

## THE KABBALAH IN COACHING

**Susan Kahn** explores concepts of similarity and difference, the broken and whole self, the place for the transcendent in coaching and what the Kabbalah can offer coaches in this regard.

We are all so very different. There is so much that potentially divides us: our family of origin, our gender identity, our sexuality, our ability and disability, our religion or our absence of religion, our material comfort or our financial struggles, our professional identity or our absence of a professional identity, whether we are parents, or whether we care for parents, our mental health, our physical health, whether we are loved or longing for love, whether we are bereaved or heartbroken or full of joy. Whether we are the helper or the helped.

And yet are we all so very different? There is so much that potentially unites us: we all have families that can be problematic, we have all faced challenges and disappointment, we have all at times done things we regret, we have most likely loved and hated, had challenges with our minds and bodies. Despite the myriad of differences, there is much that we share. The unity that shows, to paraphrase Shakespeare, 'if you prick us, we all bleed'.

In coaching we encounter it all: we might deal with a presenting issue surrounding leadership, progression, insecurity or ambition, yet we are interested in and invested in the whole. At the heart of our clients is a spiritual identity that might not be acknowledged overtly but is present in the relationship. We might not refer to spirituality in coaching, preferring consciousness, values or identity, yet I suggest it is part of us.

Recognising the broader context of coaching work is welcomed and understood as a vital part of our work. Although coaching work is often conducted in a dyad, there are always other factors at play – cultural values, organisational issues, authority relationships, stakeholder perspectives and client demands – much more than just the presence of the coach and the client. But what of the more transcendent in coaching?

Meditation, breath work, acknowledging inner voices, mindfulness, being present – these might all form part of the way a coach works with a client. Is this so different from a shaman or an energy healer who works with their clients to reach a place of spiritual wisdom?

So, what might spiritual-mystical traditions offer the coaching relationship? The influence of psychotherapy on coaching is broadly accepted. The notion that coaching is only future-focused is a

*'I go out to seek You and find You  
coming towards me'  
— Yehuda Halevi*

limiting belief: many psychodynamic coaches use history, early relationships and past challenges to inform their coaching work. In exploring spirituality I am drawing on psychoanalysis and its particular relationship with an expression of spirituality: Kabbalah and the way infinity interweaves with the everyday.

This seems a profoundly similar state to a coaching client being in a state of openness to explore the areas where they are blocked, to examine the possibilities of a situation and to contemplate an alternative way of looking at the issues that are causing them to feel 'stuck'.

Michael Eigen, a scholar of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, is accomplished at connecting psychoanalysis with other methodologies: he has written specifically about the link between Jewish mystical teachings and psychoanalytical theory. He identified the connection between the work of Wilfred Bion<sup>1</sup> and the mystical. In conversation with Bion, Eigen discovered that he used Kabbalah as a framework for his psychoanalytic work.<sup>i</sup>

Bion is most well-known for his contribution to group work, but in his later thinking he became particularly interested in the transcendental, aligning psychoanalytic ideas with mystical thinking. Ideas about infinity, love, longing, the broken self and the world of the soul.

### WEAVING THE THREADS TOGETHER

One of the themes that connects Kabbalah, psychoanalysis and indeed some approaches in coaching is the recognition that we are broken and paradoxically whole at the same time. The notion of our conscious selves and the hidden self, the split self – generous, good and kind as well as mean-spirited, envious and malicious. We occupy and own both sets of qualities. Indeed, in our coaching work we can help clients to confront their whole selves, the self they choose to show the world and the less savoury aspects of themselves that they might choose to keep hidden. Or we might encounter the reverse, those suffering with extreme impostor syndrome who fail to see their strengths and contributions.

At the heart of Kabbalah is the notion that everything grows out of love. The idea of love being part of the coaching relationship is neither new nor is it broadly accepted, particularly among solutions-focused practitioners. For some, the notion of love in a work context or professional setting is inappropriate. It is something for home, for loved ones and for those with whom we share our personal lives. The work of leadership coach Yetunde Hoffman has gone a long way towards demystifying the engagement with the 'L' word in the workplace.<sup>ii</sup> However or wherever you choose to consider love, it produces a deep reaction, emotionally and physically. The demarcation of love as an aspect of only our private lives could be at the heart of some client challenges. People often turn to coaching when they are stuck. Perhaps they are suffering, or broken in some way and in need of restoring, understanding themselves or their situation better, finding clarity. Kabbalah seeks to offer a sense of healing, touching the brokenness in our needy core. It does not strive to offer clean solutions or answers but to encourage reflection, curiosity and questioning.

Famous Kabbalistic practitioners are known for their loving ways, devotion and awareness – surely qualities we would hope to experience in those who are holding us in the coaching relationship. There is also a sense in Kabbalah of our limiting self in an enormous,

unknowable world. Bion encouraged us to imagine the client in front of us as someone we don't know. To not presume and to meet them with openness. This is what he came to describe as 'O', or the absolute truth, the moment of analytic truth. Bion might say that we are too quick to claim omnipotence or omnipresence, creating powerful fantasies and potential destruction. We can draw back to a sense of 'not knowing' in order ultimately to discover and uncover. This seems hugely relevant in examining coaching on the global stage.

In working with other cultures we are forced to adopt a truly curious stance, to observe, to witness and to question. To move away from a patriarchal sense of 'knowing best' and to examine difference without judgement, indeed with love.

### WHAT IS KABBALAH?

Kabbalah is an ancient Jewish tradition. It uses esoteric methods to make mystical interpretations of the bible. Kabbalah is complex, with many books, explanations, meditations and tracts reaching back over 2,000 years. Many are aware of elements of Kabbalah, but few would claim to be scholars, yet elements of Kabbalistic teaching can resonate powerfully. Kabbalah encourages less ego-centred thought and more other-centred thinking. It is more about losing ourselves than finding ourselves. The translation of Kabbalah is 'that which is received'. At its core is the message that one must be receptive in order to receive, essentially opening ourselves up to be able to absorb or grasp ideas, to raise our consciousness to the point that our view of reality is changed.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr Susan Kahn is a coaching psychologist, fellow of the Association of Business Psychologists and a mediator. She is programme director for Coaching Psychology at Birkbeck, University of London, and works as an executive coach and facilitator.

1. Wilfred Ruprecht Bion (1897-1979) was an influential British psychoanalyst and a decorated soldier known for his work with group relations. He later went on to work with theories that relate to Kabbalistic thinking. He offers us an understanding of containment, crucial to coaching and all helping relationships and by his famous urgings to remain neutral and open to what a client might bring to any group or consultation.
- i. Eigen, M (2012). *Kabbalah & Psychoanalysis*. Karnac, London
- ii. Hoffman, Y Y (2020). *Beyond Engagement*. Authors Place Press