Edward Hoffman’s book begins with an excellent chapter that overviews the history of Jewish mysticism from Roman Palestine to its decline in 19th century industrial Europe. “The Merkabah or “Chariot” epoch…spanned the length of the first century B.C.E. through the tenth century C.E. and was centered in Palestine” (p. 10). This fairly stable tradition held the knowledge of how to attain to higher states of mind, and from it came what is considered the earliest kabbalistic text, the Sefer Yetzirah, or Book of Creation (3rd–6th centuries C.E.). This short work presented the cosmos as a set of 32 vibrational forces, represented by ten primordial numbers—the famed Sefirot—and the 22 characters of the Hebrew alphabet. Together and in constant interplay with each other, these essences uphold the world.
The Merkabah period was a precursor to the kabbalistic era proper, which began in southern Europe in the 12th century and flourished until the 17th century in both Europe and the Near East. During this period, the charismatic teacher Abraham Abulafia wandered through what is now Spain, Italy, and Greece spreading his meditative techniques, and, among other adventures, narrowly escaped being burned to death for attempting to convert the anti-Semitic Pope Nicholas III to Judaism. Around the same time Moses de Leon compiled and/or composed the Zohar, the great central text of kabbalah. In later centuries revered masters of kabbalism such as Cordovero, Karo, and Luria converged on Safed, in Palestine, which became a center famed for its kabbalistic scholarship. Several abortive messianic movements by students of kabbalah led its works to be rabbinically prohibited to all but the most advanced Jewish scholars, effectively bringing this flowering to a close.

However, with the 18th century birth of the Hasidic movement in eastern Europe, founded by Israel ben Eliezer—an apparently self-taught kabbalistic master better known as the Baal Shem Tov—kabbalistic Judaism took on a new and wider life. The Jews of eastern Europe were mostly poor, uneducated, often oppressed, and always excluded from meaningful participation in non-Jewish society; they received the joyous and mystically charged teachings of the Baal Shem Tov with great enthusiasm. He and his successor, Rabbi Dov Baer of Metzrich, established Hasidism as a Jewish path that has many adherents throughout the world. Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liady, Rabbi Dov Baer’s most influential disciple, founded Chabad Hasidism, a movement that today works actively to bring non-practicing Jews into their mystical tradition. Yet by the mid-nineteenth century, rationalist philosophy and industrial society had severely curtailed interest in kabbalah.

After this historical review, the remainder of Hoffman’s book takes a quite different turn, focusing more on parallels between kabbalistic thought and the topics studied by transpersonal psychology, such as the interconnectedness of the cosmos, the intelligence of the human body, sacred sexuality, meditation, transcendent states of consciousness, dreamwork, and paranormal capacities. In doing so, he draws some fascinating parallels between this contemporary branch of psychology and the tradition of Jewish mysticism. However, this strength of the book is also its weakness—for transpersonal psychology becomes the lens that constrains its view of kabbalah. Hoffman points to ways in which Jewish mysticism resonates with what contemporary transpersonal psychology already knows, rather than exploring ways in which kabbalah might contribute to its vision. This approach leaves certain central aspects of kabbalah completely out of the reader’s view.

Kabbalism is mysticism but it is also, deeply and profoundly, traditional Judaism. The name Israel means, wrestling with God, an element of spiritual practice that pervades all of Judaism. Judaism is not a path of obedience or surrender, but one of struggle, argument, vigorous contention, earnest grappling with the mystery that is God. The nature of this collective engagement is clearly visible in the structure of Jewish literature: the Torah, simple in its literal text, was the basis for hundreds of years of rabbinic
discourse, dialectic, and debate. This oral tradition was only written down when so many great Jewish teachers had been killed in failed revolts against Roman occupation that there was a fear of losing the wisdom stored up in this ever-renewing conversation carried on across centuries.

The Mishna represents the first written collection of oral law teachings, dating from the third century C.E. The Mishna itself then became a subject of intense rabbinic discussion; in the fifth and sixth centuries C.E., these discussions of earlier rabbinic discussions were gathered into collections that became the Palestinian and Babylonian editions of the Talmud. The great 11th century scholar Rashi added a further level of commentary on Torah and Talmud, and in the 12th century Maimonides attempted to distill all of Jewish law into a single volume, the Mishneh Torah. Maimonides’ work became the foundation for the 16th century Shulchan Aruch, a codification of Jewish law still honored within the orthodox community. This never-ending, determined, intellectual and emotional grappling with the divine through Torah and community is what constitutes wrestling with God.

Kabbalah is deeply embedded within this central spiritual practice of Judaism. Its radicalism, its power, lies in the proposition that one wrestles with God not only to comprehend divine mystery, not only to understand what has been revealed in Torah, but to participate in shaping the divine reality. The divine is not only transcendent and creative, but also immanent and receptive. Yet its teachings are enfolded within the living weave of Jewish scripture and writings. This can be illustrated by examining a passage from the Zohar. Daniel Matt (2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009a, 2009b) is currently engaged in the first scholarly translation of the Zohar from a critical Aramaic text; his version of the text, along with his commentary, will be relied on here. The passage comes from a portion of the Zohar that expands on Exodus 25:1–27:9, a section of the Torah known as Terumah in which Moses is given instructions for building the wilderness sanctuary where the divine presence would reside. Terumah expands on the meaning of divine presence in the world through discussion containing subtle references that can only be understood if one has a firm grasp of Torah and the many generations of rabbinical discussions based thereon.

The passage in question, Terumah 2:151b–152a (Matt, 2009b, pp. 383–386), tells of a city named Luz, where Death has no power. Everyone who lives there dies eventually, but they must go outside of the city wall to die. Why? Because as the world was being created by the dance of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, or more precisely, by the interplay of the divine emanations that they represent, there came a moment when the Holy One called the process to a halt. At that moment, the Hebrew letter tet was suspended over the site where Luz would one day be built. The first time the letter tet appears in Torah is as the first letter of the Hebrew word, tov, meaning good. Thus, in this location Death has no power. The text goes on to ask, “Now, you might say, ‘If it is so that life dwells in that place, then why wasn’t the Temple built there to give life to its inhabitants?’” The answer is that “in this place, existence endures because of one letter hovering over it. In the Temple all of the letters abide, and by them it alone was created, resembling the whole world” (p. 386).
On its surface, this tale might seem obscure. But in the light of Matt’s (2009b) commentary, it takes on complex depth as well as clear significance. Luz is the Aramaic word for almond, and “the immortal city of Luz shares its name with the immortal bone of the human body supposed to be at the base of the spine. This bone, shaped like luz (an almond), is said to be indestructible, and from it God will one day resurrect decomposed bodies” (p. 384, n. 552). It is tempting to draw a parallel with the Hindu notion of the transformational power of kundalini, arising from the base of the spine. But this would be a partial and superficial comparison of the sort that Hoffman makes between kabbalah and transpersonal psychology. “A rabbinic tradition reports…: ‘That is the Luz…against which Nebuchadnezzer marched without destroying it. And even the Angel of Death has no permission to pass through it, but when the old people there become weary of life [literally “when their mind becomes loathsome to them”], they go outside the wall and die”’ (p. 384, n. 552). Here is the first sign of trouble with the immortality that this city bestows, for those who live within it eventually become so disgusted with life that they leave its protection in order to find escape through death.

The Temple was not built in this location, then, because the goodness and immortality provided by the letter (or emanation) tet is only a fraction of the divine creative presence. In Jerusalem, where the Temple resides, all 22 letters (or emanations) exist together, representing the fullness of the power that brought the world into being. Wholeness, then, is more redemptive than goodness; the passage goes on to imply that even when wholeness includes those aspects of the world that are demonic, wholeness is preferable to goodness. The Zohar conveys this through a narrative that can only be understood through immersion in the deep waters of trans-generational argument and commentary: the fundamental Jewish practice of wrestling with God. The text thus begins from a passage of Torah that discusses cultic architecture and ascends to the ever-present mystical construction of the cosmos, weaving its way through millennia of collective discourse. This is tikkun olam, the kabbalistic practice of participating in the salvation of the world by connecting its disconnected pieces back to their divine source.

It is undeniable that the kabbalistic tradition deals with altered states of mind and the extraordinary gifts associated with these. Kabbalistic masters such as the Baal Shem Tov were reputed to be gifted healers. Yet these states and psychic capacities are like the immortality of Luz: attractive, but partial. It is not in transcendent experiences, but in the wholeness of life, that redemption is found. It is perhaps from this insight that a discipline such as transpersonal psychology can profit, for it is not the beyond-ego experiences in and for themselves that have the most deeply transformative power; it is what these experiences imply about who we are as whole human beings.

At a deeper level, the insights of kabbalah cannot be simply lifted from the pages of the Zohar and applied to transpersonal psychology as if they were cultural artifacts that could be removed and put on display in the British Museum. These glimpses of the life of the cosmos are inseparable from the on-going process of discourse that keeps them alive. The Zohar understands that
the 32 divine emanations not only brought the world into being, but that they continuously bring it into being in every present moment. To engage with kabbalah, then, is to enter into a conversation that has been in process for thousands of years. This does not mean that one needs to be Jewish or lay tefillin (a practice of binding small boxes containing Hebrew scriptural passages to the head and hand) in order to participate in this discourse, for the process of scholarship itself resonates with the Jewish practice of wrestling with God. It does imply that kabbalah deserves to be approached as a living tradition, understood on its own terms, rather than simply serving as a resource to be mined in service of another field of study.

Hoffman’s book is a substantive comparison of transpersonal psychology with elements of kabbalistic thought; in this way it is informative and well worth reading. At the same time, the kabbalah that it presents is one that has been reduced to fit within a narrow vision of transpersonal psychology. The Zohar itself holds a much wider mystical vision, one that permeates every fiber of daily life. There is some evidence that transpersonal psychology is also emerging from its early focus on altered states of consciousness and moving toward a more holistic and transformative vision of psychology (Hartelius, Caplan, & Rardin, 2007). An engagement with the Zohar on its own terms may prove supportive of this impetus.

The Author
Edward Hoffman, Ph.D., is an adjunct professor at Yeshiva University. His books include The Kabbalah Reader: A Sourcebook of Visionary Judaism; The Hebrew Alphabet: A Mystical Journey; The Heavenly Ladder: Kabbalistic Techniques for Inner Growth; and The Drive for Self: Alfred Adler and the Founding of Individual Psychology. He writes extensively for leading Jewish newspapers and magazines, including the National Jewish Post & Opinion, and the Jewish Week, and his articles have appeared in New York Newsday, and Yoga Journal.

The Reviewer
Glenn Hartelius, Ph.D., is a core faculty member at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, and Editor of the International Journal of Transpersonal Studies, an on line, peer reviewed journal. His articles have been published in the IJTS and the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology.