



**This resource examines good practice in using quotations and references to scholars within an A02 answer. Read the following two arguments about philosophical understandings of the nature of God and religious experience found in Kabbalah and decide which one is a good example and which one is a poor example. Give reasons to justify your decision, particularly in relation to use of quotations, references to scholars and the style of reasoning.**

## Evaluating whether it is possible to have a personal mystical union with God in Judaism

### 1.

This question is all about whether or not the claims of Kabbalah are true.

On the one hand, they claim to have experienced God through mystical practices; on the other hand traditional Jewish teaching is that we cannot experience God – that which is ‘wholly other’.

On the one hand the Zohar supports mysticism and gives special knowledge, insight and guidance for those who follow kabbalah; on the other hand, special knowledge and insight is only through the Torah and Talmud, guided by experienced learned scholars.

On the one hand, En Sof emanates power to individuals; on the other hand shekinah is the presence that is felt at worship in traditional Judaism.

On the one hand traditional Judaism came first and the teaching of mystical union may be a distortion; on the other hand kabbalah could be seen to be a development of Judaism.

Overall, there are many arguments for and against but if Judaism really is true then God should be revealed to each individual person.

### Summary

This first example has no evidence of any scholarship to back up the arguments presented. Neither does it develop the points or lines of reasoning presented. In addition, it is very brief for an A Level answer and is more concerned with listing arguments for and against than exploring each one. It is clear that the answer has some understanding of (a) the problem Kabbalah raises for traditional



Judaism (b) how Kabbalah works and, (c) a basic awareness of the different possible arguments. However, it is totally undeveloped and the conclusion does not appear to be linked to the rest of the answer in any way whatsoever.

## 2.

The main line of argument in support of the statement is that there is a distinctive mystical and esoteric tradition within Judaism known as Kabbalah, wherein the whole purpose of practice is to experience the divine nature and presence. This argument would suggest that it is the purpose of Kabbalah to interpret and 'experience' the traditional teachings within the Jewish scriptures in a symbolic way, but also a way that involves highly specialised and intensive practices. These practices reveal significant meaning and understanding of God that has been described as a 'closeness' to God. Through meditation, visual, artistic and magical means some have even claimed to have had a 'mystical union' with the divine. Therefore, it is clearly possible to have a personal mystical union with God in Judaism.

The Zohar, revealed in the thirteenth century, is the book containing the mystical writings of the rabbi Simeon bar Yochai and is instrumental in leading and instructing the devotee towards such union through a focus on the experience of God and trying to penetrate God's essence. Hellner-Eshed states, 'Torah in the Zohar is not conceived as a text, as an object, or as material, but as a living divine presence, engaged in a mutual relationship with the person who studies her.' The Zohar contains what Dosick describes as 'higher truths in addition to the literal meaning of the text; that the highest goal of a human being is to reach for and understand the innermost secrets of existence; and that every human act has a ripple effect on the entire universe'. It is thus considered to be the text that caters for those who wish to experience a personal mystical union with God in Judaism. As the Kabbalistic prayer states, "For the sake of the unification of the Holy One, blessed be He and His Shekinah, in awe and devotion I am prepared and ready to perform mitzvah (named here) to the full command of my Creator.' It is therefore clear that the Zohar supports the idea of a personal mystical union with God in Judaism.

Other aspects of Kabbalah also support the possibility of achieving closeness to God, and the concept



of En Sof is one such example. Even though Kabbalists acknowledge that God is beyond the grasp of the human mind, one aspect of divine revelation is through the Sefirot which act as filters between a person and God. As Robinson explains: 'they allow us to focus on and hear the "radio signals" of the All Powerful mixed in among the static of everyday life. The emanations, then, are the ways in which God is able to interact with the sensual world, the world we inhabit.'

Furthermore, through visual and magical means, some individuals have even claimed to have had a 'mystical union' with God. Evidence for this can be found in a school of early Jewish mysticism known as Merkavah mysticism. The aim of this contemplative system was to be a 'merkavah rider' and free oneself from the bonds of physical existence in order to ascend to the heavenly realms. Followers of this tradition were not content to be commentators on the biblical text; they sought to experience it for themselves. Tradition has it that it was possible for some particularly pious individuals to ascend into the divine realm and return to earth to convey the secrets that they had discovered. All this supports the idea that a personal mystical union with God in Judaism is possible.

Overall, the above arguments would point out that Judaism is grounded in an experience of God, for example, kavod in the Biblical narrative and shekinah in rabbinic literature. Both kavod and shekinah may be mystical in nature, however, it could be argued that such an experience is not specifically one of union with God, but more of a sense of the 'other'. As Dan states, 'The Kabbalah, according to the kabbalists, is never new; it can be newly discovered or newly received, but essentially it is millennia-old divine truth.'

However, on the contrary, traditional Judaism sees its focus on Torah and Talmudic study as very different to Kabbalah and not involving any such experience with God. According to this line of argument, the essential nature of God in Judaism is that God is transcendent, 'other', Holy and 'set apart' from humanity and beyond the realms of experience. Such a line of argument would point out that 'mystical' traditions within Judaism are a relatively late development and therefore not necessarily reliable.

Indeed, it could be argued that the practices of Kabbalah are too far removed from traditional Judaism in the eyes of many in the Jewish tradition today and the claims for 'mystical union' with the divine



are a distortion of the original teachings of Kabbalah. Afterman writes, 'In ancient forms of Jewish mysticism ... mysticism is about empowerment and knowledge – but no mystic or angel integrates himself into God Himself!' thus acknowledging mysticism in terms of knowledge or insight, but not mystical union with that which is 'wholly other'.

In conclusion, it is also important to consider the fact that many scholars regard the ideal of contemplative or mystical communion with God as a medieval innovation, and therefore a relatively late development within Judaism. Also, it has been argued that the practices of Kabbalah are too far removed from traditional Judaism in the eyes of many in the Jewish tradition today, and that even the claims for 'mystical' union' with God represent a distortion of the original teachings of Kabbalah.

### Summary

The second example is the better example of the two. There is a very good introductory paragraph that gets straight to discussing the answer through the nature of Kabbalah. The answer is evaluative throughout and keeps returning to the focus of the question. There is a good range of evidence presented, often supported by quotes or references/examples. The argument is balanced and sustained throughout and arrives at a decent conclusion. Overall, the structure of the debate shows a process of reasoning. It responds to points made and raises counter points which are then addressed. Although it may be slightly unbalanced in the weight of arguments, this does not affect its impact.

**TASK:** Develop the basic argument below by using any relevant quotes/references to scholars that are listed. You may also have your own. It should not be assumed that all are relevant or required. Then compare with other people in the class and discuss any differences assessing the justification given for those differences. Don't forget to also consider the different styles of evaluation examined above and in the AO2 task based on topic of different views about Kabbalah.



## Evaluating value of aids to worship in Kabbalah

The issue for debate here is that followers of Kabbalah were in possession of, and practised, a wide variety of mystical techniques which acted as aids to worship. Some might claim therefore that this suggests that aids to worship have an important part to play in Kabbalah, and that they act as the means by which a person can come to experience the divine nature and presence of God. Furthermore, the fact that the path to God within this particular mystic tradition is esoteric in nature might lead one to expect that symbolism and imagery of some kind needs to be present in order to act as a focus for worship, especially in ways which appeal to the imagination.

Kabbalah presents a solution via an aid to understanding which has come to be known as the Tree of Life. Its value as an aid to worship in Kabbalah is significant as it presents, in diagrammatical format, ten Sefirot which are considered to be the ten attributes through which God is manifested. The Tree of Life describes the different stages along a path to awareness of God.

The practice of meditation could also be considered by some to be of value as an aid to worship in Kabbalah, as great emphasis is placed upon it as the foremost method of achieving a true understanding of hidden truths.

### **POSSIBLE QUOTES TO USE:**

'One must therefore familiarize oneself with the ways of the Torah and know the purpose of the Holy Names. He should be expert in them, and when he needs to request something from God, he should concentrate on the Name designated to handle that question. If he does so, then not only will his request be granted, but he will be loved in the heavens and beloved in the world; he will inherit both this world and the next.' (Rabbi Gikatila)

'By engaging in the combination of letters and names, the mystic was able to empty his mind so as to concentrate on divine matters. Through such experiences, the kabbalists believed they could attempt to conduct the soul to a state of the highest rapture in which divine reality was disclosed.'

(Cohn-Sherbok)



'The roots connect the Tree to the all-encompassing Reality Beyond Being, and the Tree portrays the flow of Life that finally manifests itself as everyday world reality.' (Falcon and Blatner)

'Heaven connects to earth, spiritual to physical, Creator to creation. Everything starts getting into harmony with its essence and inner purpose.' (Freeman)

'For the sake of the unification of the Holy One, blessed be He and His Shekinah, in awe and devotion I am prepared and ready to perform mitzvah (named here) to the full command of my Creator.'  
(Kabbalistic prayer)

'Here is the strong foundation which I deliver to you that you should know it and engrave it upon your heart: the Holy Name, the whole of the Torah, the sacred Scriptures and all the prophetic books; these are all full of divine names and tremendous things. Join one to the other. Depict them to yourself. Test them, try them, combine them ... First begin by combining the letters of the name YHVH. Gaze at all its combinations. Elevate it. Turn it over like a wheel ... Do not set it aside except when you observe that it is becoming too much for you because of the confused movements in your imagination.' (Abulafia)

'The phenomenon of the golem contributed meaningfully to the portrayal of the Kabbalah as an esoteric, mysterious, and powerful compendium of ancient magic. ... The life force of the golem is the Hebrew alphabet, the secret name of God inserted under his tongue, or the word "truth," one of God's names engraved on his forehead ... The legend of the golem conformed to, and strengthened the image of the Kabbalah as doctrine that could bring great benefits, but one that also includes some sinister, dangerous elements.' (Dan)

'The Kabbalah, according to the kabbalists, is never new; it can be newly discovered or newly received, but essentially it is millennia-old divine truth.' (Dan)

'One should not discuss ... the Creation unless there are two besides him, nor the Divine Chariot with one individual, unless he was a wise man and had much knowledge of his own.' (Mishnah Hagiga 2:1)



'In all known periods of the development of this mystical tradition, Jewish mystics were in possession of, and apparently practised, a wide variety of mystical techniques ... all of them included a deep involvement of the mystic, who was expected to invest considerable effort in order to attain his religious goal.' (Idel)

'In the Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia and his school, devekut is fundamentally rooted in the combinations and permutations of the names of God. In Abulafia's concept of language, we learn that language is perceived as the universe itself; it reveals the structure of the Divine names of God; it reveals the structure of the laws of reality; and each letter of the Hebrew alphabet is in itself an entire world ...The Hebrew language is not a human creation but a Divine emanation and a result of Divine revelation.' (Shokek)