



On the Current Renaissance in Jewish Spirituality

Jody Myers

With delicious irony, modern Jews' escape from religious tradition has led to a Renaissance of religious sentiment. Today's spirituality is, in part, the product of a rebellion against the way that Judaism has been practiced and conveyed in American synagogues, homes, and schools. The popular usage of the word conveys this. "Spirituality" connotes a highly individualized, uncharted, and not yet completed quest in which the individual's immediate feelings are of greater importance than the observance of *halachah* and inherited norms. Religion, on the other hand, signifies a fixed heritage that is packaged for transmittal from one generation to the next.

I grew up in the Conservative Movement's youth movement and completed my formal training as a Jewish historian. Warily I viewed the many Jewish spiritual enterprises opening in my own Los Angeles neighborhood. For years I passed up their public lectures and averted my eyes from the enthusiastic devotees thronging their sidewalks. Only for the sake of scholarship — in order to add another element to my study of modern Jewish thought — did I eventually venture inside.

Today's Jewish spiritual seekers are a diverse and fragmented crowd, but they share a powerful desire to forge an intimate connection with God and a feeling of oneness with the cosmos. They have responded eagerly to the call for greater spiritual consciousness heard in turn-of-the-millennium urban America. America's immigrants, along with the publishing industry, the media, adult education venues, and business enterprises from personal fitness centers to novelty shops provide access to foreign religions and a full menu of religious teachings, images, rituals, and techniques. This is what sociologist Wade Clark Roof calls "the spiritual marketplace." Jewish organizations and teachers offering adult education courses, study groups, 12-step programs, guidebooks, and special *minyanim* are adding their wares to the available merchandise.

This new Jewish spiritual quest is profoundly influenced by psychotherapy. Part of the therapeutic process involves breaking with the past in order to allow the con-

struction of a new narrative myth, one tailored to the individual. Psychotherapy typically evinces hostility or discomfort with religious strictures, and in contrast to religion, seeks solutions entirely within the individual. At the same time, psychotherapy has assumed some of the functions of religion by helping individuals confront questions about life's meaning and feelings of emptiness, a search for inner peace, and how to reconcile with others. Contemporary spirituality often resembles what religion might look like after being linked to psychotherapeutic processes and goals. There are the lighter, feel-good programs such as healing ceremonies and Rosh Chodesh groups. And there are the more sober communities like Jonathan Omer-Man's Metivta Institute, which include deep psychological introspection and demand the hard work of self-transformation. In all the above, Jewish (not therapeutic) sources are cited as supportive guides for the spiritual quest. Chasidic stories and commentaries are popular because they em-

phasize the inner turmoil and struggle involved in the human encounter with the Divine.

Then there are the paths that lead to ecstatic spirituality. They jar my rational proclivities and skeptical nature. It is not just that these places engage the nonrational, intuitive, and imaginative faculties, but the rapturous expressiveness of Jewish Renewal ceremonies, Shlomo Carlebach-style services, and hours-long chanting practices mandate a rejection of conventional boundaries. How impatient they are with Western rationalism, its sharp division between science and religion, or spirit and matter! Jewish mysticism and New Age holistic health practices — whose popularity is another manifestation of today's concern for psychological and physical healing — exist comfortably side by side and create a certain harmony. Both support the conviction that God is a beneficent energy pulsating through and continuously influencing the physical universe. Let go, open up, and the Divine light comes flowing through.

These immanent and diverse God images also have their roots in the feminist critique of Judaism. Yet, while women are highly represented among participants in Jewish spiritual ceremonies, and one could say that the emo-

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tional skills fostered by the therapeutic spirituality are more easily acquired by women, feminist ideology is not overtly present in spiritual circles. More important is the Kabbalah. Modified for popular consumption, kabbalistic concepts and symbols graphically convey the interconnectedness of all life, the multifaceted aspects of all reality, and the hope for personal and political *tikkun*, or repair.

My foray into the world of Jewish spirituality has

been intellectually stimulating and personally engaging. Today's Renaissance of spirituality is the flowering of an old shoot, planted in the soil of ancient Jewish texts and fertilized by the contemporary knowledge revolution. What kind of hybrid fruit it will bear remains to be seen.

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The Chat Room Gateway

Jory Rozner

A few years ago, I was an unaffiliated Jew. Now I attend Jewish conferences and speak at Jewish events. So what's the secret for making the jump from nonaffiliation to meaningful Jewish life?

Unfortunately, several obstacles kept me from becoming involved in the Jewish community. The community seemed fragmented and its entry points illusive. After college, I lived in pre-Internet New York City for five years. Never once did I attend a Jewish event or class, even though they took place every night in every neighborhood. Although I harbored some interest, I didn't know where to turn for anything Jewish. Had I attended some event, I would have likely felt uncomfortable, unfamiliar with the names and purposes of the different Jewish organizations.

When I moved to Chicago, I bought a computer and logged onto the Internet. While surfing, I stumbled upon a Jewish chat room where I found myself talking to Jews in Australia, London, and Toronto about matzah balls. A woman from L.A. mentioned the Young Leadership conference in Washington. I became "connected" through the Internet.

I decided to create a gateway vehicle into the Jewish community. It welcomes people of all ages, healthy or disabled, single or married, unaffiliated or completely immersed. It is a nonthreatening place for a

beginner to come learn and an educator to come teach. To be fun and inviting, we called it Zipple.com. Zipple lets people stumble into Judaism through the Internet, a medium comfortable to newcomers whether they log on at work, in a dorm, or at home.

Old methods had failed me. The Internet, on the other hand, provides a clearinghouse for all of the Jewish organizations in the world, in a savvy, sophisticated fashion without high costs or hierarchies. It offers instant access to anyone and levels the playing field. Before the Internet, I felt awkward in the Jewish community and therefore spent my time and money elsewhere; but the culture, religion, and history of Judaism were always important to me. Rather than tackling Judaism on a grand scale, I took small steps forward along a comfortable path, until I felt at home in the right Jewish community.

A Jewish Renaissance will require new gateways into the Jewish community that have no economic, geographic, or age barriers; nonthreatening places that guide Jewish people to Jewish things, even when they aren't looking. These gateways need to make people more comfortable with themselves and their Judaism, so that when they make it to a Jewish organization, they have a passion, and in turn, a connection.

Jory Rozner is the founder of Zipple.com.

Jewish Renaissance in Israel

Elan Ezrachi

The 1990s were the stage for dramatic events and significant changes in Israel. To name a few: rapid economic development, increased influence of Western (American) popular culture, the influx of many new immigrants, the peace pro-

cess, and of course, the tragic assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Add to all these the anticipation for the end of the millennium, and inevitably, issues of identity and meaning have taken on a new urgency.