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About the Author

A direct descendant of Rabbi Chaim Yosef Gottlieb (1790–1867), Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz (1555–1630), and Rabbi Moses Isserles (1530–1572), three revered rabbis and teachers of Kabbalah, **Arthur Kurzweil** frequently teaches the Talmud and introductory classes on Kabbalah to groups of adults in synagogues and other Jewish gatherings across America. He also currently serves as publisher at *Parabola* magazine.

Arthur is the author of *On the Road with Rabbi Steinsaltz: 25 Years of Pre-Dawn Car Trips, Mind-Blowing Encounters, and Inspiring Conversations with a Man of Wisdom* (Jossey-Bass). He's also the author of the best-selling classic *From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Family History* (Jossey-Bass), co-editor of *The Hadassah Jewish Family Book of Health and Wellness* (Jossey-Bass), and editor of *Best Jewish Writing 2003* (Jossey-Bass). He has also written *My Generations: A Course in Jewish Family History* (Behrman House), which is used in synagogue schools throughout the United States.

Arthur is the recipient of the Distinguished Humanitarian Award from the Melton Center for Jewish Studies at The Ohio State University for his unique contributions to the field of Jewish education. He received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies for his trailblazing work in the field of Jewish genealogy.

A member of the Society of American Magicians and the International Brotherhood of Magicians, Arthur frequently performs his one-man show “Searching for God in a Magic Shop,” in which he blends the performance of magic tricks with a serious discussion of Jewish theological ideas.

Visit Arthur’s Web site at www.arthurkurzweil.com.

Dedication

To my parents, Saul and Evelyn Kurzweil,

Who in partnership with God brought me into this world, and who taught me the holy process of curiosity, (“There are three partners in man” [Talmud, Niddah 31a])

To my children, Moshe, Miriam, and Malya,

Who study and live the wisdom of Kabbalah, who have made me the wealthiest man in this world, and who are my greatest blessings. (“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.” [The Five Books of Moses, Bamidbar 6:24])

To my soul mate, Bobby,

My partner in all the worlds. (“In how many days did the Holy One create the world?” “Six.” “And what has God been doing since then?” “Making matches, assigning this man to that woman, and this woman to that man.” [Midrash, Genesis Rabbah 68:4])

To my extraordinary Teacher,

Who nourishes me with Wisdom. When God wills it, may this wisdom usher me gently into the World to Come. (“But your teacher who taught you wisdom . . .” [Talmud, Bava Metzia, 33a])

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Introduction

Kabbalah is the theology of the Jewish people; it is the way Judaism understands God and the relationship between God and the world. For Kabbalists, all the laws, customs, practices, holidays, and rituals of Judaism are best understood in light of the Kabbalistic teachings about God and of what it is that God wants from humans.

Over the centuries, Kabbalah has become more and more systematized. Brilliant Jewish sages have explored, developed, and refined Jewish theology to the point at which, in the last six centuries, Kabbalah has become a distinct system of ideas, beliefs, technical terminology, and values with its own history, great personalities, controversies, and vocabulary. But Kabbalah, which means “the received tradition,” has always been an integral part of Jewish religious and spiritual life.

Like other studies of divinity and spirituality, Kabbalah deals with ultimate questions: Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? What for? Why?

About This Book

Kabbalah is often thought to be a secret study occupying the minds of elite students throughout the ages. But the “secrets” of Kabbalah aren’t the typical kind in which information is revealed to the few.

There are two kinds of secrets:

✓ **Secrets that are kept from the public:** When revealed, these secrets are recognized for what they are: clever illusions that, once revealed, can never fool again. Whatever “mysteries” the illusions once held disappear.

✓ **Real secrets that are available for all to see:** When real secrets are explored, they become deeper and more profound. They become richer and give birth to even greater secrets while their revelations illuminate the world. Such are the so-called “secrets” of Kabbalah.

My goal in writing this book is to help set the record straight and to inform the general public about what Kabbalah is — and also what Kabbalah isn't.

In recent years Kabbalah has become a pop culture phenomenon, a development that's resulted in the spread of tremendous inaccuracies and misinformation about the subject. This book is for those who are curious about the subject as well as for those who sincerely want to begin to grasp some of the profound teachings of Kabbalah and to integrate Kabbalistic wisdom into their daily lives.

Unfortunately, some books represent Kabbalah as a New Age, mystical practice dealing with amulets, obscure forms of meditation, superstition, and occult practices. Some books on Kabbalah separate Kabbalah from Judaism, misinforming well-meaning students and encouraging them to think of Kabbalah as a general

philosophy of life rather than as a spiritual practice inextricably integrated into Jewish law, ritual, prayer, and study.

Kabbalah For Dummies explains in plain English both the major abstract ideas of Kabbalah as well as the Kabbalistic practices that are part of daily Jewish life. Although the study of Kabbalah can be a major commitment that influences a practitioner's entire life, a person can pick up on many profound approaches to life just by considering the ideas and perspectives of Kabbalah.

Conventions Used in This Book

Because Kabbalah is a complex and often controversial topic, I had to establish a few conventions while writing to keep things as fair and simple as possible. As you're reading *Kabbalah For Dummies*, please keep in mind my conventions regarding the following:

✓ **References to God:** Kabbalistic notions about God include the fundamental belief that the Almighty doesn't have a gender, so whenever possible, I refrain from referring to God using masculine pronouns. However, the primary language of Judaism, Hebrew, doesn't have a neutral gender, so most Hebrew nouns are masculine. In addition, although there's a female term that indicates God's

indwelling presence in the world, the male forms of God's names have their own spiritual significance (Kabbalistic tradition has many names for God, as I explain in Chapter 16). In Jewish prayers, for example, God is referred to as "He." This isn't sexism; God is neither He nor She, so please don't be offended when God is referred to as "He."

✓ **The word "Kabbalist":** Throughout this book I refer to things that Kabbalists do or believe. In reality, none of the great (or even not-so-great) Kabbalists ever referred to themselves as Kabbalists. All the great Kabbalists throughout history have been Jews, more specifically traditional, observant Jews. In today's terms, they'd probably be called Orthodox Jews.

I use the term "Kabbalist" through this book to refer to those people, great sages, or everyday people like me who integrate into their lives the beautiful Jewish practices and profound ideas that are part of Jewish tradition and have explicit connection to Jewish theological — and therefore Kabbalistic — ideas.

A great sage is referred to as a Kabbalist because he wrote about or taught the theology of Judaism and was specifically interested in using the vocabulary and essential ideas contained in the theological, esoteric explorations of Judaism. Even today, teachers who are considered masters of Kabbalah aren't generally known as Kabbalists; instead, the term **mekubal** (meh-koo-*bahl*) indicates that a certain teacher is a qualified teacher of Kabbalah and is known for his or her Kabbalistic teachings.

✓ **Hasidism:** In recent centuries, there have been two streams of Kabbalah study.

- One is represented by the great rabbi born in the year 1720 known as Rabbi Elijah (also known as the Vilna Gaon). He saw Kabbalah as a subject reserved for study only by the best students.
- The other is represented by the great rabbi born around the same time, in 1698, known as Rabbi Israel (also known as the Baal Shem Tov). The thrust of his teaching was to bring the wisdom and practice of Kabbalah to the average person, not just to the elite scholar. This effort is called *Hasidism*.

In this book, many of the sages that I quote and many of the Kabbalistic practices that I address come from Hasidism, which is basically the effort during the last few centuries within Judaism to bring Kabbalah to the masses. Because *Kabbalah For Dummies* is an effort to explain Kabbalah to as many people as possible, it's filled with teachings from Hasidism, which is Kabbalah for everyone.

✓ **Dates:** I don't use the abbreviations BC and AD to indicate dates in this book because these designations measure time in relation to Christian history. Rather, I use BCE, which means "Before the Common Era" and CE, which means "Common Era." For example, the year that Columbus discovered America would be indicated as 1492 CE.

✓ **Gender equality:** Religious groups throughout history have defined participatory roles for men and women in a number of ways. Throughout this book, I've tried to approach subjects from a starting point that assumes that both men and woman can participate in all Jewish rituals. However, it's important to note that the Kabbalistic tradition isn't

gender neutral; it maintains that men and women are spiritually different. When men and women honor and celebrate these differences through practices and roles unique to each gender, they fully realize the deeper spiritual dimension of their lives and the unique contributions to the world that emanate from these different spiritual places.

✓ **Pronunciation of Hebrew words:** Many Hebrew words and phrases appear throughout this book, and because not everyone's familiar with the language, I've offered pronunciation help. The syllable that has the accent is always in *italics*. But you should be aware that there are two ways to pronounce many Hebrew words:

- **Ashkenazic:** This is the Eastern European pronunciation that's used in most Orthodox synagogues. An example is **Shabbos** (*shah-bus*; Sabbath), with the accent on the first syllable.
- **Sephardic:** This is the modern Israeli pronunciation that's used in most liberal synagogues in the United States. An example is **Shabbat** (*shah-baht*; Sabbath), with the accent on the second syllable.

As you can see from the examples, not only are the pronunciations of the sounds different, but the accented syllable is also different. It isn't unusual for someone today to bounce back and forth between pronunciations. In the traditional Jewish world I've live in for the past 25 years, pronunciation of Hebrew words is generally Ashkenazic. But the modern Israeli pronunciation also has a great influence, and some of my pronunciations reflect this. For example, I sometimes find myself saying

both “Shabbos” and “Shabbat” on the Sabbath, sometimes within mere moments of each other. In this book, I mostly use the transliteration and pronunciation commonly used in Israel, but sometimes, especially if it has become common usage, I give the Ashkenazic pronunciation.

By the way, another example of varied pronunciation is the word “Kabbalah.” The Ashkenazic pronunciation is kuh-*bah*-lah, whereas the modern Israeli pronunciation is kah-*bah-lah*.

What You’re Not to Read

If you have the time and inclination to read this book from cover to cover, by all means, get to it! However, if you’re only looking for the most helpful, most essential facts and explanations, you can skip the sidebars, which appear in shaded gray boxes throughout this book. They’re interesting (I hope!) anecdotes and pieces of information that supplement the text but aren’t essential for an understanding of the topics being explored.

Foolish Assumptions

When writing this book, I had to make some assumptions about you, dear reader. First off, I don’t assume that you’re Jewish, nor do I assume that you want to be. And although Kabbalah is just as much a spiritual practice as