

# THE MYSTERIES OF THE CABALA

*Isaac Bashevis Singer*



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

In order to think about a story's meaning, we must enter into the world of that story. We must try to imagine what the characters' lives are like and see the world through their eyes.

Isaac Bashevis Singer's story, "The Mysteries of the Cabala," takes place in Warsaw, Poland, during the early 1900s. At that time, Poland was home to a large number of Jews, many of whom were members of the Hasidic sect.

Although the characters in the story are poor, they share a culture that is rich in ancient traditions. Almost every aspect of their daily life, including the way they dress, has religious significance. Following the Bible's commandments, the men and boys let the hair in front of their ears grow into sidelocks, and wear a fringed garment under their clothes to remind them of their commitment to God.

Rules and rituals are strictly observed. One important ceremony is the bar mitzvah, celebrated when a boy turns thirteen and is officially recognized as an adult member of the Jewish community. When young people are old enough to marry, a match would most often be arranged by their parents, perhaps with the help of a professional matchmaker.

As you will notice in "The Mysteries of the Cabala," Jewish culture places a high value on study and prayer. The rabbi is the religious leader and chief teacher of the community, but spiritual activity is an important part of everyone's life. In addition to the Torah—the first five books of the Bible—Jews study the Talmud, the teachings of the early rabbis. Hasidic Jews also read the Cabala, which is a mystical commentary on the Torah. Like many Jews, the narrator of "The Mysteries of the Cabala" believes that the true Messiah will one day arrive, announced by the prophet Elijah, and bring about peace on earth.



**Text Opener**

THE MYSTERIES OF THE CABALA

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Invent a story about yourself and tell it to the others in your group.  
Then discuss these questions with your class.



What did you like best about telling your story and hearing everyone else's?

---

---

Did you find yourself really *wanting* to make your story more fantastic than the others? Why?

---

---

How would you feel if someone actually believed your story?

---

---



**Directed Notes**

**THE MYSTERIES OF THE CABALA**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

During your second reading of the story, you marked places where the narrator is confronted with something **mysterious**.

Now look over your notes and write down your own interpretive question and an answer. If you can think of a second answer to your question, write that down, too.



Interpretive question: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_





Name: \_\_\_\_\_

The narrator wants to learn the mysteries of the **Cabala**.

**Cabala**

📖 a holy book studied by Hasidic Jews. The Cabala contains interpretations of the Torah by the ancient rabbis. They believed that every word, letter, and number in the Torah contained mysteries that could be understood by those who knew the secret. The names for God—and even the letters in the names—were believed to contain miraculous power.

Why does the narrator become frightened when he realizes that he has been playing games with the Cabala?

---

---

---

Why does the narrator's father try to discourage him from studying the Cabala too early?

---

---

---

Why does the narrator think that the Cabala might tell him whom he will marry?

---

---

---

Now answer this interpretive question:

**Why does the narrator feel close to madness when he begs his father to teach him the Cabala?**

---

---

---

---

---

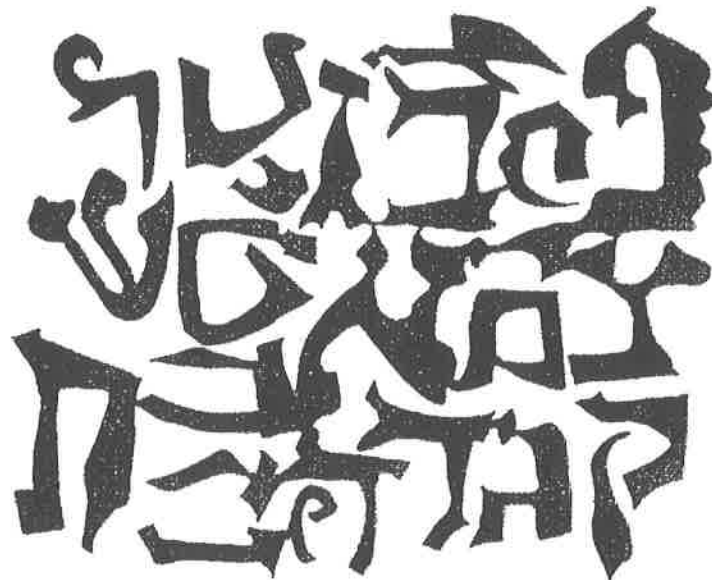
---

---

---

---

---



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Make notes for an essay that answers this question:

**Do you think life is mysterious, or is it easy to understand?**

What is the most puzzling thing that you have come across in your life?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Do you brood about this thing, or do you feel it is not so important?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Your Opinion**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

How do you feel about the fact that it is impossible for us to know everything?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Do you think that growing up will answer most of the things you want to know?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

Make notes for a story about what the person you are going to marry—your future betrothed—is like right now.

**Where does your betrothed live?  
What kind of family does he or she have?**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**What are your betrothed's hopes and dreams?**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Your Betrothed's Description**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**What do you and your betrothed have in common?**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Do you wish you knew your betrothed now?**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

