



## **Kabbalah: A Love Story**

*Lawrence Kushner*

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*Sometime, somewhere, someone is searching for answers . . .*

*. . . in a thirteenth-century castle*

*. . . on a train to a concentration camp*

*. . . in a New York city apartment*

Hidden within the binding of an ancient text that has been passed down through the ages lies the answer to one of the heart's eternal questions. When the text falls into the hands of Rabbi Kalman Stern, he has no idea that his lonely life of intellectual pursuits is about to change once he opens the book. Soon afterward, he meets astronomer Isabel Benveniste, a woman of science who stirs his soul as no woman has for many years. But Kalman has much to learn before he can unlock his heart and let true love into his life. The key lies in the mysterious document he finds inside the Zohar, the master text of the Kabbalah.

## Kabbalah: A Love Story Details

Date : Published October 10th 2006 by Morgan Road Books (first published 2006)

ISBN : 9780767924122

Author : Lawrence Kushner

Format : Hardcover 208 pages

Genre : Fiction, Literature, Jewish, Religion, Judaism, Occult, Mysticism, Romance, Love Story

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## BlackOxford says

### Signs of the Times

This charming little book is the perfect sequel (or antidote) to anything involving modern physics, especially Quantum Gravity and String Theory. It's also not a bad companion to calm the spirit after much post-modernist fiction.

Kabbalah is attractive because it is neither rationalist nor dogmatic, yet it respects both thought and faith. It neither preaches nor proves; it simply invites consideration. Kabbalah does not provide truth; it hints at reality. What better way to present Kabbalah therefore than as a love story between a rabbi and a cosmologist?

There is a perennial controversy about the date and authorship of the central text of Kabbalah, The Zohar. Attributed to both the 13th century Moses de Leon and to the 2nd century sage Simeon bar Yochai, The Zohar is without doubt a sign of its times when it reached its 13th century form. Mysticism had been on the rise for two centuries in the dominant Christian society. Gregory the Great, John Scotus Eriugena, Bernard of Clairvaux, Raymond Lulle, William of St. Thierry, and Hugh of St. Victor were Christian voices reacting to a growing rationalism and dogmatism that were affecting the lives of medieval Jews as well as Christians.

The principle technique of Kabbalah is the exposure of language. It is intentionally obscure, vague, ambiguous in order to redirect thought and to require the questioning of vocabulary and logical categories. Kushner interprets this explicitly as a literary device:

"Judaism is a religion of books. The entire tradition is initiated by a novel...the Five Books of Moses...This is what distinguishes Jewish fundamentalism...each word issuing from the Source of Meaning must obviously contain an infinity of meanings.... The Zohar, itself masquerading as a commentary on God's novel, becomes inexhaustible."

This is Kabbalistic Semiology: the world conceived as a sign, that is, a story. This applies to the world in general but also especially to sacred texts. According to The Zohar, the stories of God and the Israelites in the Torah cannot be what they superficially appear to be because God would have written more interesting stories. The task of Kabbalah therefore is to uncover the hidden stories of the Torah, the meanings placed there by God within, or really beyond, the language.

Interestingly, this idea of the theology of the sign, of language, was also a principle concern of the 'Seraphic Doctor' of the Catholic Church, St. Bonaventure. Born a generation before Moses de Leon but very possibly known by him, Bonaventure also considered the world and its components as signs to be interpreted not taken at face value. Bonaventure was subsequently overshadowed by his contemporary Thomas Aquinas and Thomas's very Aristotelian rationalism.

Not until the 20th century, in the 'dialectical theology' of the Swiss Karl Barth did the insights of both Bonaventure and de Leon return to mainstream theology. Barth plays continuously, for example, with the simultaneous process of hiding and revealing that occurs in all language about God. This dialectic is the central theme of Kabbalah.

Kushner's weaving together of a simple love story with what might be called the universal love story of the cosmos with itself is totally apt. According to Kabbalah, both Creation and the Creator learn together what it means to love through their experience with each other. The relationship between Creature and Creator is necessarily tenuous, each making exploratory advances and unexplained retreats. There is progress and there is alienation; affection and disgust; communication and misunderstanding.

Ultimately it is the mutual commitment to find the meaning of love that continuously re-creates the world. Neither Creature nor Creator knows the final result, but simply trusts in the other. This is not a means to some other end - heaven, salvation, etc. - it is purpose pure and simple. Nothing else matters.

Philosophers like Daniel Dennett and scientists like Carlo Rovelli make the case that our intuitions of human purpose and intention and consciousness are illusory. While admitting they cannot demonstrate this contention empirically, they insist on its superiority. In other words, they have made a pre-rational, an aesthetic, choice about how to view the world. Having made that choice, the world appears to conform. This is the power of aesthetics: to create the world around us. The real illusion is that we claim this power as illusory while we exercise it. Kabbalah is a mode of grappling with this illusion.

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### **Ken says**

I didn't get into it right away, because I thought the author was pretending to have a story while teaching kabbalah. But then I saw how the flowering story was interwoven with those principles, and I found myself thoroughly enjoying a warm-hearted tale very reminiscent of *When Harry Met Sally*.

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### **Pinar says**

So far: wonderful. (Rabbi) Lawrence Kushner is an adjunct professor at the Hebrew Union College in NYC and has taught on Jewish spirituality and mysticism for years. The novel is full of quotes from the Zohar with an interesting and mysterious plot alternating between the 13-14th century Europe and modern-day New York. Those who are interested in the Kabbalah (\*not\* the Madonna version) and Jung's synchronicity theories would enjoy this immensely. Haven't finished it yet so I hope the ending won't be a disappointment.

note: after finishing the book, I must say that it lived up to my expectations. There are also some wonderful quotes (mostly from primary sources ie. Kabbalistic writings, the Bible, etc.)

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### **Michael Johnston says**

It's a novel, a quirky love story in fact, that jumps back and forth between the present, the near past and the long ago past. It's also a book about Kabbalah - mystical Judaism. Kushner is a man who does not believe in coincidences, a man that sees traces of "the ineffable" in every interaction of human beings and every moment of life. The mysteries of life are hidden, he says, but everything happens for a reason and part of the joy is searching for why and what it means. In fact, the main character in the story finds his ability to love (and in turn his own path in life) in the magical words of an ancient book and the mystical secrets that are hidden (literally) within its covers.

What I enjoy most about Kushner's writing is his combination of concise, fluid prose and his remarkably beautiful and hopeful view of life. He is a man of hope, a teacher and a lover of books and the words they contain. Yes, it's a love story, but not just the discovered love between a man and a woman. It's also a love story about this remarkable world that we have been gifted in all of its beauty and with all of its failings.

As a novel it's not bad. As a tale of hope and optimism for the human race, a teacher's lesson plan on how to live life, it is better.

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### **Peter says**

I have read about Kabbalah in nonfiction texts and have struggled to understand, but this novel opened a door for me to understand, at least a little bit, this Jewish mystical tradition and perspective. It is creatively plotted out, as any number of stories unfold and become one story.

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### **Katherine says**

I loved this book. It's dense and incomprehensible and no, I don't know how to describe it. But reading it is a lot like getting glimpses of the sky between beautiful, dramatic storm clouds.

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### **Storyteller\_re says**

Absolutely amazing! This book transcends space|time and integrates the mystical essence of kabbalah with the subtle complexity of love. I absolutely adore the richness and life in these pages. One of my favorites, I continually reread...it had me from the first glance of its page!

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### **PJ Swanwick says**

#### **Romancing the Kabbalah**

Rabbi Harold Kushner's 2007 mystical novel is more than a spiritual romance (although it reads quite well as one); it is a celebration of Jewish mysticism and spiritual insight that uses rich metaphor and prose to immerse the reader in an experience rather than just tell a story. Interwoven plots, historical revelations, and profound insight make "Kabbalah, A Love Story" an entertaining introduction to Jewish mysticism. The most profound insight is also one of the simplest- "People become mystics ... for one of three reasons: because they've had a mystical experience, because they want one, or because they're in love."

Although the book offers only a brief introduction to a very complex subject, Kushner's spiritual novel can help a reader new to Jewish traditions understand the power and allure of the Kabbalah. In the end, Kalman discovers that "knowing ultimate truth and giving yourself to your lover are effectively identical. You move from this World of Separation to the World of Unity by giving yourself away, and once you can do that, new life is the reward."

**My take:** Kushner's first novel operates on many levels at once, and all deal with love. The late-blossoming romance between Kalman and Isabel parallels another love story in 13th-century Spain that suggests how the Zohar came to be written. However, the greatest love story to me is Kalman's (and Kushner's) love for the Zohar itself. To read "Kabbalah, A Love Story" is to immerse one's self in the magic of Jewish mysticism, where we discover our true nature only by opening ourselves to love.

The story feels like magical realism in spiritual expression, rich with metaphors that help expose essential truths- "That's the way it is with a good book: Just when you think you've read all its words, the damn thing falls apart in your hands and you have to start all over again." The novel suffers from a predictable plot and stiff characters, but the beauty of the message, the pull of those multi-layered love stories, and the powerful questions Kushner poses both engaged and challenged me to the last page.

For more reviews of spiritual/metaphysical novels, see [Fiction For A New Age](#).

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### **Peachesxyz says**

beautiful and light the book unites the spiritual, the carnal and the neurotic in a story of love

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### **Betsy says**

A mystical love story that weaves in people from different times and places and spiritual Kabbalistic teachings. A delightful read. Also special because I know the author.

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### **David says**

This short novel is about Rabbi Kalman Stern, a middle-aged man who fears that he is a failure. He does not have a permanent job at a congregation, cannot finish a doctoral dissertation, and lost his first wife in a divorce. Worst of all, he fears that he has lost his ability to love someone.

Kalman meets a kindred spirit, a woman astronomer who wonders about the universe. They are mutually attracted, but he cannot bring himself to fully give himself to love. Kalman is an expert on the Kabbalah, the collection of Jewish mysticism. He had a mystical experience when visiting Safed, in Israel, when he was given an old book from the Kabbalah. The book, literally, had his name on the title page. The binding starts to come apart, and Kalman finds an ancient love letter that had been part of the cover, and has become separated.

The story alternates between the present time, the recent past, and the ancient past. The novel manages to expertly interweave a modern love story with an ancient love story, and thread the ideas of the Kabbalah throughout. It is interesting how the story of Kalman's visit to Safed is repeated again and again, and each time it is mystical, but different. The entire book is profound, beautifully written, and quite engaging.

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## **Jessica says**

Trust your ability to absorb what's important. Remember, all the good stuff is already recorded in sacred text anyway.

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## **Jessica says**

I really enjoyed this book. Interesting history scattered through the book. Also I enjoyed the idea of Jewish mystic meets astronomical scientist.

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## **Norma says**

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner's, *Kabbalah A Love Story* is one of those novels that we all hope for every time we pick up a new book. We hope the story line is satisfying and whole. But we also want our characters to be "likable" and perhaps maybe even moves us. This book delivers in all areas and does not fall short.

Having much respect for other religions, I certainly do not feel qualified to discuss ninety-nine percent of the book's content, as I'm keenly aware of my intellectual deficiencies in Judaism and mysticism.

However, as a Roman Catholic woman who constantly questions her existence but has never as much as looked outside Christianity for a different perspective, much less for answers, I can attest to having "experienced" Kushner's novel rather than simply comprehending (or claiming to comprehend) written text.

Rabbi Kushner masterfully created his novel by weaving a couple's romantic courtship with history, Judaism and mysticism into one love story. The result was much more than the love between a man and a woman; but also about man's love for spirituality and enlightenment.

The author inspires the reader to expand the mind and experience the story of love as part of a greater being. He encourages the reader to explore God and Creation in everyday life while maintaining balance with faith and tradition. The author's vignettes of parallel centuries (Contemporary NY, Israel and 13 Century Spain) made for a very interesting reading.

It took me longer to read this particular book than perhaps other readers however, I had a handicap which I had to overcome. I purchased additional books (Zohar, Torah) conducted online research in effort to fully understand the author. However, the more I read the more questions I had so, I read more resulting in yet even more questions. Until I finally realized Rabbi Kushner's message hence, I "experienced" his novel.

*Kabbalah A Love Story*, like all good books, conceals more than it reveals.

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## **Kerry Pickens says**

I read this book while sick with the flu, so there is nothing mixing Jewish mysticism and fever dreams. This short book combines the tale of a 14th century manuscript's effect on its new owner, and an explanation of kabbalah (pronounced ka-ba-lah). This Jewish studies is based on the concept that there are different levels of reality, and man's goal to reach a higher level. Kabbalah is usually the domain of the Hassidim, but aspects of it included the Kabbalah Shabbat service in Reform and Conservative Judaism. It seems esoteric until you have experienced a traumatic event which changes your doors of perception, like Alice in Wonderland.

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