MARRIAGE AND SEXUAL BEHAVIOR IN THE TEACHINGS OF THE KABBALAH CENTRE

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1. Introduction

The Kabbalah Centre is a new religious movement that seeks to disseminate the teachings of kabbalah to a universal audience. Founded in 1970 in the United States, it exhibits many of the characteristics associated with postmodern religious sensibility. Symbols from disparate frameworks of meaning—including New Age ideas, psychology, physics, and capitalistic consumer culture—are utilized to interpret and communicate concepts and values rooted in twentieth century and pre-modern Jewish kabbalah. Promising that the teachings of kabbalah will bring personal fulfillment and contentment, and addressing themselves primarily to spiritual seekers 18–45 years of age, Kabbalah Centre teachers recommend ways of finding a loving life partner, creating a fulfilling marriage, and sustaining an exciting and emotionally satisfying sexual relationship. They suggest behaviors that conform to Jewish religious law and modern orthodox Judaism—with a notable exception on the matter of homosexuality, about which they are quite tolerant. However, they assiduously avoid explicit identification with Judaism. Their recommendations and explanations are based on scientific reasoning, pragmatic individualism, and kabbalistic concepts shorn of their particularistic ethnic associations.

Kabbalah Centre teachings are an elaboration and interpretation of the kabbalistic writings of Yehuda Ashlag (1885–1954). Born in Warsaw, Yehuda Ashlag received a rabbinical education and was attentive to, though not formally educated in, modern thought. He moved to Palestine in 1921 in order to devote himself more intensively to the study of kabbalah, and except for a few years spent in England, he lived in Jerusalem until his death in 1954. Ashlag constructed a

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2 On Ashlag, see Meir, ‘Wrestling with the Esoteric’; Huss, ‘Altruistic Communism’.
distinctive and innovative version of kabbalah. He raised only a few disciples, and few studied his teachings until decades after his death. During the 1960s, an American orthodox rabbi named Philip Berg studied kabbalah with two of Ashlag’s disciples. They died in the late 1960s, and Berg asserted himself as the leading transmitter of Ashlagian kabbalah. He began to develop his unique interpretation of these teachings.

The establishment in 1970 of Berg’s school and publishing house, the Research Centre of Kabbalah, signals a new era in the popularization of kabbalah. Berg was one of a handful of men of the younger generation who regarded kabbalah as the vehicle for restoring religiously alienated or secular American and Israeli Jewish men and women to their Jewish roots. These teachers’ undiscriminating policy toward students violated the dominant stance of Jewish religious authorities, who generally regarded kabbalistic knowledge as esoteric and best limited to men schooled in sophisticated rabbinic literature and behaving in strict compliance with Jewish ritual and ceremonial laws. Berg, in partnership with his wife Karen, initially sought to attract a following in Israel. In 1970 they moved to Israel and made overtures to highly secularized young Israelis who, like their American peers, were seeking spiritual insight in Eastern religions. The Bergs remained in Israel until the early 1980s, when they returned to the US with a core group of Israeli disciples. They did not achieve noticeable success until the early 1990s. At that point, growing appreciation for Berg’s teachings by non-Jews as well as Jews enabled the Bergs to establish centers of study and worship called Kabbalah Learning Centres in the major cities of Canada, the United States, western Europe, and Israel. Sons Yehuda and Michael Berg joined the leadership of the movement and began adding to its published literature. The teachings on marriage and sexual behavior described in this chapter are drawn from the published writings of Philip, Karen, Yehuda and Michael Berg, and from the curriculum and public lectures and sermons of Kabbalah Centre instructors and prayer leaders.

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3 On the efforts of Levi Krakovsky and Yehuda Brandwein, two members of the first generation of Ashlag’s disciples, see Myers, Kabbalah and the Spiritual Quest, 23–39.

4 In this group I would include Aryeh Kaplan, Zalman Schachter, and Shlomo Carlebach along with Berg.