

## *Four Lessons in Kabbalah*

### Lesson One: I have a soul

The door at the end of the hall is slightly open, generating a thin knife of light across the floor. I walk down the hall and stop right in front of it. I am facing a cardboard sign that reads “Sculpture Studio”. Should I knock or to just enter? I knock forcefully. My knuckles swing open the metal door.

“Come in” I hear a boyish voice call. I swing the door all the way open, gently. As the high squeaking sound raises every hair on my body, especially my lashes, I see Herman for the first time. I search for the source of the boyish voice that called me to enter. All I see is Herman. I am confused. How could a child’s voice originate in this man’s body?

Herman stands severely hunched over, with his large belly preceding him. His pants are hanging low, as if he has given up on concealing his inflated stomach within them. He is wearing a smock with several clay stains and numerous pockets filled with tools. He is wearing a neon green cap that reads “Herman’s Studio.” His beard looks a few weeks old, but seems too thick and chaotic for its young age. He smiles and the bristles of his face move in sync with his widening mouth. Only then do I notice the room. Herman is standing in a large spacious studio. Strong northern light penetrates the studio from four tall arched windows. The windows remind me of a church I once visited in Italy. Herman is surrounded by easels, canvases, and tools spread out in the room. The shelves close to the wall contain large art books finger marked with clay and brown sculptures covered in plastic.

Herman moves the bench in front of him out of the way with a foot gesture and walks towards me. His asthmatic breathing is thick and loud. His heavy steps and wrinkled forehead indicate he is old. Perhaps he is my parents’ age.

I take a few steps towards the center of the room and feel as if I have been lifted into air, as if gravity has decided that I am no longer worth pulling down. Herman smiles as we meet in the middle of the space, surrounded by light. He holds up his hands to show me that they are dirty with clay, thus excusing himself from a handshake.

“Hello, I am Herman. Are you here to pose for me today?” I witness his boyish voice and only now believe it is his own.

“Yes, I am a friend of Rachel’s, your babysitter. She gave me the instructions on how to get to your studio.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Come in. Before we start, I would like to let you know what I am planning on doing. Originally, I had planned on doing some drawings of you, but I’ve decided to begin a sculpture instead. I would like to know if you are available to meet for three more sessions, maybe once a week. I definitely will not be able to complete the sculpture today. But if you can’t, that’s OK, because you didn’t know of my plans, I will pay you for all your...”

“No, no” I interrupt his mumbling. “That won’t be necessary, I can come for three more sessions.” He smiles widely. His belly smiles, too. I reciprocate. Herman walks to the sink and begins washing the clay off his hands. Attempting to overcome the sound of running water, he screeches in my direction. “...while I am getting cleaned up, you can go ahead and take off your clothes, and maybe even think of some poses.”

His words seem to travel to me like a laser. They arrive at my ears with the same intensity as he speaks them. I take off all my clothes and put them on a chair in a neat pile. I walk to the middle of the room where a low stage and some pillows are located. I feel the cool air swimming between my legs. As I walk, I notice all the female sculptures in the room. I look at them like sisters. I know I will soon join them as a monument in clay, a mini woman frozen in time.

“Do you want me here?” I ask, pointing to the setup.

“Yes, exactly.” Herman dries off his hands with a paper towel and walks over to where I am standing.

“Look, just relax, get into a pose that is comfortable, something you will be able to hold for a long time.” His voice doesn’t surprise me for the first time.

He raises the stand in front of him to chest level with the move of a bolt. He unwraps a large lump of clay from its plastic covering. He dumps the entire piece of clay on the stand and begins to work at its stiffness. His movements reveal strong arm muscles. I watch the dance his muscles perform on the skin of his arm as he increases the speed of his strokes.

“... So Rachel tells me you’re Jewish.” He says as he further accelerates the motions of his hands on the clay. He stops for a moment and removes his cap. Under it, his head is covered by a kipa. He reveals his kipa to me like policemen show their badges. It seems as if he is pointing to a trophy of some sort he has worked hard to receive. He is exposing the reason for his line of questioning.

“Yes, I am.” I move the pillows aside, and sit on the flat surface of the stage. The soles of my feet are touching each other. I bend my back forward, bringing my head close to my feet. My hands grab my ankles. My triangular breasts are pointing towards my feet. I am bowing down. Not to Herman, to something greater. Since my head is in the diamond space formed by my legs, I can no longer see Herman. I can only feel his presence.

“So, what is a nice Jewish girl like you doing modeling for artists?”

I think to myself “How dare he assume that I am nice. This man doesn’t even know my name, but because I am Jewish he is so convinced he knows...” I realize I have not yet answered his question. I reply: “I don’t know if you can really call me Jewish. I don’t believe in God.”

I hear his hands struggling rapidly with the clay. I feel his eyes looking at the back of my neck.

“Well, do you believe you have a soul?” He asks.

I wait a few seconds. I try to come up with an answer that will break the argument he is about to construct. "I don't know. I am really not sure if I have a soul or not." I feel my breath hitting my feet as I speak.

"Of course you have a soul." He replies. "I would not have an interest in sculpting you if you didn't have a soul. You would be a hollow person. And although you may not know it yet, your soul is a Jewish one."

I am ambivalent towards his assertion. I find his words condescending, but the comic tone in which he delivered them leaves me appeased. I remain still in my pose on the stage for two hours, every so often declining his suggestion for a break. I close my eyes. I remain silent and silent. I focus on the numbness developing in different parts of my body. I try to feel a soul inside me.

## Lesson Two: God is imperfect

I walk straight down the hall to Herman's studio. I enter. Herman is standing with hands dirty of clay setting up the sculpture he started the prior week. The piece is still very abstract and I cannot recognize myself in it. My eyes focus on Herman's kipa. It is turned upward like a bowl on his head. It seems like it is hovering above his head. I laugh at the illusion my eyes are creating once I spot the hair clip on his head. The 'floating' kipa would definitely have fallen off his head if it were not attached. I taste comfort in the shower of light and great space I have just entered. We exchange hellos. I remove my clothing and assume the position I began the prior week. The stage is marked with little stickers outlining the pose. I fit into these markings perfectly. I am relieved to have my head low between my legs. I find the intensity of eye contact with Herman unbearable.

Herman circles me a few times, glancing at my naked body from different angles. He then drags his sculpture stand to my right. The squeaking sound of the stand's rusty wheels penetrates my body and sends an electric wave from my feet upward that stops at the arch in my neck. Herman

mumbles to himself “ ... finished establishing the figure... now I’ll work on her *Malkuth, Hod, Netsah* and *Yesod*.” He mumbles some more words I cannot understand. A minute later I hear his hands begin to work. “Today, I will keep my eyes open” I think. With my head in my lap, I speak loudly so he can hear me: “So, I thought about what you said last week, about me having a Jewish soul. And after thinking about it, I now know for sure that you were wrong.”

I hear no break in his work. His hands continue to hit the clay at a steady pace. I wonder why he is not responding. Is it because he is too absorbed in his work to hear my words? Is it because he is waiting for me to elaborate?

I continue: “You see, before I do something, I don’t think about God. Not about a Jewish God or any other God. I think only about the results of my action. And sometimes I choose to do things that I know are wrong. This means that I really don’t believe he exists.”

I hear him clear his throat from a deep place. “My child, are you saying that because you don’t always do the right thing, you are not Jewish?”

With my head motionless between my legs, I feel his words hitting the back of my neck. “He is twisting my words” I think. “I have thought out this logic several times over the past week and it made complete sense. Now this man is trying to confuse my thinking.”

“No, you see, you are playing with my words. That is not at all what I meant. It’s not only that I am not perfect. That is not how I know that I don’t believe in God. See, I don’t even aim at being perfect. I consider no moral or religious scale when I act. This is because I am a non-believer.”

“Do you think God is perfect?” He asks.

I feel his inquisitive tone hitting my body and search for a vague answer.

“I don’t know. I am really not sure. Since I think I don’t believe he exists, I really never thought about his character.”

“OK, “ He tries once more, still as calm as before, “Do you think that people who believe in God, me for example, think God is perfect?”

I do not know what to say. There are too many hypothetical assumptions in his question. This all reminded me of my uncle Jacob’s style of arguing. So many assumptions building on each other, that by the time you consider all he has said, you forget his original question. Nevertheless, I decide to answer quickly. I do not want to give the impression that I am confused.

“Of course you think God is perfect.” I reply with confidence as if I don’t understand why anyone would pose a question with such an obvious answer. “You believe that he is the creator of our world. You believe that he is the judge of every Jew, and a merciful one too. If he were imperfect how could you accept him as your ultimate judge?” I feel good about my reply. If I were allowed to move, I would straighten my back and raise my head high.

Herman immediately replies “Oh, no, no. You have it all wrong. God is not perfect at all. I believe in the Holy One, blessed be He, but he is often as wrong as any man, maybe even as wrong as you. Are you familiar with *Sefer HaZohar*?”

I realize I am arguing in foreign territory. I no longer know what Herman represents. Is this observant Jew, caressing my clay body a heretic? Does he belong to some strange cult? I decide to stop faking and admit my ignorance on the subject.

“No, I am not familiar with whatever you just mentioned.” I reply, awaiting my lesson.

The sound of his hands hitting the clay subsides and then comes to a halt. I hear him breathe deeply. He speaks: “The Zohar is one of the most significant Jewish books, some even call it the third bible since it is second only to the bible and the Talmud. Much of the Zohar is interpretations of Rabbi

Simeon ben Yohai and his students dating back to the second century. These passages analyze the psychology of God and try to establish...”

I feel the need to interrupt in order to prove my attention. “Wait a minute, you mean that God is analyzed like a person, with character flaws and everything?”

“Pretty much”, he continues to explain, “The Zohar describes conflicting elements that comprise the consciousness of God. The book establishes a personality for God based on his actions of creation and his revelations to man.”

I sigh. I let the air that I breathe flow through my body in a dance. Even though I am motionless, the air dances within me. “Well, in that case, what is God like, what kind of personality does the Zohar say he has?”

“Well, the Zohar constructs ten *sefirot* that embody all aspects of God’s personality: *Kether*, *Hokhma*, *Bina*, *Gevura*, *Hesed*, *Tiferet*, *Netsah*, *Hod*, *Yesod* and *Malkuth*. These characteristics are dynamic and their relationships are dynamic. An energy flows from *Sefira* to *Sefira*, activating and intensifying different characteristics as it moves...”

Herman continues to speak in his high monotonous voice, and I lose focus. I am dizzy and I can no longer single out words from his speech. I can tell he is not used to teaching. He is struggling with the simplification of these concepts. The rhythm of his speech accelerates, and I feel that if I don’t slow him down soon, he will be lost in this Zoharic lecture for eternity.

“Wait a minute, I am beginning to lose you. What do all those characteristics mean? When does he use which one?” I raise my head slightly sideways and peak at his work.

Herman pauses. He looks at the piece in front of him. He scrapes off a piece of the left foot with a thin metal tool, leaving a perfect arch between my big toe and my heel. He cleans the tool of the scrap clay. He sighs in frustration.

“I am sorry if I am getting carried away. The Zohar formulates a mathematical system that maps God’s behavior. It is too complicated for me to explain to you now. The point that I am trying to make is that this Kabbalist book reveals the complex nature of God. And more importantly, it teaches that this system of personal consciousness is the common element of God and man.”

I lower my head back to my ankles. I stop questioning. I silently absorb and I allow Herman to focus on his work. No more words are spoken for the remainder of this session. I close my eyes. I think of God. I place faces on him for once in my life instead of just a cloud. I borrow different features from famous Hollywood actors, cartoon characters, my friends. By the end of the session, I have formed a picture of God, built as a collage of many different characters: a Brad Pitt baby face with thin blond hair gathered in a pony tail; a wide Mickey Mouse smile with a Cuban cigar dangling from his lower lip; Steven’s smooth chest with a Star of David nipple piercing; God, how I loved touching Steven’s tender chest before he left me to go travel the world. I freeze this iconoclastic image of God in my mind and laugh inside at this stupid game of mine. I erase the image.

### Lesson Three: Creativity is the path to God

I walk the hall towards Herman’s studio. Before entering I decide on a new approach. Today, I will listen, not argue. I will learn, not confront. Whether I am a believer or not, a Jew or an atheist, the teachings of Herman are fascinating to me. I will swallow his arrogant assumptions about the nature of my soul in order to retrieve a lesson in mysticism. I reach the door. I knock gently.

“Come in” Herman calls. His high pitch voice has an ability to transcend matter. Even though there is a door separating his voice from my ears, I hear him, clearly, directly. I turn the doorknob and enter. I am once again in the familiar shower of light. Herman’s hands are clean. He is sitting on a stool, glancing at pictures in a book. His heaviness clashes with the thin lines of the stool.



“Genius” he exclaims. “What brilliant work.” He raises his head from the large book and turns to me. “Come, have a look.” I look over his shoulder and see a photograph of a sculpture by August Rodin. It is a sculpture of a pair of hands. They are massive, heavy and very detailed. I feel I should comment, but I have nothing intelligent to say.

“Beautiful. I like the details.” I reply.

Herman is looking at me. He is silent for a moment. It is as if only now I have entered the room in his mind.

“Yes, it is beautiful. But the beauty is not in the details. It is in the truthfulness, the sense of man, not of matter that these hands convey.” An awkward smile of ignorance develops on my face. I remove my eyes from the book and take a few steps backwards. I slowly begin to undress. I start with my shoes and my socks.

“You are not impressed by the details at all?” I ask in a diplomatic tone. Herman closes the book with a sudden motion that produces a bang.

“Let me explain what I mean through a story.” He motions me with his hand to have a seat on the stool. As I am seated, he raises his right pointer finger and begins swinging it from side to side as he speaks. It is as if his finger is a remote control to his speech.

“One time when Rodin completed a sculpture of a figure he had been working on for months, he called upon one of his students and asked him what he thought of the sculpture. The student walked around the sculpture a few times, examining it from all angles. The piece was a magnificent life size clay sculpture of a monk. The monk seemed old and his face, mostly covered by a hood, revealed a pensive expression. Once the student had formed an opinion of his master’s work, he replied.

‘Master, most of all I like the hands. They are so detailed. So magnificent.’ Rodin seemed unsatisfied and called upon another student to join them in the room and asked him the same question. The student examined the sculpture and said ‘The details in the hands are the most remarkable I have ever seen, master.’ Rodin, still unhappy, called in a third student and posed him the same question. The student replied “Why master, the hands on this sculpture are the most lively

I have seen that do not belong to a real man.' Rodin, at this point frustrated, walked towards the sculpture and faced it. He looked directly into the piercing clay eyes of the monk. Rodin held the clay hands in his own and broke them off. Then he turned to the three students in the room and said: 'Now, for heaven's sake, what do you think of my new sculpture?'"

Herman freezes his gesture for a few seconds. His eyes are wide open causing his forehead to wrinkle. His pointing finger remains frozen. I smile. Only then does Herman relax his face and return his finger to his fist.

I resume my undressing. I walk towards the stage in the center of the room and sit in the boundaries of the tape markings. I arch my back and form a diamond with my legs.

As my vision locks on my familiar ankles, Herman resumes his speech: "It is the truthfulness of art that makes it brilliant, not the details." I hear him step away. I raise my head. Herman is walking towards the shelf with the sculpture of me. He picks it up and then carries it to the stand. He removes the plastic covering and I see something of myself: the arch in my back, the little bun of hair on the back of my head. I lower my head. Herman starts mumbling and measuring. I feel his hand pointing to and fro, I sense his eyes dancing on my body. He mumbles to himself:

"*Din...Tifereth...Hesed.*" I wonder whether this is a prayer or a sculpting technique. I remain as still as I can. I hear the familiar sound of Herman's hands in dialogue with the clay. I look at my long, outgrown toenails. I begin to think of how I've been neglecting my body since Steven left, as if I took care of myself only for him. I treated my body like his trophy.

"Are you an Artist?" Herman asks, interrupting my thoughts.

"No. I don't know. I write in my journal everyday."

"Don't discredit the art of writing. What do you write about?" He asks.

"Sometimes my thoughts on the events of the prior day; sometimes stories that float into my mind. Yesterday I wrote a five-page letter to a friend that is traveling. But I really had no intentions of mailing it. I don't even have his address. It was more for me than for him."

“The Kabbalah teaches that writing is the most magical act of creativity, superior to all other art forms. The books of the Kabbalah were written by real people, not God. In fact, some believe that writing is a Jewish form of meditation. Some Kabbalists explain that when they write their minds become a vehicle to something greater.”

“If in their writing they are just the vehicle wouldn’t that mean that they are not the creators of the art they produce?” I regret asking this question. I was enjoying the non-confrontational nature of our meeting. I am afraid I have just destroyed it.

I hear Herman exhale in a half giggle. “Don’t be a wise ass. When I say that a writer’s mind becomes a vehicle, this is not necessarily a vehicle to someone else’s message. When one writes, with lucidity, an inner voice is revealed. The writer becomes a vehicle to a message from deep within himself. You must never discredit writing in this manner. *Sefer Yetsira* tells us how God created the world with twenty two Hebrew letters and the ten numbers of the decimal system.”

I decide to resume my role as an obedient and curious student “What is *Sefer Yetsira*?” I ask.

Herman adopts a pedagogical tone in his speech, “*Sefer Yetsira*, or in English The Book of Formation, discusses the secrets of creation. It was intended as an explanation of the Book of Genesis. *Sefer Yetsira* teaches that numbers and letters have a central importance in the creation of the world.”

“How does this Kabbalist book relate to our discussion of writing?” I ask.

“Patience, my dear, I am getting to that right now. You see, as I started saying before, *Sefer Yetsira* explains that God created the world with the twenty two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This implies that the actual matter of the universe was first molded in words.

“Wait a minute,” I interrupt, “That means that every literate person can create a whole world just like God?”

“Not exactly, you need to know what combinations of letters to use. *Sefer Yetsira* calls such combinations gates. These are the gates to creative activity. But you were partially right. One of the

most controversial conclusions of this book is that if a writer can combine the letters properly, he can reenact the creative process used by God in the creation of the world.”

“Wow. So you think I should quit modeling and become a full-time writer?”

I hear Herman exhale a laugh. I hear his strokes against the clay become more rapid. I realize that this is the end of today’s lecture. I sit motionless and in silence for the remainder of our time. I wonder if some stories I scribbled in my journal can really be called art. I wonder if they are potent enough to transform into matter. I try to think of myself as a creator. I decide that no matter what happens, I will go to the gym every day next week. I will wax my legs; I will eat right, read books and take better care of myself.

#### Lesson Four: Awakening

I walk the hall towards Herman’s studio in giant leaps. I feel strong. This is our last session. Today will be different than our prior sessions, I decide. I will not be the passive student Herman wants me to be. I read my entire journal during the week that has passed. I decided I am a creator. I am Herman’s equal. I have spent the prior afternoon at the library reading on Jewish mysticism. I am equipped with the knowledge to expose his phoniness.

I do not slow down as I reach the door. I walk right in. Herman is erect by the sculpture stand, gently caressing my clay figure. I am startled. It looks just like me. My gestures are imprinted in the clay. He ignores my arrival. He is mumbling to himself those same Hebrew words “*Hokhmah... Bina...*” His hands move up the piece and reach my clay head. He then arrests his movement and holds the clay head with one hand supporting the back of the head so it won’t fall back as if he is holding a baby. I quickly begin removing my clothing to assume the pose.

Once I am naked, I notice there is something inside my foot. I shake my foot, but I still feel as if there is a condensed substance within it. I feel as if I am a duvet cover in the shape of my body and the actual blanket has fallen to the foot part of the duvet cover. Could this be my soul? I shake my

leg in an attempt to disperse the substance evenly into the rest of my body, just like one would shake a duvet a few times before laying it on the bed. I feel the substance in my foot spread upward within me. It now occupies my feet, my thighs, my torso, my belly, my chest. It finally reaches my head.

I assume my pose within the boundaries of the tape markings.

After half an hour of still silence, Herman's high voice penetrates my mind like the ringing of a bell:

"Good morning."

"Good morning" I reply, feeling my warm breath on my ankles. "Today, I have prepared a question."

"Oh, that is great. Only those who ask will learn. Others remain ignorant." I let his words pass me by and proceed with my well-planned speech.

"So tell me Herman, I thought you were a practicing Jew. How come you disobey the bible every day?"

I do not hear a change in his pace. I continue: "After Moses received the Ten Commandments from God, he was upset with the Jews for having built a sculpture. He told the Israelites that God disallows the construction of sculptures. Creation is exclusively the act of God. How can you try to teach me Kabbalah at the same time that you are breaking one of the most basic rules of your religion?"

Herman pauses for a minute. "My child, you are angry at me for no reason." He replies calmly.

"I want to hear your answer to this question. Please, I am interested to hear what you have to say for all your clay monuments of naked women." I do not pause between my sentences. I will allow no weakness in my attack.

"I am not attempting to replace our creator. By sculpting your body and soul, I am merely attempting to contemplate our creator. I am trying to better understand God's creation, not mimic it."

"If what you are doing is according to the rules, how come it is not allowed to display sculptures in Israel?"

“That is a true statement, but it holds true only for realistic sculpture. If you glance around the room, you will not find one realistic sculpture I have made. This is precisely because I am not trying to be the creator. I am only trying to gain a better understanding of him. Here, raise your head, have a look.”

I raise my head, and then straighten my slightly numb legs. I walk around to the shelves Herman points to. I notice that one piece has a blank face. Another has no legs. Another has a large ear placed in the middle of the woman’s stomach.

“You see, I purposely injure or alter each piece so people will not doubt my intentions. I do this so I will not confuse my intentions. I am not a creator. I am merely a student. I am celebrating the creations of God, not copying them.”

Herman holds out his hand and gestures me to return to the pose. I obey.

With my breath at my feet I respond, “Well, the sculpture of me you are working on seems very realistic. Not only does it have all my body parts, but it looks exactly like me.”

“Do not jump to conclusions, my dear. I am not done with this piece yet.”

I hear Herman stepping away from the piece and walking towards his tools at the corner of the room. He mumbles the word “*Kether*” repeatedly. It is as if he is chanting a mantra, a word of some spiritual power. I hear the sound of metal tools touching each other. It is the same sound that people make when they are washing silverware in a sink, but without the sound of water.

I decide I will not accept his retreat to his tools. I will draw him back to me with stinging words. I speak loudly: “You know, Herman, I have been thinking about the growing relationship between us, and I think you see it through warped lenses. I am not your student. I am a paid model posing for a sculpture. If you didn’t pay me I wouldn’t spend one minute in your stupid studio.”

I hear his footsteps getting louder and nearer. He is now standing at the piece, but I do not hear his hands massaging the clay...

... “I may not be able to move, but it is unfair for you to take advantage of this situation and try to penetrate my mind with your teachings.”

I hear nothing of his actions. I get goose bumps. I feel the blanket of my soul moving in waves in my body like a flag dances in wind.

“Herman!” I scream, trying to stop whatever it is he is doing. “You can mold my body in clay, but you cannot shape my soul.”

“You can stand now. I am done. Thank you for your patience and openness.” His voice is deeper than usual. I immediately stand. I walk towards the sculpture. I am still naked. I face my equal in clay. I observe what he has done. Herman has sliced a rectangular window through my clay back. It begins at the bottom of my shoulder blades and goes all the way down to my lower back. I see the scrap rectangle beside the sculpture, still attached to the knife that has just sliced it out. I peak through the window in my back and see my clay legs and clay feet through it.

I raise my eyes from the scope and look at Herman, who is standing remarkably close. I point to the opening in the back of the sculpture and frown my mouth to show him my confusion.

“But you worked so long on getting the back just right. Why have you done this? What is it?”

“Why this is the window to your soul.” He replies. “Have another look.”