In both spheres one can find those human beings who claim to understand the mind and the will of God and how to intercede with that Divine energy. This is where the abuses proliferate.

False Messiahs, miracle workers, scam artists and yes clerics of various sorts, all use so-called mystical skills and charms to heal, cure, guarantee financial success and happy marriages. In Talmudic times anything that could not be explained, such as gravity or friction, would be attributed to *sheydim*—spirits who tugged at clothes, tripped you up, or removed ladders. You could see their footprints if you scattered powder around your bed before going to sleep at night.

In medieval times witches, spirits, devils, and golems proliferated and dominated the lives of the ordinary people who had no access to medicine or technology. So Baalei Sheym (Masters of the Divine Name), Kabbalists, experts in connecting one to God, were employed by communities to help, writing charms and petitions and soothe the minds of the troubled or possessed. If you happen to be interested in this area, you should read "Jewish Magic and Superstition" by Joshua Trachtenberg.

More distressing was the belief that mental illnesses were the result of malevolent spirits who entered the bodies of the vulnerable and had to be exorcised or tortured to leave their hosts, who often died in agony. Lunatic asylums were places of horror where those whose minds were affected by the moon, *luna*, were sent to disappear and die.

The amazing thing is that in this modern technologically advanced world, so many are still enthralled to such superstitions. But it is the stress and pressure of modern living that requires help, placebos, and reassurance. None of this is real mysticism. I am a rationalist. I do not believe in magic, hocus-pocus, or coincidences. I do believe in human responsibility and proactivity. We are limited by genes, upbringing, other people and circumstances beyond our control. We can make or break our luck too. Therefore, no curses, evil eyes, or other threats have any power over me unless I let them. I see all the time people who do believe in it and are actually affected. They can be destroyed by such auto-suggestive fantasies. I recognize that magic works, up to a certain point, for those who believe in

it.

But magic is not mysticism, even if some mysticism is magic! The Kabbalah, which is the generic name for Jewish mysticism, has three very different parts to it. Before Kabbalah (a medieval term), there was *Nevuah*, *Nistar*, and *Mercava*—terms that described the capacity of some to feel so close to God that they felt His presence and influence. Heard the word. This was a gift that went beyond the normal bounds of religious ritual, practice, and authority. Sometimes it coexisted. At other times it competed. It was accessible to very few.

There were two significant schools of such mysticism thousands of years ago: those who tried to understand the House of God, God's role in the Universe, the *Hechalot* literature, the chambers of God; and those who tried to comprehend the ways God interacts with people, *Shiur Komma*, the Measure of the Divine Body mirrored in the human.

Medieval Kabbalah expanded the earlier sources into a theoretical system of non-rational thought. To explain the God of the universe and God's relationship with humans, in contrast and opposition to the colder, rational systems of thought. Which was based on Greek philosophers like Aristotle and Plato, who dominated medieval thinkers of all Western religions and intellectual cultures.

then there was Practical Kabbalah which flourished in Medieval Spain and Provence. It was as a system of contemplation, meditation, and exercises in letters, numbers, and textual formulations to try to engage directly with God, to both enhance personal spirituality and find a way to bring the experience of the Divine into daily life. There was even a system of meditational and yoga-like exercises that appear to have integrated certain eastern practices into Jewish mystical life.

These theoretical and mystical aspects of Judaism coexisted in many great medieval and early modern rabbinic minds as being complementary. But somewhere along the line, Kabbalah acquired the reputation for being dangerous. That was because a third element was appended to mysticism, which brought in all the primitive medieval, irrational, uncontrollable and dangerous magic to the main body of Kabbalah. IN fact it is the very antithesis of genuine spirituality because whereas halacha, the Jewish constitution, has its boundaries and is open for anyone to see, magic is hidden, and often unpredictable in its demands.

Kabbalah spread as the sixteenth century Safed mystics popularized it. But people soon abused and distorted it. False messiahs like Shabbetai Zvi and Jacob Frank created heretical sects and divisions that nearly tore Judaism apart, flying under the banner of Kabbalah. Which is why it gained its negative reputation, so that it retreated into esoteric coterie or became integrated and tamed within such movements as Hasidism and Orientalism.

Yet I am a devotee of (some parts) of the mystical. I am amazed and inspired by the complexities (and sometimes the weird antirational ideas) that are to be found in the Zohar and other books written in medieval times. And I make

constant use of mystical exercises in helping me pray, relax, and reach God and feel the Divine presence. The rational side of me cannot prove the existence of God, but the mystical side feels God's presence all the time. It is a wonderful, reassuring experience that helps me cope with the pressures of life. Even though I have no expectation of being granted wishes, guaranteed good health, wealth, or anything else. Life is to survive, cope, enjoy, and suffer. God is not a cure, but a means of coping. It is based on experience rather than illusion. It is the difference between sex and love. One can be described. The other cannot. One can be measured; the other may be experienced, but still be open to delusion.

For all the faults and failures of religions, they persist because clearly there is a demand or a need. The idea of God is not such a bad idea after all. (See the article [What Religion Gives Us \(That Science Can't\)](#) in the New York Times.) However much our knowledge has advanced, the idea that the universe came about accidentally defies probability and logic. Atheists like Anthony Flew have recanted because they can find no acceptable alternative. My rational mind cannot accept this, because it still provides no positive evidence of who or what God is. But my mystical mind gives me an answer I can validate and repeat, all the time. Which is why in the end I go for mysticism over rationalism—even if I need my rationalism to stop me making an idiot of myself.

Rationality is limited. Mysticism can be abused. Neither is the complete answer to life. But both, combined and set against each other, provide the best solution I have found so far.

(I want to thank Zachary for inspiring this piece!)