



# SEEING THE LIGHT



LIKE MADONNA, DEMI, ROSEANNE, ET AL., MANY KABBALAH CENTRE REGULARS SAY THEIR LIVES HAVE BEEN IMPROVED. BUT SOME OF ITS MORE VULNERABLE FOLLOWERS TESTIFY TO EMPTY PROMISES AND A JOURNEY DARKENED BY DESPAIR. BY KENNETH MILLER

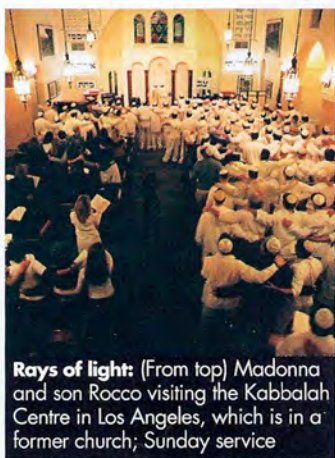
**T**he Beverly Hills Kabbalah Centre on Shabbat Eve—the start of the Jewish sabbath—is a power spot in every sense of the term. On a recent Friday night, the congregation includes Demi Moore, Ashton Kutcher, and rising star Monet Mazur (*Torque*). As in an Orthodox synagogue, the sexes are divided, but here the separation seems to amp up the electricity. The faithful—men in white, women in designer splendor—belt out Hebrew prayers like fans at a Rolling Stones concert. They raise their right hand and utter a collective “Oooooooooooooh!” There’s a brisk commerce in ecstatic hugs and knowing grins.

At the altar, Rav Philip Berg chants blessings, flanked by his wife, Karen, and their grown sons, Yehuda and Michael. Berg, 75, is a portly man with a scraggly beard and a faraway stare; his offspring, who help run the organization and write its literature, are plump and balding; and Karen, in her puffy wig, would fit in among the pious matrons of nearby Hancock Park. Yet when followers speak of the Bergs, it’s usually with awe. “They’re the most inspirational family I’ve ever met,” Mazur says. “It’s undeniable how much energy they have, this amazing ability to transform people’s lives.”

Madonna, the Bergs’ most famous acolyte, has called their teachings “a manual for living”; after writing three children’s books whose proceeds benefit the center’s kids’ program, she recently adopted the spiritual name Esther. Veteran A-listers such as Roseanne Barr, Barbra Streisand, Mick Jagger, and Liz Taylor have frequented the center, as have Britney Spears and Paris Hilton. Capitalizing on the celebrity stampede, the center has amassed an estimated 200,000 followers and now has 50 branches worldwide; its tax-free annual revenues reportedly total in the tens of millions. Not bad for a group whose precepts are based on a form of Jewish mysticism traditionally reserved for male Torah scholars over age 40.

But the Kabbalah Centre’s success has also aroused a chorus of naysayers. Some religious authorities object to the group’s decidedly unorthodox theology; others decry its commercialism, with courses costing up to \$270 and bookstores stocked with private-label bottled water, candles, scented oils, meditation stones, and jewelry.

Most disturbing, perhaps, are charges that the center exerts a harmful influence over some of its most vulnerable followers. Groups such as the Jewish Board of Family and Children’s Services in New York and the international Jews for Judaism (which counters recruiting efforts by cults and



**Rays of light:** (From top) Madonna and son Rocco visiting the Kabbalah Centre in Los Angeles, which is in a former church; Sunday service



missionaries) have received dozens of calls about the center, claiming that it encourages devotees to break with unbelieving spouses and family, pressures them to donate sums beyond their means, and says that Kabbalah water can cure cancer. The center has consistently denied such accusations, but “across the globe, these issues keep coming up,” says Rabbi Michael Skobac of Jews for Judaism in Toronto.

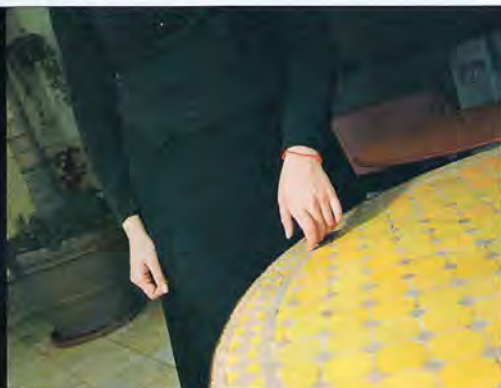
Is the Kabbalah Centre a place to find oneself, lose oneself, or just try for a glimpse of Madonna? Many followers—and not just celebs—say the center’s ethical teachings have helped them to become better, more generous, more effective people. But trouble may await those who take its promises (to unlock “all the secrets of the universe” and “all the solutions to your problems,” as one text trumpets) too literally. “The problem with the Kabbalah Centre right now is in distinguishing between a religion and a superstition,” says Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, the author of several popular books on Judaism, noting that some of his Orthodox friends admire the sect. “A religion empowers you, but a superstition weak-

For Lindsey, the voyage began in April 2001, after *The Poor and Hungry*, an indie film in which she costarred (playing a very un-Panlike lesbian street hustler), won an award at the Hollywood Film Festival. Eager to make more movies, she left Memphis for L.A. But auditions led nowhere and her encounters with fellow hopefuls left her disillusioned.

Lonely and adrift, she found a job as a tour guide at L.A.’s Museum of Tolerance. There she developed a crush on a handsome coworker, Alex, a fellow aspiring actor 16 years her senior. Alex had been raised in a Muslim household but for the past three years had been studying at the Kabbalah Centre. After they started dating, he invited her there. “He said, ‘If you’d known me before, you’d never have wanted to be with me. I’ve changed a lot because of the center.’”

Lindsey was raised as a Christian, but she’d begun to question her faith in recent years. “You can’t tell me that every Jewish person who died in the Holocaust is in hell right now,” she says. She considered herself a skeptic, leery of organized religion. Still, the introductory lecture at the

LINDSEY CHUCKED HER CAREER, MADE HERSELF A STRANGER TO THOSE WHO LOVED HER, AND MARRIED A MAN SHE BARELY KNEW: “SOMETIMES I’M LIKE, DID THAT HAPPEN TO SOMEONE ELSE? WAS I THERE?”



**That old-time religion:** (From left) Devotees are encouraged to purchase red string bracelets that ward off the “evil eye” (\$26); a framed picture of the 72 names of God.



ens you. A superstition makes you very dependent on the group—you need to take their courses, ask them all your private questions. You can’t stand without them.”

“I’d say the majority of people go there for a few weeks or months and then leave,” says counselor and cult expert Steven Hassan, the director of the Freedom of Mind Resource Center in Somerville, Massachusetts. “But depending on where an individual is in life, it can be a very different experience.”

**“I WANTED SOMETHING TO MAKE SENSE IN MY LIFE”**

On a backstage wall in a Memphis theater, one autograph carries a bittersweet double meaning for the woman who scrawled it five years ago: “Lindsey Roberts, forever in Never-Never Land.” Lindsey was 21 then and playing the title role in *Peter Pan*, her first lead in a professional production. Just 5’2”, her delicate features framed by an auburn-tinted pixie cut, she projects a stadium-size personality. Storming about the playhouse in jeans and John Fluevog combat boots, she greets colleagues with a stream of patter—“You comin’ to the party tonight? All right!”—and a guffaw known as the Lindsey laugh. Friends and family are happy to hear it again after a two-year absence during which Lindsey chucked her career, made herself a stranger to those who loved her, and married a man she barely knew. “Sometimes,” she says, “I’m like, Did that happen to someone else? Was I there?”

Kabbalah Centre captured her imagination. Her teacher described Kabbalah (Hebrew for “that which is received”) as an age-old set of techniques for harnessing the laws of the universe. This knowledge, said to be codified around the second century in a book called the Zohar, was now available to all—thanks to the center and its founder, Rav Berg.

Most historians in fact date the Zohar and Kabbalah to the thirteenth century, when a Spanish Jew, Moses de León, spun a thousand years of spiritual tradition into a multivolume combination of biblical commentary and mystical allegory. (He attributed the text to a second-century rabbi.) De León began with the premise that the Torah—the first five books of the Bible—is written in code, and that its deepest meanings can be revealed only through meditation, numerology, and creative interpretation. He described a God with male and female aspects and a world in which spiritually informed human action can alter the very fabric of reality.

Later Kabbalists added their own twists, including a touch of astrology. They all agreed, however, that the discipline was too sacred, too difficult, and too psychologically hazardous to be attempted by anyone not firmly rooted in Jewish law. To hold otherwise, renowned Judaic scholar and Zohar translator Daniel Matt says, “is a bold and controversial departure from Kabbalah.”

The Kabbalah Centre is willing to make that departure,



and others. Its doctrine—"a blend of Kabbalah, New Age, and self-help," says Matt—seems to rest on two central tenets. The first is a vaguely karmic code of ethics rooted in Kabbalist cosmology: God is embodied in a primal energy force, or Light, whose nature is infinitely giving; the universe is filled with a desire to receive. Since we are fashioned in God's image, however, simply satiating this desire can never bring fulfillment. The key is to accept our hunger for riches, glory, power, sex—but only so that we may emulate God by giving to others. Like God, we should be "proactive" rather than "reactive." Instead of following our impulses, we should practice "restriction": Stop, take a breath, and proceed from a position of divine calm. Though Satan (in the form of selfish instincts) may tempt us, self-interest requires unselfish behavior; illness and misfortune result mostly from our own egotistic actions, whether in this life or a previous one. Putting others first brings "miracles."

Second, the center preaches that Hebrew letters are a conduit for divine Light and that contemplating certain combinations—especially those in the Zohar and in the 72

Kabbalah Centre in Tel Aviv, in 1977. (Brandwein's family has long denied that Berg is his spiritual heir, though Berg counters that letters from Brandwein prove his legitimacy.)

The Bergs came to New York City in 1984, but it was their move to L.A. in 1997 that would make Kabbalah a household word. Sandra Bernhard was the first Hollywood maverick to discover the center; she brought along her friends Madonna and Roseanne, and a trend was born. For these hip celebs, Kabbalah's affirmation of God's female side is an obvious draw, as is the center's take on the mechanics of fate and the perils of self-centeredness. "What people in Los Angeles do for a living can make for a very misleading life," Monet Mazur says. "Ego gets in the way of everything."

For ordinary folks, the center has an added attraction: the stars. "I didn't join because of Madonna," Lindsey says. But when doubts arose, the fact that Madonna was a follower helped dispel them. "I thought, Maybe it's not the cult that people say it is. Maybe it's not that bad."

From the start Lindsey juggled doubt and devotion. She went to Kabbalah II and scanned the Zohar regularly. It irked

Articles of faith: Kabbalah Centre merchandise



ONE NIGHT X MET A TEACHER ALONE AT THE CENTER'S MIKVAH FOR AN IMPROVISED PRECONVERSION RITE. HE TURNED HIS BACK AS SHE APPROACHED THE SHALLOW POOL WRAPPED IN ONLY A TOWEL. ONCE SHE WAS UNDERWATER, HE FACED HER AND BEGAN TO PRAY. "HE COULD SEE EVERYTHING," SHE SAYS.

three-letter "names of God"—can help bring health, wealth, happiness, even world peace. So powerful are these units of cosmic DNA that knowing how to read them is unnecessary; just scanning the text yields results.

At first this "scanning" notion struck Lindsey as absurd. But her teacher used examples from quantum mechanics to show that even the most outlandish theories can become tomorrow's scientific postulates. In fact, he said, Kabbalists had unlocked the secrets of subatomic physics centuries before Einstein and Bohr. "I wanted something to make sense in my life," Lindsey acknowledges, "and little parts of what he said kept making sense." She signed up for Kabbalah I and began attending services with Alex.

**A MAN, A PLAN, A MOVEMENT**

The man who brought Kabbalah to the masses is an unlikely guru. Rav Berg (the title *Rav* denotes special respect for a rabbi) began life as Feivel Gruberger in an Orthodox enclave of Brooklyn. After being ordained as a rabbi, he switched to the insurance business. Then on a trip to Israel in the early '60s, he met Rav Yehuda Brandwein, one of the century's great Kabbalists, and became his student. He also reportedly married Brandwein's niece, and they had children. But around the time of Brandwein's death, in 1969, that marriage ended, and he later married Karen, a fellow Brooklynite. He changed his name to Philip Berg and with his wife opened the first

her that she had to pass through the center's store, with its slick displays, to get to class. That didn't stop her from buying a \$26 red string to ward off the "evil eye" or a \$415 Zohar. She was unnerved by the *chevra*, or full-time volunteers, who badgered her to take classes and buy books. Yet she respected her teacher, Chaim, who seemed to find real joy in sharing his knowledge.

Meanwhile, Lindsey and Alex had embarked on an affair and moved in together. After a few months he asked her to marry him. Chaim, Alex's mentor, had told him that Lindsey showed signs of being his "soul mate" and that it was an astrologically auspicious time for him to take a bride. (Alex says that in Kabbalah, a soul mate doesn't necessarily mean "a mate for the rest of your life. It could mean a person who comes into your life to teach you a lesson, or you teach them.")

Lindsey loved Alex, but the relationship had its troubles. She says Alex questioned her incessantly about old flames, berated her for speaking too familiarly with other men, called her spoiled and stupid, and forbade her to wear red lipstick or nail polish. On a Christmas visit to Memphis, friends say, he nearly started a bar fight with one of her actor pals over a perceived slight. Yet she accepted his proposal, partly for fear of passing up an unrepeatably cosmic opportunity.

To preserve Alex's reputation at the center and to avoid the sin of "evil-speak," Lindsey kept his bullying to herself. (Alex remembers some things differently but admits "I'm not the easiest guy in the world to get along with.") Chaim, she says,



counseled that they could resolve any problem by following the center's principle of emotional restraint and jointly scanning the Zohar. When it became clear that Lindsey's parents disliked Alex, Chaim explained that friction with family was a signal that a couple was joined by destiny. The center also taught that "negative thoughts" could do material harm, and Lindsey, fearing family and friends would bring bad vibes to her wedding, didn't invite them. "I felt apart from them," she says, "but a part of the center and this life."

Lindsey and Alex were married by Chaim at the Kabbalah Centre on May 26, 2002. "I remember standing under the *huppa*," she says, "and as Alex walked in my first thought was, Run!" The event was worlds apart from the big church wedding she'd always envisioned, and she found herself regretting the absence of the people she cared about most.

all scientific knowledge as well as the past and the future; its leaders have absolute power—there are no clerics or lay committees to rein in their authority.

Not all unhealthy cults are as aggressive or systematic as the Moonies, Hassan says. Some modulate the level of control to fit individuals' susceptibilities and life circumstances. At the Kabbalah Centre, most followers never experience anything close to mind control. But those least capable of resisting—followers dealing with family troubles, for example, or the stress of moving to a new city—"are going to be more manipulable and exploitable," he says.

The center insists it doesn't control anyone. "Spiritual discovery can elicit powerful devotion," Yehuda Berg, 32, says via e-mail. "This bespeaks the strength of the teachings of the Kabbalah—no more." Roseanne backs him up: "Kabbalah is

"KABBALAH IS ABOUT MEDITATION," SAYS ROSEANNE BARR. "IF YOU'RE WEAK AND VULNERABLE, YOU SHOULDN'T JOIN ANY GROUP. THERE ARE IGNORANT, CONTROLLING PEOPLE WHEREVER YOU GO."



**Flocking together:** (From far left) Kabbalah Centre luminaries include Demi Moore as well as Guy Ritchie (holding son Rocco) and Madonna, shown leaving a service in New York.

**A MATTER OF CONTROL**

Steve Hassan knows how the emotionally vulnerable can be led down dangerous spiritual paths. He was at Queens College in 1974, a 19-year-old junior reeling from a rough breakup, when a trio of pretty girls approached him with a dinner invitation. It turned out to be a recruiting session for the Unification Church—aka the Moonies. Soon he dropped out of school and became a recruiter himself. Over the next two years Hassan rose to a leadership position, before his father and three ex-members staged an intervention. Eventually Hassan became one of the country's best-known exit counselors, helping members of "unhealthy cults" liberate themselves.

Hassan's definition of "unhealthy" hinges on what he calls BITE: behavior, information, thought, and emotion—all the elements a group needs to control in order to make members dependent. Any organization, Hassan says, can inspire cultlike devotion in some followers. Even mainstream groups, from religions to diet support networks, use some degree of cognitive suggestion. But in an unhealthy cult, according to Hassan, everything from getting dressed to communicating with loved ones may be subject to group control. Severe restrictions on sleep or diet foster altered mental states and weaken resistance. Members are taught to banish unsuitable ideas and feelings by means of "thought-stopping" techniques—meditation, chanting, formulaic prayer. To ensure discipline, phobias are planted in members' minds, such as the idea that disobedience or error will cause disaster. The cult claims to have the key to

about meditation," she says, "and it is meditation that changes your life, not groups of people or rabbis. If you're weak and vulnerable, you should not join any group. There are ignorant, controlling people everywhere you go." But Hassan has seen some center followers change in ways that he believes meditation alone cannot explain. That's why he said yes when Lindsey's mother asked for his help.

**THE INTERVENTION**

When Lindsey called to tell her about the wedding, Donna Roberts says, "I must've cried every day for two weeks." Through friends at church, Donna got in touch with Hassan. He first advised her to avoid further alienating Lindsey, who had cut off all contact with her construction-magnate father after a recent quarrel. (Lindsey's parents had separated after her move to L.A.) "He said, 'They want you to say you're never going to see her again if she's going to treat you like that,'" she recalls. "He said, 'You go out and fight for her'—and fight I did."

At Hassan's urging, Donna flew to Los Angeles for the belated reception the couple held that June. She went with Lindsey to a class at the center and was struck by the instructor's evasiveness. "Every time someone asked a question," she says, "the teacher would work around it or say, 'That's a wonderful question. We'll cover it next week.'"

Donna enlisted Lindsey's oldest friend, Tracy, who was equally concerned. "She'd always been outgoing, boisterous, freethinking," Tracy says. "Now she (Continued on page 528)



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was calm, but in an eerie way." Donna also contacted Lindsey's beloved mentor at the University of Memphis (which she had left before graduating to act in *Peter Pan*), Judaic Studies professor David Patterson.

In November 2002, Donna invited her daughter to Memphis for a birthday celebration. She would treat Lindsey; her sister, Lesli; and three friends to a spa weekend. "I said, 'Yeah, I'm there!'" Lindsey recalls. On the second day, Donna told her a man wanted to share some information with Lindsey about the Kabbalah Centre. If she didn't care to listen he'd go away, but if she did, she might learn a few things that would surprise her. "I was mad," Lindsey says. "But looking back on it, if I were her, I would've done the same thing." Besides, she was growing weary of the gap between the center's promises of fulfillment and the reality of her life. She accepted, and Hassan came into the hotel room.

Hassan showed her reports that were critical of the center and a stack of news clippings—from journals as far-flung as *Miami* and *Tel Aviv*—documenting ex-devotees' allegations. There were stories (all denied by the center) of followers being told their marriages were "spiritually unsuitable" and given new partners, or being pressed to donate large sums of money.

Although Lindsey was shocked, she responded that she was not a hard-core believer. Hassan suggested otherwise: She'd already married under the center's influence. She took daily precautions against the evil eye and bad karma—examples, he said, of induced phobias. He argued that the substitution of Zohar scanning for analytic problem solving, as well as bans on "negative thoughts" and "evil-speak," were ways of pre-empting critical thinking about the center itself. The group's habit of shunning apostates was further evidence of control.

### THE STORY OF X

But Hassan's strongest testimony came from a former Kabbalah Centre follower we'll call X (she requested that her name be withheld to protect her privacy), whom Donna had flown in to tell Lindsey her story. X was a college sophomore in 2000, when she discovered her local Kabbalah Centre. At the time she was feuding with her parents, questioning her Christianity, and struggling with her studies; she had just endured surgery and a bad breakup. She heard that Kabbalah could cure illness and "remove the chaos" from people's lives, and the chevras who approached her were effusively welcoming. "It sounded," she says, "like everything I was looking for."

X became a fixture at her center, taking classes and helping cook Shabbat dinners and clean up afterward. She had grown up admiring her Jewish neighbors and was eager to convert

to Judaism, so she began learning Hebrew and keeping kosher. Her teachers, she says, told her that her mother, who was increasingly distressed by X's devotion to the center, was "manipulative and controlling."

Then in 2001, her rabbi told her that Karen Berg, on a visit, had been impressed by her friendliness and dedication and thought she would make a fine chevra. X was so excited that she walked out in the middle of a crucial exam: "I was thinking, 'Why am I doing this when I'm going to be doing bigger things?'"

No one at the center questioned her quitting school; she told her parents only that she was going to L.A., where she soon found herself working in the center's bookstore. In exchange for food, a one-bedroom apartment shared with four other girls, and a stipend of \$35 a month, she worked seven days a week, often from morning till past midnight. On Shabbat, the day of rest, she once even did the Bergs' laundry—a task she regarded as a privilege. When a follower she'd begun dating proposed marriage, she was advised to avoid any close relationships till she'd completed her conversion and "received her Jewish soul."

Around this time, a center teacher began paying her special attention. He pressed her for details about her past, she says, including her sexual history, and recommended a special cleansing. Under Jewish law, a ritual bath, or *mikvah*, culminates the conversion process; if the convert is female, she must be covered by a sheet, and another woman must be present. One night, however, X recalls, she met the teacher alone at the center's mikvah for an improvised preconversion rite. He turned his back as she approached the shallow pool wrapped in only a towel. Once she was underwater, she says, he faced her and began to pray. "He could see everything," she says.

The incident didn't strike X as unwholesome until long afterward; indeed, it only heightened her euphoria. But other things at the center began to trouble her. There was the pressure to take on more work and the persistent exhaustion. There were the endless postponements of her conversion, supposedly on astrological grounds. X hated the push to sell courses and books and to make sure wealthy worshippers never had to pray alone. (She remembers guiding Marla Maples through the service on one holiday.) She was dismayed when one center leader, having scored a big contribution from a rock star, pranced around the office giving high fives. Still, she told herself she was happy, and when her mother made an unannounced appearance at the center, X informed her that she planned to stay.

But during X's third month as a chevra, she learned that her father was seriously ill, and she asked permission to go see him. Her supervisors, she says, advised her to work harder instead, to send more Light his way. They

warned her that she would be cutting herself off from the group and from the Light—from God—if she went. She left anyway, taking a supply of Kabbalah water (\$78 per case) to aid her father's healing. When she dropped by the local center and confessed her growing discontent, she says, the rabbi told her, "You didn't give 100 percent, so you didn't get 100 percent."

Soon after, X's mother asked if she'd meet Hassan. The intervention was followed by two weeks at a cult rehab center and a year of therapy. By the time she met Lindsey, she was back in college and was about to become engaged.

The Kabbalah Centre refused to comment on the details of her story, but Yehuda Berg writes that X "was already alienated from her family before she became involved with the center. How many of the other allegations are manifestations of prior conditions? Should we refuse to minister to these individuals?" He notes that X was one of 40 chevras there: "While we regret that we were not able to assuage her mental anguish and make her comfortable within the group, is the center to be blamed for an experience at odds with that of 39 other individuals in exactly the same position?" Indeed, a current L.A. chevra, Alison Cohen, 26, calls her life at the center "amazing, completely rewarding, fulfilling," and says her long workdays are entirely voluntary.

For Lindsey, though, X's tale struck a resonant chord. "I wanted to cry for her," she says. "I was so sorry." Over the next three days, in fact, Lindsey did plenty of crying. Patterson, her former mentor, talked with her about Kabbalist theology. She spoke with Hassan about her abandoned ambitions and how she could begin to reclaim them. She was ready to end her romance with the center. But she was not prepared to say goodbye to Alex.

Lindsey flew back to L.A. and asked him to go with her to a marriage counselor, but it soon became clear to both of them that their relationship was irreparably broken. Alex, who hasn't been to the center in nearly a year, remains loyal to its principles. "If you live your life according to what you learn there, you're going to see improvements," he says. "It's easier said than done, but that's the whole point."

In May 2003, a year after her wedding, Lindsey left Alex, and in August she went back to Memphis. Almost immediately she won back the part of Peter Pan, then roles in other plays and short films. She resumed her studies and was soon earning straight A's. She found a new boyfriend—a drummer in a rock band—who has no objection to red nail polish.

Nonetheless, she's keeping her Zohar as a reminder of where she's been. "For some reason," she says, "I think I needed to become aware of the feeling of loss. Your freedom, your sense of who you are and what your goals are—I needed to lose all that to realize just how precious those things are." □