

Attitudes toward the Study of Zohar and Lurianic Kabbalah, from the Dawn of Chasidism to Present Day Chabad

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In the contemporary Chabad community, study of the primary texts of Kabbalah is not emphasized. Chabad Chasidic thought (Chasidus) is studied extensively, as are the sermons (*sichos*) of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, texts that themselves are rich in citations from, and commentary on, Kabbalistic sources. However, for reasons I will explore in this essay, Kabbalah study from primary texts, such as the Zohar and works of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (*Arizal*), is relatively uncommon in Chabad. This has been noted by the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe himself: “Generally speaking, Kabbalah study was not common, even among Chabad Chasidim.”¹

Is this omission intentional, a matter of principle? Or is Kabbalah study deemed worthwhile by Chabad, but neglected merely due to the priority of other activities?

¹ Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Toras Menachem, Hisvadyos 5745 (Vaad Hanachos Labak, 1985) volume 2, p. 1147*. The Rebbe stressed that “Kabbalah study was not common, even among Chabad Chasidim” since, of the various strands of Chasidic thought, Chabad Chasidus is particularly rich in its use of Kabbalistic sources (see below section “Lurianic Kabbalah in Early Chabad”). One might therefore expect that Chabad Chasidim in particular might be inclined to Kabbalah study.

Rabbi Chaim Miller was educated at the *Haberdashers' Aske's School* in London, England and studied Medical Science at Leeds University. At the age of twenty-one, he began to explore his Jewish roots in full-time Torah study. Less than a decade later, he published the best-selling *Kol Menachem Chumash, Gutnick Edition*, which made over a thousand discourses of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe easily accessible to the layman. His 2011 compilation, the *Lifestyle Books Torah, Five Books of Moses, Slager Edition* was distributed to thousands of servicemen and women in the U.S. Army. In 2013, he was chosen by the *Jewish Press* as one of sixty “Movers and Shakers” in the Jewish world. His latest works include *Turning Judaism Outward*, a critically acclaimed biography of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and the multivolume *Practical Tanya*, which has set new standards in the translation of Chasidic thought for contemporary readers.

In other words, has Chabad adopted an *exclusivist* position toward Jewish mysticism, that only the study of Chasidus is to be pursued; or is it more *inclusivist*, seeing value in a broader curriculum of Kabbalah study, while retaining an emphasis on its own particular school of thought?

As we shall see, there are sources that point in both directions. My impression is that, notwithstanding some comments that appear to be strongly exclusivist, the position of contemporary Chabad is, in fact, inclusivist. Before offering my analysis, let us avail ourselves of the relevant statements on this issue.

Zohar study in early Chabad

While there is much internal consistency between the teachings of the seven Chabad Rebbes, some of their positions have shifted over time. An example of this, relevant to our discussion, is a strong emphasis by the first Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman, on Zohar study, which did not persist in later generations.

In *Likutei Torah*, a volume of Rabbi Shneur Zalman's discourses published in 1848, the author recommends that, before prayer one should prepare through:

The study of *mussar* (ethical texts), particularly the words of *mussar* found in the Zohar, a term that means 'illumination.'²

This echoes a similar practice taught by the founder of Chasidism.

The Ba'al Shem Tov instructed people that before each prayer they should study a passage of *Zohar* or *Tikunei Zohar*.³

² Rabbi Shneur Zalman, *Likutei Torah* (Zhitomir 1848; new edition Kehos, 2002), *Deuteronomy* 43c.

³ Rabbi Mordechai Twersky of Chernobyl, *Likutei Torah* (Piotrków, 1889) p. 6a. For the Ba'al Shem Tov's interest in the Zohar see: Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome Mintz (trans.), *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov* (Schoken, 1970), pp. 42, 49, 165, 244. The Zohar was particularly appreciated by early Chasidic master Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, who commented: "The Zohar sustained my soul." "The Zohar helped me to be a Jew." "In matters of both the spirit and the flesh the Zohar is a guide." "The bitter taste of exile is with me... Only when I immerse myself in the study of Zohar do I find peace." "I achieve inner tranquility only in prayer or in the study of Zohar." "Study the Zohar... then study it even more" (cited in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *In the Circle of the Ba'al Shem Tov. Studies in Hasidism* (Chicago University Press, 1985), p. 5.