

Ecstatic Kabbalah

Lesson Aleph

I'm going to kick this course off with a somewhat controversial claim: **In modern occult parlance, the best translation of the word "kabbalah" is "unverified personal gnosis"**. This might seem odd, since, as it's usually used by occultists, the kabbalah is mostly understood as a rather rigidly intellectual system of fixed correspondences. However, the word "kabbalah" (קבלה) itself means "something received" which we understand to mean "received wisdom" or **gnosis**. As **Clifford Hartleigh Low** rightly points out, "kabbalah" can also mean apprenticeship: *"The implication is that it's taught from father to son, reaching back to the knowledge of Adam after the expulsion from Eden. It is the literal translation of "apprenticeship", so that one can receive the kabbalah of dying wool from one's dad."*

This is knowledge we gain **only** by direct experience of it; neither faith nor reason is sufficient (although both are required). In most cases, the word "kabbalah" is contrasted with "torah" (תורה) which means "something taught". In its earliest usage, the word "kabbalah" refers more or less to the entire body of what we would now call "oral torah", all of the teachings of Judaism apart from the "books of Moses"). However, in modern parlance, kabbalah can refer to the entirety of Jewish esoteric tradition, and more specifically to three related strains of esoteric teachings: **contemplative, practical, and ecstatic**.

The Hermetic kabbalah you're likely familiar with derives entirely from the contemplative (also sometimes called "speculative" or "philosophical") kabbalah. Personally, I think the best name for it is the "theoretical" kabbalah. **Theoretical kabbalah is the domain of the scholar**; it's primary purpose is to lay out a consistent ontology to use in understanding and interpreting Jewish Holy Law and to draw one closer to the Divine. Outside of this context, it's just not, in my opinion, especially useful. Now, don't get me wrong; I'm all for drawing close to the Holy ONE. Further, theoretical kabbalah teaches many beautiful truths about the nature of the humanity, the Divine, the universe, and the complicated relationship between them. All that being said, I'd be hard pressed to say (and I suspect you might be too) just what theoretical kabbalah is *FOR*¹ outside of a religious context.

I like to think of the theoretical kabbalah as (metaphorically) like a dream interpretation dictionary. A dream dictionary is useful **ONLY** in the hands of someone with (1) a reason to care about messages from the dream world, (2) the skill to induce visionary dreams, and (3) a solid understanding of when to throw out the dictionary. Similarly, **theoretical kabbalah provides a**

¹ A rabbi/colleague/fellow kabbalist took pains to point out to me that drawing closer to the Divine IS what it's FOR.

dictionary to help understand, talk about, and contextualize the experiences provoked by practical and ecstatic kabbalah. I'll be teaching a bit of theoretical kabbalah, but it's not my focus. There are plenty of books on the market that will provide you with all the theoretical kabbalah you could possibly want. However, I will take an occasional detour to UNteach some misguided notions too many people have picked up from theoretical kabbalah, and teach some fundamental concepts and context we'll need to make our way.

The **practical kabbalah**, on the other hand, is a system of Jewish magic. The practical kabbalah predates the theoretical by many centuries; it is primarily a flavor of spirit sorcery very similar to that found in the [PGM](#) or other Mediterranean systems of similar age. The best English source on Jewish magic is, without doubt, [Gideon Bohak's Ancient Jewish Magic: A History](#), which I highly recommend. However, Dr. Bohak's work is academic in nature, and requires a solid grasp on the socio-religious climate of the Near East in the Iron Age.

Orthodox sources sometimes go so far as to deny the very existence of modern practical kabbalah. *"With regards to the [practical kabbalah], the vast majority of the more important texts of magical Kabbalah have never been published, and perhaps for good reason...the magical elements of Kabbalah have, for all intents and purposes, become extinct, and its knowledge has been completely forgotten²."* This is utter poppycock. In the words of the esteemed [Mr. Norell](#), "[I, myself, am a quite tolerable practical magician.](#)"

The ecstatic kabbalah, the sort of kabbalah I primarily practice, is often called **Ma'aseh Merkava**, or the **Work of the Chariot**³. It is named after [Ezekiel's vision of the chariot](#). Another name for the practice is "hekhalot"⁴, which means "palaces", a reference to the places one travels in the chariot. This is perhaps the oldest form of kabbalah; the techniques of kabbalistic ascent are well documented in Talmud, the Dead Sea scrolls, and much of the Apocrypha. At its root, this is the shamanic journey that forms the basis of almost all mystic work, in any culture. That being said, merkaba kabbalah gives us a unique perspective on the matter; there are a limited number of literate cultures with a thriving unbroken tradition of visionary trance work; Merkava provides a unique opportunity to engage with a well-documented, living shamanic tradition that arises out of a culture very similar to urban, middle-class, American existence. I think you'd be hard-pressed to name another tradition of trance-magic with a well-documented, unbroken history of practice stretching from the Iron Age to the present day, including a [Brooklyn-based outreach movement](#).

At its most basic, merkaba is a system for inducing, understanding, and using visionary trance. This is used both as a system of divinatory communication with Spirit and also as a sort of

² http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/170308/jewish/What-is-Kabbalah.htm

³ There is also a specific text by this name, which I'll discuss in detail in a later lesson.

⁴ Technically, this more usually refers to the body of knowledge and texts which teach the practice, rather than the practice itself.

shamanic healing practice (for individuals, communities, and "situations"). There is not much available in English on merkaba kabbalah aimed at "outsiders". The best resource I have found is Jonathan Garb's [Shamanic Trance and Modern Kabbalah](#), but it is aimed primarily at scholars of religion with a solid grounding in Jewish theology and history. Aryeh Kaplan's [Kabbalah and Meditation](#)⁵ is also good; Rabbi Kaplan was an excellent mystic, but his scholarship leaves something to be desired. However, [Chabad](#) and other Jewish organizations have VAST quantities of high-quality free materials just waiting for you to read them. Now, while those materials require very little background, they do require you to read with your skeptic's mind engaged. You mustn't forget, for even a moment, that those materials are written and translated by religious fundamentalists for the express purpose of promulgating their own, very narrow view of Judaism. Ultra-orthodox Judaism, like all exoteric orthodoxy, can sometimes be host to misogyny, racism, and demagoguery. Please remember that's not Judaism! It's just an unavoidable side-effect of isolating a community; it breeds corruption and narrow-mindedness. Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

On the other side of the issue, problems also arise when you try to remove kabbalah entirely from its Jewish context. At that point, you're no longer doing kabbalah, and you'll get no benefit from it you can't get from something like [Core Shamanism](#)⁶. Now, I LOVE modern syncretic practices, but there is benefit from going deep, as well as going wide. I think that kabbalah is among the best ways for modern westerners, particularly Jews, Unitarians, and secular folks, to establish, develop, and deepen communication with both the Higher Self and the Divine, and to acquire the wisdom, understanding, and knowledge from which arise the ability to act in the world with power and compassion.

All of this is why I like to think of what we're doing here as [Traif](#) Kabbalah. It's not kosher kabbalah, but it's still enmeshed enough in Jewish culture and context to know what "kosher" means, why it's important, and to make conscious, informed decisions about when to hew to tradition, when to run alongside it, and when to ignore tradition and do what's right. Merkava, with its emphasis on intimate, immediate, personal communion with the Divine, is ideally suited to cutting out the middleman.

At this point, a word of caution is called for. Just like the theoretical kabbalah's map isn't very useful if you're not going anywhere, traveling without a reliable map can be, at best, unwise and unproductive, and, at worst, psychologically/spiritually dangerous. This danger is conveyed in a classic Jewish story, entitled "Four Go Down Into Paradise". A version from the Babylonian Talmud reads:

⁵ This was my first introduction.

⁶ Which I practice and endorse, but it's something else than this.

The Rabbis taught: Four entered Paradise. They were [Ben Azzai](#), [Ben Zoma](#), [Acher](#) and [Rabbi Akiva](#). Rabbi Akiva said to them, "When you come to the place of pure marble stones, do not say, 'Water! Water!' for it is said, 'He who speaks untruths shall not stand before My eyes'⁷". Ben Azzai gazed and died. Regarding him the verse states, 'Precious in the eyes of God is the death of His pious ones'. Ben Zoma gazed and was harmed. Regarding him the verse states, 'Did you find honey? Eat only much as you need, lest you be overfilled and vomit it'. Acher cut down the plantings. Rabbi Akiva entered in peace and left in peace.

Now, I know you're probably thinking to yourself "marble stones?" "Water, water!" "what the what?". I promise I'll explain that part a little later (CITE WHERE). For now, I want to focus on the second part of the story, about what became of the four travelers when they came back up.

The story presents four⁸ very real dangers⁹ of undertaking merkava with the wrong mindset.

- **Ben Azzai gazed and died.** For some people, particularly people with heart or breathing problems or epilepsy, or those who are very old, celibate, 2nd century ascetics like Ben Azzai, this practice can be physically strenuous. If you should run into trouble, it is entirely possible that even the highest quality of 2nd century medicine won't be able to bring you back. If you have any doubts as to your health, you should see a doctor before beginning.
- **Ben Zoma gazed and [went mad].** Magic can be a little addictive. All of us who do it know that, once you've glimpsed the dragon, it's easy to start chasing it. The danger of this in merkaba is no greater than in any other kind of sorcery. If you're a successfully adulting adult, are mentally healthy, and (most importantly) have a vibrant, compelling life with a sense of purpose, you'll be fine. If you're not, this might not be the thing for you right now¹⁰. If you still need magic to pay the rent, go improve your life and come back to this when you've gotten your shit together. On the other hand, if you're studying religion 24/7, and

⁷ Psalms 101:7

⁸ As you will see, Orthodox sources would contextualize what I'm calling the fourth "danger" as a desirable outcome.

⁹ All of which, really, come down to "bad trip".

¹⁰ FOR REAL! I was 18, living alone for the first time, with no real support system when I started this work. I went spectacularly mad, in a way doctors called "bipolar with schizophrenic tendencies". I am not fucking around on this point; get your shit together first. (but don't hold on too tight!)

living in a pseudo-monastic closed orthopraxic religious community, you've probably already burned this book, but if not, you should probably do that now.

- **Ben Abuyah (Acher) [became a heretic].** This, in my opinion, is the most likely “danger” for people who come to merkava having already had some experience in magic. There's a VERY real danger that this work will fundamentally change the way you understand the world. It's entirely likely that you'll come to reprioritize things in your life, and need to make radical changes in order to build a life in keeping with your new beliefs. Merkava teaches the pious to doubt and the skeptic to believe. If you don't want that, then put this book down and walk away.
- **Rabbi Akiva entered in peace and left in peace.** This, really, is the most troublesome of the four “dangers”. It is entirely possible that, if you are fixed too strongly to your preconceived notions, if you are too settled in your life, then you will get very little out of merkava. You too might enter in peace and leave in peace, dismissing Truth as metaphor and exulting trivia into truth. There is a VERY REAL danger that the kabbalah can become nothing but a system of rules and correspondences. *“What was Rabbi Akiva like? - A worker who goes out with his basket. He finds wheat - he puts it in, barley - he puts it in, spelt - he puts it in, beans - he puts it in, lentils - he puts it in. When he arrives home he sorts out the wheat by itself, barley by itself, spelt by itself, beans by themselves, lentils by themselves. So did Rabbi Akiva; he arranged the **Torah** rings by rings.”¹¹*

So, now that we've discussed, in at least vague terms, what the ecstatic kabbalah is, and how to approach it, let's jump right into learning how to do it. Below, I'm going to teach a very basic, very safe method for your very first experience traveling the Other Places. If you already have experience with provoking out of body travel (such as shamanic journeying, astral projection, or etc), you'll probably get immediate success with this preliminary lesson. If not, don't worry. The work we are undertaking is an innate human skill; everyone can do it. You do it often in your dreams. It just takes a little practice to get the hang of it.

One thing to keep in mind: while you're learning, it's common to think that you've failed to travel, because you don't remember what happened in the other place. Keep note of the time; you will find that, even when you think you weren't successful, you “lost time”. Getting to the other world is easy; it's remembering it that takes practice. This is a natural safeguard against the dangers we discussed. The danger of kabbalistic descent isn't in descending, it's about [failure to properly reintegrate](#) as you come back up. That's why it can be **extremely dangerous** for beginners to mix

¹¹ [Avot deRabbi Natan](#) ch. 18

magic with drugs¹²; the drugs keep you in trance, even when you shouldn't be. The drugs make it so easy to slip into trance that you can't get back out, even when you need to "emergency exit".

In future lessons, we'll learn more powerful techniques for trance-induction, as well as the names, spirits, and techniques that will allow you entry into the particular realms (hekhalot) of the ecstatic kabbalah. As we do, we'll talk more about being sure you know how to come back up safely. Today, however, we're going only as far as the "place of pure marble stones", the gateway to the Other Places. There's not much danger in this; the trance we're inducing will be light enough that you're more likely to have trouble holding it than you are to have any difficulties with re-entry. However, I promise I'll explain Akiva's warning before we get there.

The method presented below is **very** loosely based on a method taught by [Abraham Abulafia](#), a 13th century Spanish kabbalist in his book [Aur H'Sechel](#) (The Light of the Mind). I have simplified it significantly for modern workers. Before beginning, you should first read through the teaching below about the letter aleph, make sure that you understand it, and then prepare a visual aid. (If you have practice in holding a visualization, such as with mandala meditation, you can just imagine it.)

A Story About the Aleph

Once upon a time, before the beginning of Time, G-d called all the letters together and held a competition to see which letter should have the honor of being the first uttered when the world was created. Each, in turn, came forward and spoke her case. Tav jumped and said "Pick me! Pick me! I am the first letter of Torah, of Teaching! If you choose me, all will learn!" But G-d said, "No. You shall also be a sign of death¹³, and that is not a way to begin." And so Tav hung her head and departed.

"Choossssssss me!" hissed the Shin¹⁴. "Your own name, Shaddai, begins with me!" "No," said G-d. "For you are also "falsssssse" (רשק), and I cannot found Truth in lies." In a similar fashion, each of the letters came forward, pleading her case, and each was rejected¹⁵.

¹² Am I saying that Akiva & crew were on drugs? No. (although that would hardly be without precedent) Deeper, harder trance states are more dangerous, and drugs are the fastest, easiest way to induce them, but not the only way. Any state your brain can be put into chemically can be attained by a magician with sufficient practice and experience.

¹³ This is actually a secret clue as to how to make a golem! I'll teach it in the last lesson.

¹⁴ Shin's ideogram is a flame. It makes a hissing noise (sssssss or shhhhhh), like fire.

¹⁵ You can read the whole story here: [FIND LINK](#)

Finally, Beth came forward. "If you choose me," Beth said humbly, "then the world will begin with a Blessing (ברכה)." G-d was well pleased with this, and for this reason it world began thus: "Beginning¹⁶, G-d created Heaven and Earth.¹⁷" And then G-d looked to Aleph, who had held back, too shy to speak. "And you, Aleph, who has no voice, will begin every utterance, and be First among all the Letters."

Hebrew is a weird language for those of us used to English. It doesn't exactly have vowels the way we think of them. Aleph, though we often say it is equivalent to the English "A", is not a vowel, and it doesn't really make an A sound. Open your mouth to say "apple", but stop before you say anything. Say the phrase "uh-oh". The non-sound, the breath before speaking, the [glottal stop](#)¹⁸ between the uh and the oh? That's the sound aleph makes.

As you might expect from the story, Aleph is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and has the numerical value 1. However, in [mathematics](#)¹⁹, the character aleph is used to denote the various [sizes of infinity](#). This points to Aleph's essential "inner" meaning; aleph is the liminal space between worlds; between the infinite and the singular. Examine the picture below, and notice that the aleph is made up of three strokes; the large one from top left to bottom right, and two smaller ones above and below. [Isaac Luria](#), an important 16th century kabbalist, taught that these represented the water above, the water below, and the firmament between them, as described in [Genesis 1:7](#)²⁰. More generally, they are the "Manifest World" (where we spend most of our time) and the "Other Place"²¹ where we go when dreaming or journeying, and the bridge of consciousness that unites the two. In the aleph, these are united, and we see that, in fact, they are just one thing; not separate, two flourishes that are just parts of a united whole.

This is (part of) what Akiva meant when he said, "do not cry out water! water!". In the place we are going, there is no clear distinction between Creator and Creation, between Idea and Thing, between Symbol and Referent, between Being and Becoming. Spirit and Matter ARE NOT

¹⁶ Genesis 1:1 starts with a beth in Hebrew. In fact, the book of Genesis is named (as is the custom) after that first word: "Bereshit", "in the beginning"

¹⁷ Fun fact: You can also translate this as "Beginning, came forth Elohim, the Heavens, and the Land."

¹⁸ Say the word "glottal". Feel how you breathed out (aspirated) the t? Now, say it again, but with a wacky fake British accent, swallowing the t. That's a glottal stop.

¹⁹ This isn't a coincidence; the man who invented the transcendental arithmetic, Georg Cantor, was a kabbalist, though I'm not sure he would use that word.

²⁰A hint: "water, water!"

²¹ In Jewish writing, this is normally phrased as "World to Come", but that makes it sound like the afterlife, and it's MUCH MUCH more than that.

DIFFERENT THINGS; there's only one thing. It's a dynamic homeostasis: the fluid tension between your incarnate-self's yearning for the infinite, and your eternal-self's yearning for the particular²².

In the light trance we're inducing today, forgetting that isn't so much dangerous as it is counterproductive. If you get mixed up trying to decide what's "real", you'll simply slip out of trance, just like you wake up when you realize that you are dreaming. In a deeper trance, however, the cognitive dissonance won't be enough to shake you loose, and it can ripple through the experience in a disturbing way. Probably, you'll just have a "bad trip", but there can be serious psychological repercussions, especially for people who are psychologically fragile, for whatever reason.

The aleph, the no-sound, the infinite, the union of the ABOVE and BELOW; that is the object of contemplation for our first kabbalistic trance, and we'll need a visual aid to contemplate. Think on it for a while while you draw a large [ALEPH](#), א, on a piece of white thick paper²³. If you aren't going to work at a table, you need the paper to be stiff enough to stay rigid when held. A small white board is actually ideal. Use your own understanding of the letter (see below) to create a unique image that encapsulates your understanding. It's important, when you draw the aleph, to be sure to make it diagonally symmetric. This is not quite the way this letter is usually drawn²⁴, but it's important to the meditation. (see picture) After you gain familiarity with the practice, you will want to redraw the image, likely many times. Once you've had the vision of the aleph, you'll know what yours²⁵ should look like.

ALEPH TRANCE

Find a comfortable, safe place where you won't be interrupted. Ideally, you will want to do this practice outside, near running water²⁶. However, you can also practice inside. If you do so, you might want to use headphones and listen to [water sounds](#); this will help filter out any background noise, as well as aiding in the trance.

Begin by sitting in a comfortable position, your spine straight, with your image in your hands. Have a glass of water and paper and pen handy for when you are done. You may wish to either dim the lights or (this is more traditional) drape a large scarf²⁷ over your head, creating a hood²⁸ that limits your vision to only the aleph. (illustrator: please show a woman wearing a tallis, gazing at a

²² See Genesis 28:10-19

²³ I actually learned to do this technique by drawing the figure onto a black mirror with white eyeliner and gazing on that. I have also done it with the image painted onto the bottom of a bowl full of water, which is cool looking and very traditional, but can result in a rough exit from trance when you start to sway and spill it all over yourself.

²⁴ A theoretical kabbalist would say that this is the "secret INNER aleph".

²⁵ Everyone's is different. Mine isn't visual at all; it's straight-up math.

²⁶ In a later lesson, I'll talk extensively about the role water plays as a "lubricant" for this travel.

²⁷ I'll teach you how to make a special scarf called a "tallis" later on.

²⁸ You could also wear a robe. This is why your ritual robe has a hood!

glowing aleph in her hands). Fix your eyes on the aleph; do not allow them to move (although you may blink as needed). Begin to slowly [sway](#), front and back, in time to your breathing. Slow your breathing down, allow it to soften and round, a never-ending circle of breath that connects you to every other living thing. The air you breathe in was breathed out by the trees; an eternal cycle of respiration. Sway back as you breathe in, and front as you exhale, slowly, smoothly. Imagine the aleph is made of pure water, shimmering before your eyes, glistening in the sunlight, reflecting and refracting the light in opalescent rainbows. Imagine you can hear the water burble and splash, hypnotizing you with its music. You might sense the aleph trying to melt into an open pool of water. Do not permit that; keep it contained in its aleph-shape.

As you inhale, focus on the lower stroke of the aleph, and imagine yourself growing taller and taller, your head stretching up to the outer reaches of the galaxy. As you exhale, focus on the upper stroke of the aleph, and imagine yourself sending down roots like a tree, reaching deeper and deeper, into the center of the earth. After a while, feel both at once; be a column of light uniting heaven and earth, be an optical cable through which the light of the divine shines. Feel the shimmering light of the stars flow through you into the womb of the earth. Feel the cool waters of the earth rise up through you. Continue staring at the aleph.

Once you have established a slow, smooth pattern of breathing, allow your swaying to speed up, but do not increase the speed of your breathing. Continue to imagine ascending on each inhale and descending on every exhale. At this point, you may close your eyes, but keep the image of the aleph in your mind's eye, shimmering like sunlight on water.

Keep speeding up until you are swaying at about [220 beats per minute](#) (front and back each count as a beat). Hear the water bubbling; feel yourself ascend and descend at once, slipping sideways out of your body, perpendicular to every direction you can name, into the other place. This might feel like you are falling down the rabbit hole, and it might feel like your body is melting away. It might feel like floating, and it might feel like nothing at all. You might hear rushing or see lights. Whatever it feels like, whatever happens, just remain a calm observer. Do not allow yourself to be surprised back into your body.

Once you are out, examine the place you are in. Most likely, it will be a formless mist²⁹. Look closer, and find the place that's glowing and shimmering, like sunlight on water. Focus on that, and allow it to resolve into the aleph, into a reflective gateway, a wall of shining white marble. This is the Second Road, the World Between Worlds, the door to the First Heaven. In later lessons, we'll learn how to open it, but for now, just abide in this place, the place where everything is one. It's possible that a guide appears; this could be an ancestor or saint, an animal spirit, or possibly even

²⁹ If you see your body and the room you're in, that's a great sign; you have a natural talent for this work! Just will yourself to travel to the Other Place, the Empty Space, the Second Road, the World Between Worlds.

an angel. Ask them if they have come to help you three times. If they answer yes all three times, you can trust them. If not, tell them, politely, to go away. However, if no guide appears, that's also fine³⁰.

When you're ready, feel for your body. Most likely, as soon as you think of it, you'll feel yourself snap back to yourself. If not, then just imagine collecting your body around yourself, like putting on a heavy coat. You may find that you are still swaying, or you may have stopped. You might be cold or stiff. Stretch, move around, settle back into your body. Drink a whole glass of water, slowly. This is not optional! The water is an important part of the process. If you're having trouble re-integrating, if you feel muddle-headed or queasy or confused, laugh out loud³¹. Fake laugh if you have to, until the absurdity of what you're doing kicks in and you laugh for real. Keep laughing until you feel better. You might also find that you've swallowed a lot of air while you were under. Belch to relieve the pressure; I promise it will help! When you're back to yourself, write down everything you experienced, even if you feel like it "didn't work". It just takes practice, and keeping notes is an important step in the process. Especially when you are new to it, the experience will quickly fade, like a dream. Writing it down gives it form and permanence. Remember to date your entry. If you've diligently practiced this exercise at least 6 times, and not yet gotten any results, please send me an email, and we'll work through it together.

³⁰ Personally, I have never had a guide appear, unbidden.

³¹ You can also try other neurological "reset" buttons like pain or orgasm, if you're really having trouble coming up, but I find laughter works best.