

Kabbalah Centre, The

The Kabbalah Centre is an international "spiritual" organization with numerous locations in different parts of the world and participants worldwide. Since 2004 Karen Berg, the wife of Philip Berg, who is the founder and "spiritual leader" (Einstein 2008, 150) of the Kabbalah Centre, is the official director of Kabbalah Centre International together with her son Michael Berg as co-director (cf. The Kabbalah Centre 2017b). The Kabbalah Centre is structured in local offices in cities around the globe, such as New York, Los Angeles, London, Tel Aviv, Moscow, and Berlin. Besides these offices, the Centre offers so called "study groups" in a number of countries, e.g. in Austria, France, South Africa, and many more (The Kabbalah Centre 2017a).

The Kabbalah Centre community is highly fluid (cf. Bauer 2017). There is no official membership-systems. Everybody is allowed to take part in the course program or religious ceremonies. This stands in contrast to a strict hierarchy inside the community. At the top of the Kabbalah Centre hierarchy is the Berg family, whose members are highly educated in Jewish religious traditions, including Talmudic and kabbalistic texts (cf. Myers 2007, 73).

The kabbalistically educated Kabbalah Centre teachers are "mostly ethnically Jewish" and form the second level of the hierarchy (ibid.), followed by the "Hevre", people that do a full-time volunteer job in the Kabbalah Centre, other volunteers, and the local Kabbalah Centre students. Becoming a Hevre or a Kabbalah Centre teacher is the highest position that can be achieved in the hierarchy.

The precursor of the contemporary international Kabbalah Centre was the National Institute for Research of Kabbalah, founded in New York in 1965. It was originally meant to be a Jewish-orthodox community. As such, in the beginning it consisted of a small group of Jewish men who together studied kabbalistic writings. Philip Berg declared himself the successor to Yehuda Ashlag (1885–1954), "the most important and innovative Kabbalist of the twentieth century" (Huss 2005, 615). Since then the Kabbalah Centre has developed in several stages. In the 1970s, Philip Berg published English translations of Ashlag's work and other kabbalistic manuscripts (cf. Myers 2008, 412). He also changed the name of the National Institute for Research of Kabbalah to Research Centre of Kabbalah (cf. ibid., 52) during the 1970s and founded Centers in North America and Canada in the following years. While in the first phase it was Philip Berg's intention to bring back secular Jews to Judaism by having them study Kabbalah (cf. Altglas 2011b, 241ff.), he changed his goals in the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, the Kabbalah Centre's teachings have expanded and become disentangled from Judaism. The Kabbalah Centre was opened to a non-Jewish audience, as reflected by the Centre's rhetoric, publications, and public events (cf. ibid., 242f.). The brand Kabbalah Centre International was formed in 1999, after the successful establishment of centres in many cities in North America, Canada, and Europe (cf. Myers 2007, 72). At the same time the Kabbalah Centre standardised its offers, intentions, and operations. It provides kabbalistic ideas in the form of self-help literature, courses, and religious events. The understanding of kabbalah in the publications and other offers of the Kabbalah Centre differ from a traditional Jewish understanding, in which kabbalistic knowledge is seen as

a mystical or esoteric part of Jewish tradition. In contrast, the Kabbalah Centre points out kabbalah's universal component and detaches it from the Jewish tradition (cf. Altglas 2011a). Philip and Karen Berg, and their sons Yehuda and Michael, describe kabbalah as a "Technology for the Soul". (Berg 2004) Personal fulfilment, self-improvement, and healing have become pivotal in their books, which are offered on the Centre's official websites. Classes and lectures are also available on a website called "Kabbalah University" (university.kabbalah.com).

According to the Kabbalah Centre's official website there are about forty Centres in different cities worldwide (cf. The Kabbalah Centre 2017a) that attract people from various backgrounds around the world. The total number of adherents worldwide is not known, and estimates range widely. Einstein (2008, 150) estimated that about four million people have participated over the last 30 years, while Altglas (Altglas 2011b, 57) estimates the number of participants to only a few thousand. Either way, the Kabbalah Centre has become "a significant contemporary cultural phenomenon" (Huss 2005, 623).

Nicole M. BAUER

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