Kabbalah versus Charlatanism of Pseudo-Kabbalists

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Certainly the study of Kabbalah(esoteric literature) is authentic and part of the Torah. We know that the great Rabbis that we all revere—the Ramban, Rav Moshe Cordovero, the Ramchal, the Wilna Gaon, Rav Shneur Zalman (Chabad), the Malbim, Rav Chaim Wolozhin, Rav Yosef Hayyim of Baghdad--and many other luminaries spent many hours in its study and produced brilliant literature. Beyond that, didn't Chazzal (Chagiga 13a) themselves deal with these subjects?

However, in our day and age we are faced with the problem of Pseudo-Kabbalists, people who are really ignorant of the true Kabbalah but nevertheless make it into a profitable business. These imposters are photogenic, very impressive in beard and garb, and make a show of great piety. Many who have some problem or worry and who wish to find an anchor of security, feel relieved to have the blessings of these pseudo-kabbalists; although to achieve that "blessing" we must grant them a sizeable amount of money.

Some of these pseudo-kabbalists deal in giving "Divine" advice. When a prospective bride or groom ask for divination whether the match is "lucky", the imposters check the Gimatria of the names, which of course has no practical bearing on the suitability of the match. (So said the Steipler Rabbi, his words recorded in "Tamim Tiyeh" page 13). Who can count how many unfortunate

people had their wedding hopes dashed due to the false advice given by such kabbalists? Some imposters claim that the cause of marriage unhappiness and bickering is due to some fault in the letters of the Ketuba document. These pseudo-kabbalists are willing to re-write a new Ketuba, of course for a sizeable sum. Others check the Mezuza, and finding some fault in its legality, claim that this was the cause for illness or financial loss. (And of course rewrite a new Mezuza, for a "nice" sum). Those people who took such advice didn't go to doctors, or to financial advisors, since they relied on the occult advice of these imposters.

Others were advised to change their place of domicile, or change their profession, due to some whim or inner hunch of the "Kabbalist". This implicit reliance on "soothsayers" is negated by Sefer Tanya (of Chabad, page 134).

The question which many readers might ask is "why claim that these "Rabbis" are imposters? I answer: For two reasons. First, all of the famous Kabbalists of yore, all the ancients, didn't deal with these "meddlings" aforementioned. Not the Arizal, not the Ba-al ShemTov, nor any great Gadol of note. And of course there is no mention of such matters in the Zohar literature. These shenanigans are innovations of our present century!

Secondly, this is a false understanding just what Kabbalah is about. The great Ramchal teaches in his book (Sha-arei Ramchal, pages 36, 62, 404) that all of the Kabbalah is built on parables and proverbs and if one doesn't know how to unravel the parable, he really knows nothing. This fundamental approach was said too by Rav Moshe Cordovero (in his Shiur Koma, article Mashal), so too by Rabbi Chayim Volozhin (Nefesh ha-Chayim, part three chapter seven) and others. The pseudo-kabbalists mumble words of the externals, the words of Zohar and Arizal like a fetish, without understanding the inner import. How do we know this? It is because they display publicly their knowledge, they flaunt their "connections" with the occult world. And the Wilna Gaon writes (at the beginning of his commentary to Sifra Di-tzniuta) that Proverbs (11, 2) writes "Et Znu-im , Chochma" those who are modest and don't reveal their expertise, they are those who attain Chochma. As written in Chagiga 13a "Dvash ve Chalav Tachat Leshoneich" wisdom which is sweeter than honey mixed with milk, keep under your tongue! See also the Gaon's teaching on Mishlei 12 verse 28, the real Tzaddikim conceal their inner knowledge. See too the words of Maharal, Avot beginning of chapter six, Ve-he-vai Tzanua (page 285).

In the recent period, several of these fakers have been caught doing sinful sexual actions with female applicants. This causes great Chillul Hashem. The mis-step

was already foreseen by the great Rav Nachman of Breslav, who says (Chayei MoHaran 526) that the word "Kabbalah" is the numerical equivalent of "No-eif" (137). Certainly he doesn't intend to say that ALL kabbalists will fall under that category. He only says that those who are not fitting will "slip". This I found in the Zohar (book three, page 123a) that those faulty people unworthy of learning Kabbalah, will be misled by snakes and scorpions, which is a figure of speech for the evil inclination.

Who is fitting to undertake the real study of Kabbalah? Rabbi Chaim Vital, the major student of the Arizal, notifies us (on page 23 of his Introduction to the Etz Chayim) of twenty four conditions. To be sexually pure of sin. To beware of conceit. To be chary of idle chatter. Never to get angry. To love all Jews (in other words not to have a riff with anyone). To have proper intention for all of the 100 benedictions uttered each day, etc., and many other conditions which are very difficult for most people to practice properly. So how can we give the mantle of Kabbalistic authority to just anybody who has impressive dress or mode of speech?

The problem is that some of these imposters sometimes seem to have clairvoyant abilities. Some of them are good at telepathy, or at foreseeing future events, or even for grasping private personal details of the person asking for their blessing. Isn't that a sign of Kedusha? Not So! Researchers at Duke University are presently studying the matter of para-psychological abilities. There are people who are born with that knack, without being holy at all. The Rambam in his Introduction to Perush HaMishna, admits that some people have wonderful ability (despite the fact that they sometimes err). However, it is no sign at all of holiness or of connection with the Almighty. To the contrary, this prowess is a Nissayon (spiritual test) to the person born with that ability, that by misusing his talents he will have control over other people's minds, get their money and dedication, and even establish a cult.

A century ago, the giant ship called "Titanic" hit an iceberg and sank with over 1,500 voyagers. The tragedy was foreseen by Morgan Robertson and depicted in his book "Futility" four years before the tragedy! So too the terrible assassination of John Kennedy was foreseen several years in advance by Jean Dixon. She depicted the month, the place of ambush, the physical description of the murderer. It was uncanny.

Knowing in advance, or knowing secret and personal details of our lives, is no sign of sanctity nor of connection with the Almighty.

We must be wary of these people. Kabbalah, the true Kabbalah, is something else entirely. It is to understand the inner meaning of the Mitzvot, it is to fathom greater understanding of Holy Scripture. It is to understand Aggadot Chazzal (So says the Wilna Gaon, writing on Mishlei 24 verse 30. And so too says the Sefer Tanya of Lubavitch , page 137). It is to get the real appreciation of Ahavat Hashem ve-yir-ato.

Kabbalah is not be a hatchet to be used for bettering our temporal situations (Kardom lachpor bah - Avot, chapter four). And people relying on the "advice" of these charlatans may bring upon themselves considerable physical, spiritual, emotional and financial sufferings.