**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Halakha and Jewish History**

**Rav Aviad Tabory**

**Shiur #20:
1756**

**Jacob Frank, “another” failed Mashiach -**

**The learning of Kabbala nowadays**

In past *shiurim*, we discussed the dramatic story of Shabbetai Tzvi, a disturbed and charismatic figure as well as a kabbalist, who succeeded in convincing many Jewish communities around the world that he was the Mashiach.

Following Shabbetai Tzvi’s conversion to Islam, most of his followers ceased to believe in him. This failed attempt led to great disappointment and despair.

Years later, Jacob Frank, a Jew from Podolia, Poland, declared himself a savior of the Jewish people. Frank was born in 1726, just a few years after the attempted *cherem* (ban) on the Sabbatean movement in the city of Lvov in 1722.

Frank was influenced by the teachings of Shabbetai Tzvi; however, he never achieved the same legitimacy in the eyes of the Jewish community.

Frank gathered followers who believed in a mixture of religious beliefs, including theological doctrines taken from Christianity.[[1]](#footnote-1) This religious group was also involved in immoral behavior, such as sexual misconduct. A *beit din* in the town of Satanow (in Ukraine of today) opened an inquiry into the beliefs and practices of the sect. In 1756 the findings were presented before a rabbinical assembly in the city of Brody, which led to a *cherem* against the movement.

The *cherem* of Brody included a ban against mingling with or marrying members of the sect, as well as learning books of Sabbatean philosophy.[[2]](#footnote-2)

However, the original ban included a limitation on the age for learning Kabbala as well:

We deem it necessary to place restrictions and create order with regard to those who… cast off the study of the Talmud and the codifiers and attempt to penetrate the deepest secrets of the Torah without learning first how to read its plain meaning and attaining the understanding of Gemara… and so we pronounce the ruling that we prohibit anyone to study these writings, even the writings that are certainly of the ARI’s authorship. It is strictly forbidden to study them until one has reached the age of forty. Only the Zohar, *Shomer Emunim* and *Pardes Rimonim* of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, may be studied by one who has attained the age of thirty, provided they are in printed form and not in manuscript.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Following religious debates organized by the Church in the cities of Lvov and Kamenetz, and influenced by Frank’s cult (who spread rumors about anti-Christian ideas mentioned in the Talmud), a decree was made to burn Jewish books.[[4]](#footnote-4) After the Talmud was burned publicly in Kamenetz, the Jewish community feared that this decree would spread to other areas. However, the Bishop who organized the burnings, Nicholas Dombovsky, died suddenly just a short time afterwards. His death was seen by the Jewish community as a direct divine intervention.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Under pressure from the Church and with the encouragement of their leader, the Frankists converted to Christianity. On September 17, 1759, Frank himself was baptized in the city of Lvov. However, the Church suspected that the sect was not following the “usual” Christian beliefs, and Frank was imprisoned in the monastery of [Częstochowa](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Cz%C4%99stochowa) (Poland). After 13 years in prison, Frank was released. He travelled around Europe until his death in 1791 in [Offenbach](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Offenbach%2C_Hesse), Germany.

In the background of both messianic movements (Shabbetai Tzvi and Frank) lie the mystical and kabbalistic teachings which empowered these cults with messianic energy. As mentioned, the *cherem* of Brody included both a ban against socializing with the Frankists and a ban against learning books of Kabbala. Thus, the Rabbis understood that there was a connection between the movement and the books. They obviously were concerned that exposure to mystical writings without the proper and correct context had potential to distort the beliefs of Judaism.

**Limitations on the learning of Kabbala[[6]](#footnote-6)**

The idea of limiting teaching and learning of mystical texts appears already in the Talmud. These limitations apply to both the age[[7]](#footnote-7) and the characteristics of those interested in pursuing knowledge of the Torah’s secrets.

Referring to passages of Tanach which Chazal deemed to be of mystical character, the Mishna claims:

[One] may [not] expound on *Ma’aseh Bereishit* (description of Creation) and the secrets of the beginning of the world before two or more individuals; nor may one expound by oneself the design of the *Ma’aseh Merkava* (Yechezkel’s reference to the Divine Chariot), unless he is wise and understands matters on his own.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The Gemara expands on the Mishna and rules that the secrets of Torah may not be passed to “just anyone.” It lists five attributes required for students to be considered worthy.[[9]](#footnote-9) Among various interpretations of these requirements, the Gemara mentions the age of 50.

Referencing the Gemara’s account of the Rabbis who entered *Pardes* (an acronym referring to the different disciplines of the Torah, including the mystical one), the Rambam rules:

I maintain that it is not proper for a person to stroll in the *Pardes* unless he has filled his belly with bread and meat. "Bread and meat" refer to the knowledge of what is permitted and what is forbidden, and similar matters concerning other *mitzvot*.[[10]](#footnote-10)

One of the most prominent *poskim* of the 17th century, Rav Shabbetai Kohen (Shach, 1621–1662), quotes an opinion that the study of Kabbala should be limited to those aged forty and above. The age of forty, he explains, is mentioned in the Mishna in *Avot* ([5:21](https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.5.21?lang=he-en&utm_source=jewishaction.com&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)). The Mishna there lists the ideal age for the study of each section of the Torah and goes on to claim that only at the age of forty does one acquire the level of *bina* (deep understanding).[[11]](#footnote-11)

Rav Chaim Vital (1542, – 1620) was a rabbi in Tzfat and the foremost disciple of the ARI (Rav Yitzchak Luria). His book *Eitz Chaim* is one of the more important books of Kabbala. In his introduction, he lists religious customs and restrictions that must accompany those interested in learning the mystics of the Torah. Among them, he mentions:

1. Refraining from eating meat and wine during the week (except Shabbat)
2. Immersion in *mikveh*
3. Refraining from anger and arrogance
4. Reciting *Tikkun Chatzot* at midnight and arriving to the *beit knesset* at dawn.

These instructions clearly indicate that the world of mysticism is not opened before all people.

**Concerns with the study of Kabbala**

Other arguments against teaching and learning Kabbala have been raised over the centuries. Tensions between normative halakhic traditions and customs that appeared in the Kabbala led to many deliberations and responsa literature on these matters.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Some were concerned with the way God was perceived in the kabbalistic writings. Mystical sources seem to strengthen the belief in an anthropomorphic God.

*Otzar Yisrael*, a Jewish encyclopedia in Hebrew edited by Yehuda David Eisenstein (1854 – 1956), contained an entry on *Adam Kadmon* (Primordial Man – a kabbalistic term describing the first spiritual [world](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Worlds) that came into being after the [contraction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tzimtzum) of [God's infinite light](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ein_Sof)) that included an image of a man with the ten *sefirot*.

Chief Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook wrote a letter to the editor conveying his surprise at the image in the book. He explained that although some kabbalists drew lines, circles, and even eyes, drawing an image of a human being is improper and may lead to “great damage” to the believers of Judaism.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Rav Yitzchak ben Sheshet Perfet (1326–1408, Rivash) mentions in one of his responsa that he was puzzled by the customs of prayer practiced by the kabbalists. He was referring to the manner of *kavana* (intentions) which followed the prayer as well as the place of the *sefirot* in their prayer. The custom involved having in mind different *sefirot* for each and every *berakha* during the prayers.

He even recalls a conversation with a friend of his, a kabbalist whom he describes as a pious man. Rivash asked him how this manner of prayer, seemingly directed at some alternative powers rather than at God Himself, could be permitted. Rivash himself explains that he believes prayer should have more of a simple manner to it.[[14]](#footnote-14)

When a person is required to make a vow, he must grasp a vessel of mitzva (*nekitat chafetz*). The custom is to hold a Torah scroll. Rav Elazar Fleckeles (1754-1826, Prague), a student of the *Noda Be-Yehuda*, was asked whether the Zohar could be used instead.

In his response, Rav Fleckeles questions the religious authority of the Zohar as well as its author. If indeed this book was composed by the *Tana* Rav Shimon bar Yochai, he asks, why do later sources appear in the book? How is it that the great *Rishonim*, who quote many *tanaitic* sources, do not quote this book? He also raises the following argument:

Since the appearance of the Zohar, many have been misled by its difficult passages …look how many, like Shabbetai Tzvi and Jacob Frank, who have destroyed (our faith), have “used” the Zohar for their ideas. Such a mistake could not possibly have occurred to a great *tzaddik* like Rav Shimon Bar Yochai![[15]](#footnote-15)

Rav Ovadya Yosef was asked his opinion about the new centers of Kabbala that teach mystical meanings of Judaism to the public.

After quoting many sources supporting the belief that these teachings must remain in the private domain, he rules against this new custom and limits such classes to the righteous and pious who are well read in the “Torah classics” (*Shas u’poskim*). He also mentions that these ideas must only be taught by the righteous and pious. This requirement is very difficult to keep, if not impossible, if the teachings are delivered to the masses.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**Those in favor**

However, many rule otherwise. According to them, the special times in which we are living demand that the mystical secrets of the Torah be revealed and accessible to the public. These opinions emphasize that at a time of messianic redemption, the need to explore these secrets is greater.

Rav Yeshayahu ben Avraham Horowitz (c. 1555 –1630), also known as the *Shelah Ha-Kaddosh* after the name of his mystical book *Shenei Luchot HaBerit*, quotes rabbinic responses to the Talmudic sources mentioned above, that seem to disapprove of learning the secrets of the Torah. He mentions the belief that the coming redemption is connected to the revelation of the Zohar. In a footnote explaining why in the past this discipline was limited to the few, he agrees that many have been led astray by the secrets of Torah. However, in this generation (17th century), he claims that we are closer than ever to the redemption, and during this period the secrets of the Torah should be exposed to the public.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Rav Chaim Elazar Spira (1868 – 1937), known as the Rebbe of the Hungarian Chasidut sect of Munkatch, quotes opinions that because his generation is living in *Ikvata De-Meshicha* (era of the coming of the Mashiach), Kabbala should be learned, especially by those who seek it.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook was a big advocate for the study of Kabbala. He himself was well versed in the Zohar and other mystical writings. In several places, he encourages the study of mysticism in our generation. His positive view of learning Zohar in our days is part of a larger theological position of his, regarding learning other Torah subjects. According to Rav Kook, one of the reasons for the crisis of faith in the 20th century is that study of the aggadic and philosophical side of the Torah has been abandoned. Rav Kook urged Torah scholars to learn *machshava* (Jewish philosophy). He also argues that the original restrictions on learning Kabbala, mentioned above, should be lessened.[[19]](#footnote-19)

1. Regarding the development of this sect’s theological doctrine, see Doktór, Jan, “Jakub Frank, a Jewish Heresiarch and His Messianic Doctrine,” *Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences*, Volume 76, pp. 53-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Yisrael [Halperin](https://www.abebooks.com/servlet/SearchResults?an=halperin%20israel&cm_sp=det-_-bdp-_-author), *Pinkas Va'ad Arba Aratsot: likute takanot, ketavim u-reshumot*, Mosad Bialik, Jerusalem, 1945 p.416. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The ban appears in Hebrew in *Pinkas Va'ad Arba Aratsot* p. 418. I have taken the English translation from Pawel Maciejko, *The Mixed Multitude: Jacob Frank and the Frankist Movement, 1755-1816* (Jewish Culture and Contexts) (Philadelphia, 2015): pp. 78-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Doktór argues that the anti-Talmud attitude was a response of the sect to the *cherem*. See the article above. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Avraham Ya’ari, *Seraifat HaTalmud b’Kamenetz Podolsk*, Sinai 44 (1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Rav Tal Chaimovitz’s lengthy article, which quotes many opinions on this matter. His article can be found online at http://asif.co.il/download/kitvey-et/amat-v-1/amt%20amon/1%20(4).pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Moshe Idel, “*L’toldot ha’issur lilmod kabbalah lifnei gil arbaim*,”*AJS Review* 5 (1980): 1-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. BT [*Chagiga*11b](https://www.sefaria.org/Chagigah.11b?lang=he-en&utm_source=jewishaction.com&utm_medium=sefaria_linker). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. BT *Chagiga* 13a. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Hilkhot Yesodei* *Ha-Torah* 4:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Shulchan Arukh* YD 246:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See for example Jacob Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah: Studies in the History of Jewish Religion, its Various Faces and Social Relevance*, Magnes Press 1984 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Iggrot Ha-Riaya*, Mosad Ha-Rav Kook,1:136. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Rivash 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Teshuva Me-Ahava* 1:26. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. His opinion can be found in two separate *teshuvot*: *Yechave Daat* 4:47 and *Yabia Omer* 10 YD:23. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Shenei Luchot HaBerit,* *Asara Ma’amarot*:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Minchat Elazar* 1:50. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See for example *Iggrot Ha-Riaya* 2:602. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)