



CLAL

27/522
November 29, 1996
18 Kislev 5757

Sh'ma

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

Inside...

THE AMERICAN SPIRITUAL REVIVAL:

What are
the Jewish responses?
the worries?
the boundaries?

Asking about spirituality: an intellectual quest

■ Alfredo Borodowski and Shira Leibowitz

One afternoon, our neighbor, an active member of a local church, knocked at our door and surprised us with a book entitled *Walking A Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool*. She wanted Alfredo, the rabbi of the Pelham Jewish Center, to participate with members of the congregation in "the labyrinth project." Intrigued, he politely took the book and promised to read it. Never doubting for a moment that the synagogue would be included in this ecumenical enterprise, she was more than a little shocked upon hearing from Alfredo, several weeks later, that he believed that it would be inappropriate for Jews to participate.

What Could Be Wrong?

The book had revealed that during the Crusades, when travel to Israel became almost impossible, labyrinths were designed on the floors of many of the great cathedrals of Europe to be walked as a symbolic replacement of pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Rediscovered in recent times, portable labyrinths, similar to those which members of local churches sought to build, have become a tool for spiritual seekers who, by following a circuitous path to a center point, symbolically engage in a powerful inward journey.

How could a rabbi, a spiritual leader, disapprove of an ecumenical project with a universalistic message of quiet contem-

plation and spiritual quest? Perhaps even more importantly, if not through projects such as "the labyrinth," how are Jews to achieve spiritual fulfillment?

Virtual Journeys

First, symbolic journeys must not be promoted as a substitution for that which can be directly experienced, in this instance, visiting Jerusalem. Rather than seeking to escape the physical world by engaging in a purely contemplative journey, countless accounts of Jews who have visited Israel reveal that they have been spiritually fulfilled through encounters with the Hebrew language, sacred places, and Israeli culture.

Second, while the search for spiritual meaning is universal, it's particular manifestations reflect different religious and cultural groups. The labyrinth itself is a uniquely Christian response. Thus, although this project was designed as an ecumenical enterprise, the truth is that labyrinths flourished in cathedrals and not in synagogues.

Third, there are those who would argue that projects such as "the labyrinth" reflect the historical Jewish mystical tradition. In response, it is essential to note that Jewish mysticism was not an alternative path to study and the observance of commandments, but the culmination of a process exclusively for rare individuals who had already attained the highest

Neil Gillman	3
Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer	5
Saul Berman	7
Ta sh'ma	7

achievement in both of these areas. Today's popularization of Jewish mysticism mistakenly views mystical experience as the beginning, rather than the end, of the spiritual quest.

Finally, if the issue is to walk a labyrinth, the members of the Pelham Jewish Center have already walked through it many times. Through the practice of the synagogue's social action committee of loading a van with donated food, clothing, and toiletries which they distribute on the streets of Manhattan, they walk "the labyrinth of the city streets" and return home spiritually fulfilled. Contrary to the solitude of the labyrinth, for Judaism, spiritual journeys must lead to active involvement in the reality of the world in which we live.

Spirituality as a Personal Quest

Alfredo's decision not to participate in the labyrinth project derived from a radically different Jewish understanding of spirituality from that which is most prevalent in the contemporary United States. A broad survey of recent writings, both academic and popular, reveals that the most predominant spiritual model today views spirituality as a personal quest. Within this perspective, sharp distinctions are made between the spiritual and the religious dimensions of life. Strongly influenced by modern psychology, this model of spirituality involves inwardly-focused experience, the subjective aspects of life, personal autonomy, individual search, and choice. This position thus directly conflicts with western religions which incorporate established doctrine, objective law, religious authority, religious community, and inherited tradition. Spirituality, in the model of personal quest, is typically understood as an experience of God or God's presence in one's life, most likely to happen outside of the formal expression of one's faith. Further, religion is often perceived as actually being an obstacle to true spiritual experience.

Despite the inherent contradictions between spirituality and western, institutionalized religion, complaints from members that their churches and synagogues have failed to offer the meaning and relevance they seek have often prompted clergy to promote the formation of small sub-groups dedicated to fostering spiritual development either through study, discussion, or prayer. Ironically,

RABBI ALFREDO BORODOWSKI, Rabbi of the Pelham Jewish Center, is completing his Ph.D. in Jewish Philosophy at the Jewish Theological Seminary where he serves as an instructor of Philosophy.

RABBI SHIRA LEIBOWITZ, serves as Assistant to the Director and as Director of Program Development for National Ramah. She is completing her Ph.D. in Jewish Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Rabbis Borodowski and Leibowitz are husband and wife.

what is enthusiastically incorporated within churches and synagogues as part of a revitalization effort, can quickly be transformed into a force which undermines the possibility of inclusion of basic religious beliefs such as God as a transcendent being, the sacred nature of traditional texts, and the need for any hierarchical structure within the church or synagogue.

Spirituality and Social Involvement

Negative reaction to the model of spirituality as individual quest has come from the Christian liberal political-religious arena, most specifically from Latin American liberation theologians and Christian feminists. Representing oppressed minorities who could not exert influence as individuals, these groups viewed an individually focused spirituality as antagonistic to the broad social and political challenges that lay before them. They thus redefined spirituality from an individualistic interior

Sh'ma

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

Senior Editors Eugene B. Borowitz, Irving Greenberg, Harold M. Schulweis

Editor Nina Beth Cardin

Administration/Production Bambi Marcus

Contributing Editors Michael Berenbaum, Elliot N. Dorff, Arnold Eisen, Leonard Fein, Barry Freundel, Rela M. Geffen, Neil Gillman, Joanne Greenberg, Brad Hirschfield, Lawrence Hoffman, Paula Hyman, Lori Lefkowitz, Deborah Dash Moore, David Nelson, Riv-Ellen Prell, Elie Wiesel, Arnold Jacob Wolf, David Wolpe, Walter Wurzbarger, Michael Wyschogrod

Founding Editor Eugene B. Borowitz

Sh'ma a journal of jewish responsibility welcomes articles from diverse points of view. Hence, the opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the editors. Donations to *Sh'ma a journal of jewish responsibility* are tax-deductible. *Sh'ma a journal of jewish responsibility* is available in microform from University Microfilms Internat'l., Ann Arbor, MI.

Book reviews are by Eugene B. Borowitz.

Address all correspondence, subscriptions and change of address notices to *Sh'ma a journal of jewish responsibility*, c/o CLAL, 99 Park Avenue, Suite S-300, New York, NY 10016. Telephone: 212-867-8888; FAX: 212-867-8853.

Sh'ma a journal of jewish responsibility (ISSN 0049-0385) is published bi-weekly except June, July and August, by CLAL, 99 Park Avenue, Suite C-300, New York, NY 10016. Periodical postage paid at New York, NY. Subscriptions: \$29 for two years in U.S.; \$18 for one year; \$21 a year overseas; \$35 for two years overseas; bulk subscriptions of 10 or more to one address, \$9 per subscription; retired or handicapped persons of restricted means may subscribe for one year at half price. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to *Sh'ma a journal of jewish responsibility*, c/o CLAL, 99 Park Avenue, S-300, New York, NY 10016-1599.

Sh'ma Online, an interactive discussion group, is available through any online service which can exchange with the Internet, such as CompuServe, GENie, Prodigy, America Online, MCI Mail, ATTMail or Delphi. To join, send a one-line message to: listproc@shamash.nysernet.org saying: **subscribe shma** your full name. Messages to *Sh'ma Online* can then be sent to: shma@shamash.nysernet.org

Copyright © 1996 by CLAL
November 29, 1996

journey to a collective social responsibility and respect for all. Troubled by injustice, these thinkers demanded that there be active and conscious participation in society and deplored what they viewed as the turning away from the world practiced by others engaged in spiritual quest.

The integration of a socially concerned spirituality within institutionalized religion is inherently complex. While incorporated within a religious tradition, the primary motivation for action within this spiritual model is desire for social change within a broadly political, rather than religious, agenda. This political agenda calls for a universal perspective encouraging adherents to be open to finding a sense of connection with all peoples. Such a universal approach often results in a lessening of an emphasis upon precisely those aspects of a religious tradition which are particular to it. Thus, paradoxically, attempts at creating an all-inclusive spiritual community create a divisive polarization between those supporting such a universal social and political platform, and those who seek to maintain the particular traditions of the sponsoring religious institution.

Potential for Integration

Saying "no" to the "labyrinth project" paradoxically marked an affirmation of Jewish spirituality. Contrary to popular belief, the greatness of such Jewish thinkers as Philo, Moses Maimonides, and Avraham Abulafia did not reside exclusively in their ability to integrate new ideas from the broader culture, but precisely in the clarity of vision they demonstrated in saying no to those aspects of their own cultural milieu which they considered to be incompatible with Judaism. For instance, in the specific case of Maimonides, while harmonizing Judaism and Aristotelian philosophy, he rejected such crucial theological issues as the Aristotelian view of creation, providence, and theodicy. Clearly, an integrative approach demands a profound knowledge, not only of Judaism, but also of the intellectual and cultural ideas of the broader

society. Today, Judaism is still awaiting those who, without looking for quick results, would embark upon a serious study of spirituality and only then explore potential approaches toward harmonizing it with Judaism. †

On the new Jewish spirituality

■ Neil Gillman

Spirituality is now very much "in." Witness the multiplicity of new books on God, angels, meditation practices, and the nurturing of the soul; (a recent visit to a prominent university book store disclosed one shelf labeled "Religion" and six floor-to-ceiling shelves on "Spirituality"); the spread of Jewish healing centers and of healing services; the "B. J. phenomenon" (B'nai Jeshurun, a revived synagogue on Manhattan's Upper West Side where over a thousand congregants sing and dance their way through the Friday evening *Kabbalat Shabbat* service); the renewed interest in Hasidism and Jewish mysticism; and the popularity of authors such as Arthur Green, David Wolpe, Lawrence Kushner and the late Aryeh Kaplan.

Three Models of Authenticity

Finally, note the presence across the country of a group of Jewish spiritual-seekers, all dissatisfied with the formality and impersonal nature of the worship service in their synagogues, all confessing to unmet religious needs, all searching elsewhere to find settings where these needs may be met, sometimes in *Chabad*, in *havurot*, or in the extreme, in New Age cults and ashrams. Some Reform and Conservative rabbis have hearkened to this message and have transformed the culture of their synagogues. In other settings, the dissident group meets informally for study and worship in some other room in the building, and finds itself in tension with the Board of the synagogue and the style of the Sanctuary service, with the rabbi caught in an uneasy mediating role.

Some years ago, I published an article (*Conservative Judaism*, Winter, 1985-86) which anticipated this phenomenon. In retrospect, I am unhappy with the terminol-

RABBI NEIL GILLMAN, a Contributing Editor of *Sh'ma*, chairs the Department of Jewish Philosophy at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. His *The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought*, will be published in early 1997 by Jewish Lights. This is a revised version of a tribute to Rabbi Lawrence Kushner on his twenty-fifth anniversary as rabbi of Congregation Beth El of the Sudbury River Valley.

TWO FOR TWENTY-SOMETHING

Got a twenty-something in your life?
Friend, daughter, grandson?
Give a gift of *Sh'ma* and match the
subscription cost to their age...

For your 21-year-old college daughter
buy a two-year subscription for \$21

For your 26-year-old co-worker
buy a two-year subscription for \$26

Please include gift card information.