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BY SARAH GOODYEAR

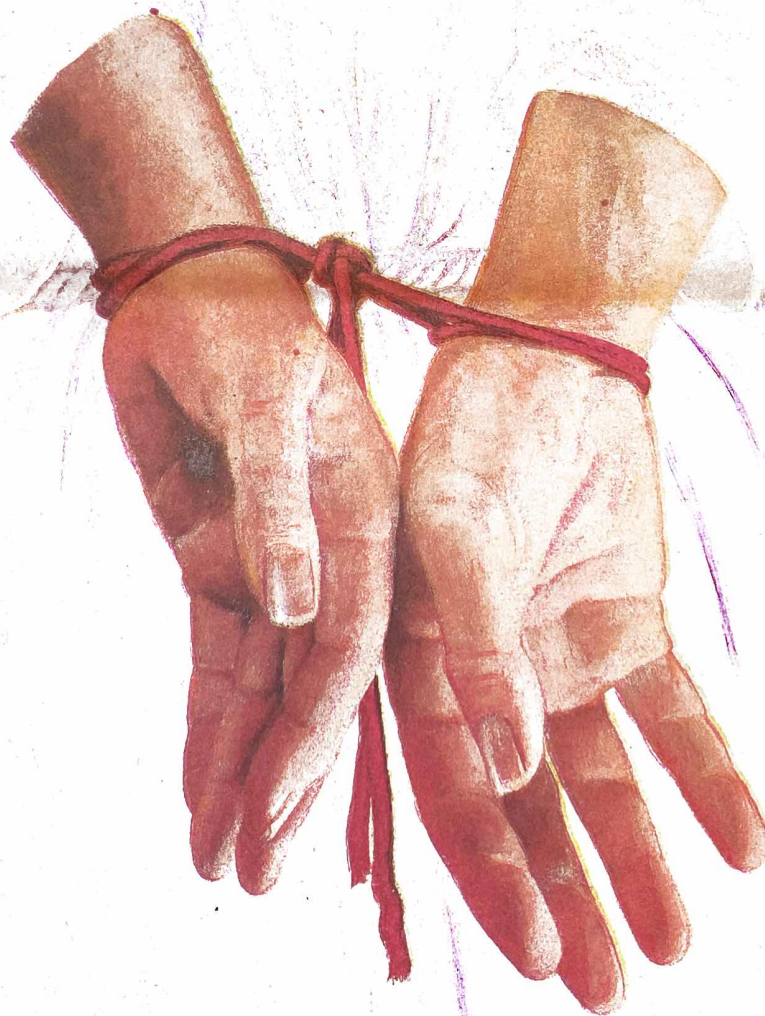
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THE KABBALAH CENTRE WANTS YOUR HEART—AND YOUR MONEY

The String That Binds

BY ABBY ELLIN p22

The String That Binds

THE KABBALAH CENTRE WANTS YOUR HEART—AND YOUR MONEY

BY ABBY ELLIN, WITH SPECIAL REPORTING BY ADAM J. SACKS



he building at 155 East 48th Street gleams like a freshly polished piece of marble. It is spotless, pristine; it could be Ian Schrager's latest hotel or a swanky, if austere, new restaurant. Everything about it sparkles: the heavy glass doors leading into the white-tiled lobby; the bottled water lined up on a table; the beatific faces on the workers milling about. ■ UPSTAIRS, IN A GENERIC CONFERENCE ROOM—ROWS OF PLASTIC CHAIRS, AN OVERSIZE IP CHART SET UP ON AN EASEL, RECESSED FLUORESCENT LIGHTING—PEOPLE LISTEN TO A BEAMING TEACHER AT THE MANHATTAN BRANCH OF THE KABBALAH CENTRE. ■ "DON'T BELIEVE ANYTHING YOU HEAR IN THIS COURSE. TEST IT IN YOUR LIFE. IT HAS TO WORK FOR YOU. BELIEVING MEANS THERE IS ALREADY AN ELEMENT OF DOUBT," HE SAYS WITH THE CADENCE OF A CANTOR. "THE SECRET TO SUCCESS IS TO KNOW THE LAWS OF LIFE—

NOT TO BELIEVE IN THEM. WHEN YOU TEST THESE LAWS AND PRINCIPLES, YOU WILL COME TO KNOW THE POWER OF KABBALAH." ■ THE GROUP OF ABOUT 60—MEN, WOMEN, BLACKS, WHITES, ISRAELIS WEARING YARMULKES—NODS EARNESTLY. HOW COULD SOMETHING SO ANCIENT, SO ESOTERIC, SOUND SO BASIC, SO . . . *BARNES & NOBLE SELF-HELP SECTION?* ■ "WHY BE REACTIVE WHEN YOU COULD BE PROACTIVE? WHY NOT EMBRACE THE LIGHT?" HE PAUSES AND HIS EYES SHINE. "THIS," HE SAYS, "IS KABBALAH."

"We let people get their own answers": Yehuda Berg, a co-director of the Kabbalah Centre



Yes, this is Kabbalah, the mystical, ancient study that has turned into the spiritual therapy du jour, its classes meeting at a center near you. But some claim Kabbalah—"receipt" in Hebrew—is picking up where the Scientologists, Hare Krishnas, and Moonies left off.

Naturally, celebrities, arbiters of the zeitgeist, are all over it: Sandra Bernhard, Barbra Streisand, Roseanne, and notable Jewish scholars like Demi Moore and Britney Spears have all taken classes with the Kabbalah Centre. Some can be seen sporting the red string, which supposedly wards off evil. (In February, the center tried to trademark the words *Kabbalah red string*; their application was rejected on the grounds that the string was only "indefinitely identified" as a religious object.) Just the other day Target, which had been selling the red strings in some of its stores and on its website—for a mere \$25.99!—yanked them off shelves after receiving complaints from angry customers.

Madonna, of course, has recently reinvented herself as the poster child for Kabbalah. On her appropriately named ReInvention Tour, she allowed only Kabbalah water in her dressing room, invited a rabbi to bless the venue, and donated proceeds from sales of her children's book *The English Roses* to the Kabbalah Centre's Spirituality for Kids Foundation. She has changed her name to Esther and reportedly shelled out \$6 million for a Kabbalah facility in London's West End. She has also spent some \$22 million for a Kabbalah school in New York, which is slated to open next fall.

"We don't answer people's questions, we let people get their own an-

swers," says Yehuda Berg, 32, the scruffy, bespectacled, yarmulke- and jeans-wearing co-director (along with his brother, Michael, 30) of the centers. Their father, Philip Berg—known as the Rav—is the organization's founder and spiritual leader.

"One of the biggest problems in religion is that the rabbi, the minister—whoever it is—keeps the information," Yehuda Berg continues. "You need them so they can give you the answer. Religion wasn't meant to be like that. Religion was meant to be the power for the people."

Kabbalah originated in Spain and France around the 13th century, when a Spanish mystic named Moses de Leon is credited with having written the Zohar (Book of Splendor), the text upon which Kabbalah is based. The book was penned in Aramaic and is, by all accounts, virtually impossible to comprehend.

Traditionally, only Jews were allowed to study Kabbalah, and then only those who were at least 40 years old, male, and well versed in the Talmud. But everyone is welcome at the Kabbalah Centre, young and old, Hispanic and Asian, white and black (about 50 percent of its students are not Jewish).

Nearly 4 million people have walked through various Kabbalah Centre doors since its first course was given in 1969 on the campus of Tel Aviv University. The first U.S. center opened in 1972; there are about 40 branches worldwide, the latest in Warsaw (the largest are in Tel Aviv and Los Angeles, with about 1,000 students each; Manhattan is quickly catching up). About 20,000 people visit the website kabbalah.com each month.

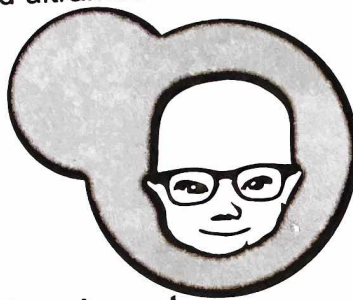
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Ellin from p22

The Jewish community—specifically the Hasidic faction—is less effusive. Itzhak Kadouri, a Sephardic rabbi considered the foremost authority on Kabbalah, has written: "Whomever is supporting Mr. Berg financially or otherwise, is endangering his soul."

Last April, Lawrence Green (not his real name), who lives in the West Village, began attending classes at the center in New York. He bought a red string, which he wore faithfully, and a \$415 Zohar.

"Everything in Kabbalah is about correction. We all need to be corrected," says Green, who is 36 and not Jewish. "The message they give is much like the Bush administration—'If you stick with us, you'll be safe. The world is very scary.'"

He grew more disheartened as the weeks progressed. "I found the classes were kind of mediocre, very pop psychology, New Age-y: 'You're in control of your life, it's your own fault, if you have a cold it means something's wrong spiritually.'"

But his annoyance reached its peak after his teacher pestered him to purchase an entire set of Zohars, and a counselor wouldn't let up.

"I said, 'What are you asking me for?' He said, 'I'm asking you for your money,'" Green recalls. "If you make a huge donation you could get a certain number of Zohars printed up and dedicated to you or a family member or whoever you want." I said, "What about donating to another worthwhile place?" They said, "If you donate to somewhere else it's just perpetuating all the chaos in the

Rav it's life insurance for the next year."

"They're really scary," says Waterman, whose husband remarried a woman he met at the center. "Anything that takes a person to such an extreme is a cult."



W HETHER PHILIP BERG IS TECHNICALLY running a cult is up for debate. According to the Interfaith Coalition of Concern About Cults, a destruc-

tive cult has a "self-appointed messianic leader" who exercises total control over members' lives; who uses "deception and misrepresentation for recruitment, retention, and fundraising"; and who aims to control "individual thought and personal privacy." To qualify, a group must possess all of the above qualities to some degree.

Yehuda Berg was happy to talk about the spiritual aspects of Kabbalah, but he and other officials chose not to respond to questions about allegations against the center.

"Over the years we have received calls from people who felt pressured to contribute money and follow the teachings of Rabbi Berg," says Arnold Markowitz, a clinical social worker and director of the Cult Hotline and Clinic operated by the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services in Manhattan. "Rabbi Berg and his wife can be very assertive about their beliefs. But it's really very hard to say if it's a cult. Different people have different experiences."

Where some say they've found enlightenment, others tell of Kabbalah-inspired divorces and pressure to donate hefty sums of money. An October 2003 article in London's

'The question is, really,
Is the Kabbalah Centre transmitting kabbalistic teachings responsibly?'

world. Volunteering is good but money really makes the difference." Disgusted, Green left the center and hocked his Zohar on eBay for \$350.

Michelle Waterman (not her real name), who lives outside New York City, blames the Kabbalah Centre for the demise of her marriage. In the late 1990s, after receiving a knock on the front door from a Zohar-wielding volunteer, her then husband began taking classes and was soon "entrenched" in it. Although he had never been especially religious, soon he was keeping a Zohar in his car, praying throughout the day and boring friends with talk of Kabbalah.

Once, he brought their grade-school daughter to meet the Rav. "When she came home she said, 'Mommy, you should see his soul,'" Waterman, in her early 40s, recalls. "I asked her what she was talking about. She told me Rabbi Berg had a beautiful soul. It was very eerie. I said to her father, 'Children don't see souls. I don't want her near there again.'"

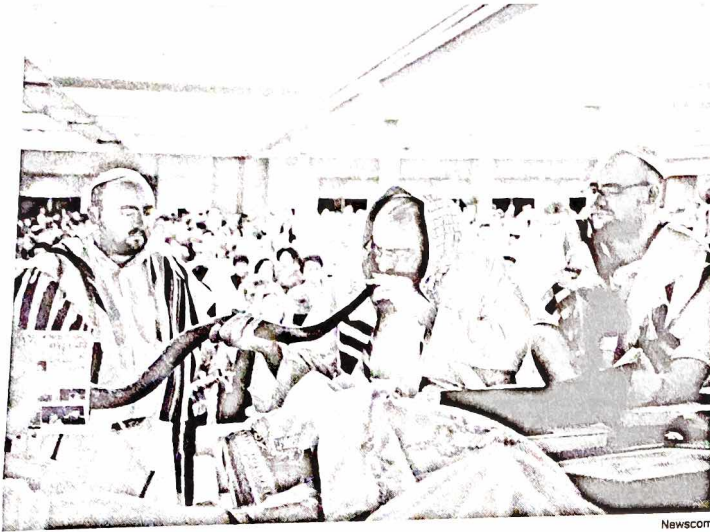
The final straw came when her husband chose to spend Rosh Hashanah with the Rav and not with his own family. "I'd say, I'm going to be with my family on a holiday, and they would say, 'For what? You can celebrate with them any night; there's only a few chances to be with the Rav,'" Ms. Waterman recalls. "When you spend Rosh Hashanah with the

Mail on Sunday quoted Jerry Hall as saying she left the center because she was tired of having to ask friends to donate a tenth of their annual incomes.

"It should be called the Berg family business," says Rick Ross, founder of the Ross Institute of New Jersey, a cult watchdog (rickross.org). "You have Daddy Berg, Mommy Berg, and baby Bergs and their cadre of high-ranking friends. It's a business. Who else but a business would be interested in trademarking the words red string? Or bottling Kabbalah water? Someone gave it to me as a souvenir; it's Canadian spring water."

"Kabbalah is a complex system of thought," sighs Professor Shaul Magid, a former professor of Jewish thought at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan. "The question is, really, is the Kabbalah Centre transmitting kabbalistic teachings responsibly? The fact that they interpret it psychologically is not problematic by definition, but are they transmitting the tradition and then making a distinction between what the text says and their own reading? Or are they unconsciously, or perhaps consciously, transmitting their interpretation as the tradition?"

"I believe they are trying to do the real thing," the professor continues. "The problem is that they are doing it in a way that's easily accessible. Kabbalah is written precisely so there is no easy access. It's encoded in a



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way that people can't access it without prior knowledge. So, perhaps they are teaching Kabbalah in a non-kabbalistic way."

WHILE THE EXPERTS MEASURE their words, the Hasidic community—often branded a cult in its own right—is more forthright, objecting to the center's non-halachic brand of Judaism (*halacha* is Jewish law). They protest Philip Berg's blend of Judaism and mysticism—call it *McSpirituality*—claiming he's bastardizing sacred texts to make a dime.

"Naturally, all of us involved in Kabbalah want the beauty and the richness of a tradition which is integrally part of Judaism and by no means a new movement to reach the public," says Nama Frenkel, owner of Frenkel & Thayer, a Baltimore-based marketer of spiritual and healing books, videos, and tapes, who converted to Judaism in 1973. "But it's a disappointment when someone like Berg does it for self-aggrandizement and wealth, because the people who study with him don't receive the healing and wisdom that others get from other teachers. In all of the 2,000 years since the Temple was destroyed, no one ever got rich teaching Torah. How can Berg be the first one?"

That's a question a lot of people ask. Indeed, Rabbi Berg is a deeply controversial character, considered a guru by some and a charlatan by others.

Born Feivel Gruberger in Brooklyn, Berg initially worked as an insurance salesman. He met the Kabbalist rabbi Yehuda Brandwein on a trip to Israel in 1962, and soon married his niece. They had eight children and stayed together until the early '70s. Then young Feivel shortened his last name to Berg, left his wife and kids in Israel, and married his current wife, Karen, who lectures on subjects like women in Judaism; Kabbalah and parenting; and kabbalistic insights into relationships. Their two sons, Yehuda and Michael, have essentially taken over the enterprise.

Reports about the Rav are conflicting. According to a 1994 article in *Tel Aviv* magazine, Rabbi Berg says he was ordained in the U.S.A. in the early '50s and got an additional ordination in Israel from his former father-in-law. The Los Angeles Task Force on Cults and Missionaries claims he is not affiliated with the 80-year-old Yeshiva Kol Yehuda in Jerusalem, once headed by Berg's ex-father-in-law, the late Rabbi Brandwein, though he claims he is. A question about the Yeshiva went unanswered by the Kabbalah Centre.

Rabbi Philip Berg (center) blowing the shofar

Critics worry that he transforms young naifs who volunteer at the center into Stepford Jews, where they're housed in dorm-like accommodations and do menial labor like scrubbing toilets or schlepping Zohars door-to-door.

They object to his more bizarre tactics, like "shadow reading." Seven years ago Gedalia Kohler joined his wife when she started taking classes at the center in Queens. Kohler, an Orthodox Jew living in Brooklyn, went because "I wanted to see what kind of people were there," he says. "He [Berg] comes out in a white turban and he looks like he's God. Before Rosh Hashanah he puts white sheets in the backyard. When you walk by the moon, it shines on your body and reflects on the sheet. He was able to tell people if they were going to have a good year or bad year based on the reflection off the moon. People are eating this up. It's like watching cartoons."

There are other claims. Don't feel well? Simply meditate on a Hebrew letter. (In his book *The 72 Names of God*, Yehuda Berg promises that by meditating on the appropriate letter, you'll "bring more money into your life, ignite sexual energy and passion, meet your true soul mate and radiate beauty to all who see you.") Should illness befall you, well, you either needed to learn that lesson or you're simply paying a karmic debt.

"I went to one of the free meetings and they said if you do this and this you won't get cancer or sick," recalls Rachel Bernstein, the community education coordinator at the Cult Hotline and Clinic here in New York. "If you go to all the classes and make a donation and you get cancer, that's because when you were scanning the Zohar, you were not truly feeling it in your heart. I thought, 'This is a perfectly well-defended organization. If it doesn't work, it's your fault. You did something wrong.'"

Then there's the matter of scanning, a method of reading the Zohar that does not require actual comprehension of Aramaic or, for that matter, Hebrew. Simply run your finger along the text, like a scanner at a supermarket counter. (Scanning with your eyes is equally acceptable.)

The rabbinical community scoffs at the practice. "In [the Book of] Noah there's something about how the light shows through the window of the ark. The way the Kabbalists

»Ellen p.26

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Ellin from p25

interpret this is that God's light shines through the letters of the Hebrew language," says Rabbi Howard Avrum Addison, author of *The Enneagram and Kabbalah: Reading*



Photograph by George De Sota/Retna

Your Soul. "There is such a concept, but the idea of trying to balk people out of hundreds of dollars at inflated prices and telling them it's okay not to understand, just run your fingers over it? I find it disingenuous."

Right or wrong, rabbis, Orthodox Jews, and former students are all curious about the Kabbalah Centre's financial situation, espe-

forehand, meditate on a particular problem, and zap! you'll feel better—is \$2. "You are not only drinking water, you are also drinking all the prayers and meditations of the center," says Yehuda Berg.

The Kabbalah Centre and its related or-

ganizations are registered as churches with the IRS, so they're not required to file annual financial returns. At the close of 2000, the Kabbalah Centre International Incorporated, headquartered in L.A., showed assets of \$14,581,729, with revenue of \$5,568,964, against a total of \$5,022,315 in expenses and liabilities.

That year, the Los Angeles center took in \$4,135,064, after expenses, with assets approaching \$12 million and liabilities well under a half million.

THE KABBALAH CENTRE LEADERSHIP maintains that its approach is affordable and welcoming.

"We don't charge for membership; I don't know how many synagogues don't charge," says Yehuda Berg. "We don't charge for holiday services. We don't hand out envelopes. . . . Obviously, every place needs money to survive."

To be sure, thousands of people have found a source of comfort at the Kabbalah Centre, a way to connect with or even find Judaism while further exploring their New Age-y sides. Everyone's looking for some kind of relief in this world, and whether it's called energy, power, or light, if it helps, well, who are we to judge?

Some people, like Rubin Margules, an Orthodox Jew and former owner of Brown's resort in Loch Sheldrake, New York, even praise the Kabbalah Centre. In the early '90s, he says, about 500 members spent two Rosh Hashanahs at his resort. "They were highly spiritual; it was admirable," he says. "Sure, it was a little weird that they liked to daven [pray] an extra two hours a day, but they had tremendous *kavov* [dedication]. It was nice."

So what if instead of blowing a ram's horn (shofar) they brought out an entire ram's head on a platter? "They didn't hurt anybody," he says. "To tell you the truth, it's nice to have a Jewish thing out there."

And that, perhaps, is the real message. "We want Kabbalah for the whole world," says Yehuda Berg, his eyes shining. "We are not going to stop until 6 billion people are enlightened."

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imm. 9150 212-398-6611 x

38th St W 4500sf Mini Conc
8 Offices, Conf Rm, Party
pen, CAC, New Windows & E
Hi Ceils (212) 258-2700 B

38 St 4330 West
Fully renov left bldg with call
& lots of windows. Spaces 1
500 to 5 000 sq ft. To view
Michelle 212-489-7198
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39 St West 900SF LOFT SI
Good for Studio or Office
bldg, heat included \$170K
Avail immed. Call 212-594-

54 St & 8 Way Midm - Office sp
Good for Studio or Office
elec & 3 other spaces avl.
Spac Friendly 212-662-31

131st St & 27th Ave
Shiny new fire 2 windows, el
bldg, 1000sf, 1000sf, 1000sf
& up. No Fee. 212-713-1222

BROADWAY/TREBECA
Ordn, move in condition. T1
w/any kitchen. 212-226-8700

B'WAY at BLEE
Units from 500 to 1000sf
Hardwood floors, Good Se
(212) 982-2359 Fram

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