

### C. Modern Judaism – New Age Judaism

Contemporary alternative spiritualities associated with the New Age Movement have frequently regarded established religious traditions with suspicion. Thus, the Jewish New Age – sometimes called “Jew Age” – provides many criticisms of the Bible’s traditional interpretations, sometimes even using Jewish/kabbalistic texts in support.

However, more favorable alternative interpretations are found in modern Kabbalistic circles, such as embracing the tradition of the “seventy-two-letter secret name of God,” based on the seventy-two combinations of three letters from Exod 14:19–21 (each verse contains 72 letters). Those are reinterpreted as a means of acquiring various “energies” or qualities (such as tranquility, transcending the ego) and are used in cards or pendants. Madonna (the famous singer) had one such combination tattooed on her arm (*lamed–alef–waw* – which sounds somewhat like “love”), after becoming a student of R. Philip Berg (1927–2013), one of the harbingers of these ideas. Berg was a successor of R. Yehuda Ashlag (1885–1954), who translated the *Zohar* into Hebrew and wanted to spread kabbalistic secrets throughout secular society; his disciples formed various groups, including Berg’s Kabbalah Centre with its dozens of branches worldwide, and the Bnei-Baruch group with its worldwide prominent media presence.

Jew Age phenomena are often combined with other New Age spiritual elements. For example, Jewish Reiki is explained in terms of the seventy-two-letter sacred names, thus reinventing a Jewish healing tradition, derived from the triad Hebrew combination (*resh-yod-yod*) with another name of God, (*hai* [*het-yod*]).

The Kabbalah helps Jew Agers to create an alternative narrative of Jewish history, extolling deviant or heretic groups as the oppressed carriers of religious truth. Thus, much like the Christian Kabbalah, those current spiritual trends view the Kabbalah

as preserving the religious truth ingrained within the Bible, while depicting the original religious truth as residing within a secret tradition, which was made necessary by institutional persecution.

Associated with Kabbalah is Hasidic lore, which is also prevalent in the alternative spiritualities scene, favoring its focus on feelings, on everyday life, and on extolling lay people. A typical example is the story of the follower of the Maggid of Mezritsh, who says that he did not travel to his rabbi for his oral teachings but to learn how he laces his shoes. Some circles argue that Hasidism and Zen Buddhism are alike, and take on a “Jubu” (Jewish-Buddhist) identity.

The phenomenon of syncretism stems from the perennial philosophy, frequently found in New Age spirituality, which affirms that an ancient kernel of truth is common to all religions, and which enables a seamless combination between Jewish and other traditions. This field includes Hebrew/Jewish Shamanism, as found in the work of Gershon Winkler who is a rabbi and a shaman. Winkler strives to recover the “magickal” texts and practices from Jewish traditions, which are in his view parallel to Native American traditions. One of his book titles is from Exod 3:5, “the place where you are standing is holy,” and is saturated with earth-based religious ideas.

Typical Jew Age interpretations of the Bible are spiritualized and allegorical. For instance, the Ten Commandments are perceived as pointing to the essence of religion, which is love. Another example is understanding Pharaoh in a psychologistic-Jungian manner, as a part of one’s mind that enslaves us. This idea, expressed by Ohad Ezrahi, a spiritual teacher who was ordained in the Jewish Renewal movement, continued the 1960s convergence between hippies and *Habad* rabbis.

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