This article deals with kabbalah and modernity in contemporary Israel, and dwells mostly on manifestations of kabbalah in the public domain, which is obsessed with issues of national security. More specifically, I shall try to lay the groundwork for general conclusions about the status of kabbalah in the Jewish world of today, based on the connection between kabbalah and suicide terrorists. I shall do so by close examination of the way a particular religious group handles the tragic consequences of the phenomenon of terrorism.

When we speak about popularization of the kabbalah and its present-day relevance—and mainly about the appearance of the kabbalah in Israeli society and politics, and the appearance of Israeli society and politics in the kabbalah—we do not refer to Kabbalah often spelled with a capital K. In other words, we do not deal here with a systematic and crystallized body of knowledge, but with a collection of metaphors, idioms, stories, formulas, and non-clarified general ideas. Moreover, the kabbalistic concept dealt with here is mostly latent, mentioned only incidentally and inadvertently. Sometimes the kabbalists to be described refuse to admit that their interest is kabbalistic, and abstain from calling their kabbalah by name. I may add that as far as the “Kabbalah” plays a role in contemporary Israeli discourse, it is mainly a relatively simplistic version of the “Kabbalah” of Ha’Ari (Isaac Ashkenazi Luria). This choice may be explained by the collectivist emphasis of Lurianic mysticism and its messianic and nationalistic character, easily amenable to translation and application to Israeli and Middle Eastern reality.¹

¹ See Jonathan Garb’s research, which focuses on some developments in the Israeli world of “Kabbalah” today whose complexity, style, and method may be considered as a continuation of classical “Kabbalah” trends (Garb, The Chosen will Become Herds).
1. The Presence of Kabbalah in the Jewish Nation-State

It is well known that religion and nationalism are interlocked in Judaism; and in Israel, religion and state are inseparable. One of the outcomes of this complex situation is the significant presence of religion in the public domain. Jewish religion—or more precisely, Israeli orthodoxy of all shades—intervenes in all issues of the social and political agenda, even those not obviously “religious”, including issues of national security derived from the Middle Eastern conflict. The connection between religion and a politics of war and peace is usually ascribed to modern Israeli orthodoxy, especially to religious Zionism in the style of the Torah Faithful emanating from the Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva and its extensions: orthodox believers dedicated to settlement in the Palestinian-populated West Bank. Their positions on strategic and tactical issues, especially defendable borders and sovereignty over the land, are backed by Talmudic reasoning and by quotations of halachic rules and rabbinical verdicts. However, there is a kabbalistic layer in their reference to such issues of nation and state—e.g. the exact location of the security fence dividing between Israel and the Palestinian Authority—that, in spite of being mostly invisible, is easily identifiable. The teaching of Rav (Abraham Isaac) Kook which guides the national-religious sector in the religious and political preferences of most members is an important link in the Jewish mystical chain.2

Since the kabbalah has been influential in Judaism over the last few generations and has had a revival in Israel, it is only natural for it to leave its mark on the public domain here—although most of the population is not really orthodox.3 We find evidence of kabbalistic influence in Israel in social and political arenas, some piquant and even scandalous—such as the use of blessings and amulets of famous kabbalists in order to mobilize voters for parliamentary parties. In a deeper sense, the kabbalah subtly directs Jewish individuals, institutions, and

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2 Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, first lecture; Ish-Shalom, Rabbi Kook between Rationalism and Mysticism; Rotenstreich, Jewish Thought in Our Age. We should differentiate between the mystical teaching of Rav Kook and “Kookism”—a popular version with a national-political tendency of Rabbi Kook’s original teaching, interpreted and practiced since the last third of the twentieth century in Zionist yeshivas, mainly in settlements beyond the Green Line. See Aran, ‘From Religious Zionism to Zionist Religion’.

3 The distribution of the Jewish population in Israel: 50% secular, 30% “traditional”, 20% religious (just under 10% of them Haredi).