

bookSMART



**JLI FLAGSHIP
LESSON 6
—WINTER 5783**

Key Points

1. **Transmitted Secrets.** Kabbalah is the Torah's inner, spiritual dimension, containing its most powerful and empowering ideas. But these esoteric teachings are also extremely subtle, and can easily be misunderstood and corrupted. As a result, the history of Kabbalah is driven by two paradoxical aims: to transmit and to conceal. For many centuries, the teachings of Kabbalah were carefully guarded secrets, transcribed only in the guise of esoteric terminology and metaphors, and taught only to a small exclusive circle of mystics in each generation.
2. **A Brief History of Kabbalah.** The history of the transmission and revelation of Kabbalah can be divided into five stages: (1) The esoteric texts of the Talmudic era. (2) The increased Kabbalistic activity in southern Europe beginning in the 12th century, prompted by the publication of the *Zohar* and by Kabbalists such as the Raavad, Rabbi Yitzchak the Blind, Nachmanides, Abulafia, Gikatilla, Recanati, Ibn Gabbai, and others. (3) The flourishing of Kabbalah in 16th-century Safed under the tutelage of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero ("Ramak") and Rabbi Yitzchak Luria ("Ari") and their disciples. (4) The spread of Kabbalistic learning throughout the Jewish world in the generations following the Safedian period; Kabbalists of this period include Maharal, Da Fano, Shalah, Ramchal, and Gra. (5) The revelation of Chasidism in 1734, which disseminated the "soul of Torah" beyond the circle of sages and mystics in a manner accessible to all.

3. ***The Revelation of Chasidism.*** Chasidism is an extension of Kabbalah as well as a field of Torah in its own right. The teachings of Chasidism take the Torah's innermost truths beyond the specialized language of Kabbalah, employing metaphors and explanations that make them accessible to all. Chasidism also reveals the inner "soul" element that unites the various dimensions of Torah, and it represents the final phase of the Torah's unfolding revelation from Sinai to Mashiach.
4. ***The Great Paradox.*** A major subject in Kabbalah is the "great paradox" that underlies G-d's relationship with our existence. On the one hand, a principal belief of Judaism is that G-d cannot be defined or described in any way, shape, or form. Idolatry, which ascribes human traits to G-d, is categorically condemned in the Torah as a cardinal transgression and as a harbinger of moral corruption. But no less central to Judaism is the belief that G-d is intimately involved in His creation—an involvement described in the Torah in terms of Divine "attributes" such as wisdom, love, judgment, anger, joy, compassion, sovereignty, etc. Indeed, a central idea in Kabbalah is that we can understand G-d's relationship with His creation by contemplating our own soul's relationship with our body.
5. ***The Ten Sefirot.*** The teachings of Kabbalah describe a constellation of ten Divine "attributes"—the ten *sefirot*—which G-d generated within His infinite being in order to create and relate to our existence. According to the *Zohar*, this is the "Divine image" in which the human being was created. The ten *sefirot* also provide the formula that explains the "great paradox" of G-d's transcendence and immanence. Ramak uses an analogy of colorless water being channeled through colored vessels to illustrate the manner in which the "featureless" Divine effluence, being channeled through the *sefirot*, retains its transcendence even as we experience it as a manifestation of Divine wisdom, Divine love, Divine sovereignty, etc.
6. ***The Contraction.*** Complementing Kabbalah's "colored vessels" analogy for the *sefirot*, Chasidic teaching employs an analogy of a parent "contracting" their adult personality in order to engage in play with their young child. The adult self is fully present within the child-persona they have isolated within themselves, with the result that their interaction with their child is both genuine and fully relatable by the child. In the same way, G-d is fully present within the "attributes" He assumes in order to relate to us.

7. ***The Great Paradox Personalized.*** Chasidism seeks to not only understand the spiritual cosmos, but also to unite spirit with matter. In the teachings of Kabbalah, the “great paradox” informs the spiritual infrastructure of Creation; in Chasidism, it also describes our own soul’s relationship with our physical self. Guidance comes in the form of a passage in the Torah instructing us to offer roadside assistance to an enemy’s overburdened animal, whose inner meaning is revealed by a Chasidic teaching to address the challenge of reconciling our material nature with our spiritual goals.