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Madonna: "Kabbalah Girl"
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If you managed last week to see news that was not about Iraq or the election, you might have caught an item about the pop-star Madonna. The former "Material Girl" apparently has "got religion," and a rather esoteric one at that. Now following the Kabbalah, a mystical form of Judaism, she was visiting Israel to pray at Jewish holy sites.

But she was not particularly welcomed by Hasidic communities of Jews, the main followers of Kabbalah nowadays. In the news report I watched, scenes of Madonna in sacred synagogues were interspersed with an interview with a Hasidic rabbi, dressed in traditional black garb, saying the Madonna did not conform to their beliefs.

What is the problem between Madonna and the Kabbalists? To provide an answer, I first need to give a (very) brief introduction to Kabbalah.

Kabbalah began to coalesce in the 11th and 12th centuries, as evidenced by numerous short, mystical treatises written at that time. This was the same period that mysticism got its start in the surrounding religions of Christianity and Islam. In the late 13th century, Kabbalah received a strong boost with the composition of *The Zohar*, an extensive mystical work written in Aramaic. This became the foundation of the Hasidic movement in later centuries. The Hasids are now the main practitioners of Jewish mysticism. Although comparatively small in numbers, they are quite visible in their traditional, black clothes. Today they are centered in New York and in Israel.

Jewish mysticism originated with the idea that individuals could get close to God, or, more accurately, that properly prepared individuals could actually ascend into heaven to approach God on his divine throne. This idea grew out of the vision in Ezekiel chapter one, where the prophet sees a divine being riding a heavenly chariot. Of course, journeying through unknown places, such as the heavenly realm, toward a powerful being like God

is fraught with danger. So Kabbalists began working out the nature of heaven and began developing notions of God's character. After all, if you are going on a long journey, you want to be as prepared as possible.

This speculation gradually developed into theorizing about the character of God in this world. According to the *Zohar*, there are 10 divine emanations into this world. These are called Sephirot. In general terms, the problem is that the Sephirot, pieces of God's nature, are trapped by the material character of the natural world. The goal of each practitioner of Kabbalah is to work to help free the Sephirot and thus restore the cosmos to its rightful order.

Madonna's problem with the Hasidic rabbis stems from the ethical system underlying Kabbalah. The Kabbalists never broke with traditional Judaism and its moral commandments. Instead they made the commandments part of their mystical practices. So performing the commandments helps release the trapped Sephirot.

This has made Hasidism one of the strongest adherents to traditional Judaism. And traditional Judaism has very strong beliefs about the place of women. To be overly brief, a woman's place is in the household, running the family and supporting the men who follow the commandments. To be sure, there are commandments for women to follow, but these are more socially oriented, rather than directly involved in Kabbalistic activity.

So Madonna is following (for now at least) Kabbalistic beliefs and practices that are for men only. It is not surprising, then, that her rejection of the traditional women's role would prevent her from linking to Judaism's traditional mystic community.