
JEWISH SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

by

Jenny Goodman

Like many other Jews, I have been involved for some years in the human potential movement and the world of 'New Age' or Aquarian Spirituality which borders it. I have known fleetingly what Maslow calls peak experiences and what I call glimpses of heaven, glimpses of the Divine. But I've been missing out on something, something that exists on a simpler, more basic plane than the spiritual. I've been missing a sense of tribal sharing, a cultural or ethnic oneness that for me is a necessary base on which to rest, and from which to - more safely - take flight into the realms of spirit, the higher level of Oneness.

So I have become involved in the movement for Jewish spiritual renewal, which is embryonic in Britain but 25 years old in the States. It's difficult to capture or explain something so big and exciting, so new, yet so obvious. but I'll do my best to describe at least some features of it.

The Jewish renewal movement lives and works on several levels; intellectual, social, spiritual and political.

There is a growing perception of the cycles of Jewish history that sees the Holocaust (and the creation of the modern state of Israel) as the most recent of three major, cataclysmic changes that seem to have occurred at roughly 2000 year intervals, and that have all necessitated huge shifts in our attitudes, practices and perceptions of God. First there was the Exodus, a transition from slavery in **Mizraim** (translated as 'Egypt' but meaning also 'the narrow place') to wandering in the wilderness and finally freedom, in the Promised Land. A story of rebirth.

At the end of the biblical era, at the very moment of change from the age of Aries to the age of Pisces, there was the dispersion, a transition from our own land to a scattered diaspora, and from physical sacrifice in a central temple to verbal prayer in small communities. we face no less a transition. The greatest scholars and spiritual leaders of the Jewish world today are arguing that the events of this century require for our spiritual survival as people, as

profound a change in our forms of feeling, thinking, and communing with God and each other.

The Jewish renewal movement is a response to this felt and understood need. We honour the past, hallow the present, and move on into the future. It is of course, simply the Jewish people's particular part in the great transition to the Aquarian age of peace and harmony for which we are all struggling. As such, it embodies the crucial insight of that movement, which is that the political and the spiritual are not separate.

Groups like New Jewish Agenda and the Shalom centre in the USA are committed, as Jews inspired by their traditional sources, to work in concrete ways for global justice and peace. There is Jewish civil disobedience; members of the 'Pershing Ploughshares' group have done time in prison for damaging nuclear missiles. 'Nation shall not lift up sword against nation' is their song. And there are numerous other examples. The Jewish anti-nuclear movement had adopted the annual celebration of the Rainbow Sign, the sign God gave Noah that She/He would never again destroy the world by water. But God said nothing about fire. The Rainbow Sign has become a new Jewish festival for peace and nuclear disarmament.

Other festivals such as **Pesach** (Passover - spring and rebirth), **Sukkot** (Tabernacles - a harvest festival of fruits - 'spread over us your tabernacle of peace') and **Tu B'Shvat** (a festival of trees) are all used as occasions for raising ecol-

ogical issues and awareness, by connecting our spiritual celebration with the urgent needs of the Earth. Spiritual unity and the unity of the planet's ecology are truths that feed each other, because they are (parts of) the same truth.

Jewish activists are also involved in the efforts to bring about another vital form of unity - and understanding between Palestinians and Israelis. This reconciliation work goes on inside and outside Israel and members of the Jewish spiritual renewal movement are active in 'Peace Now' and '**Yesh Gur!**' ('There is no limit' - soldiers refusing to serve in occupied territories) and other Israeli peace groups. Feminist awareness is central to the new Jewish spirituality, both in terms of women's free and equal participation in prayer and ritual, and in terms of reclaiming the Goddess and the feminine side within our culture (see Alix Pirani's article 'Psychotherapy, Women and the Feminine in Judaism', Self and Society Vol XIV No 5 Sept/Oct 1986) Many women now celebrate **Rosh Chodesh**, the women's New Moon festival. They have transformed a patriarchal religious menstrual taboo into the menstrual celebration it surely originally was.

Jewish spiritual practices are slowly starting to change, to become more accessible, experiential, immediate, personal and heart-felt. To some Jews they may always have seemed this way, but to me and many other young Jews, synagogue rituals have lacked the fire, the clarity and the

'cosmicness' of the meditations, songs and dances we have learned elsewhere. Till now.

The changes are coming from the grassroots; from the **Chavurah** movement. A **Chavurah** is an informal group of friends who meet in each other's houses to sing, dance, meditate, pray, study, debate and - of course! - eat. We attempt to work in creative and unshackled ways with the rituals, texts and festivals, especially with the beautiful traditions surrounding what someone called the Jew's Place in Time, the **Shabbat** (Sabbath). Often, many people in a **Chavurah** have been in the Growth movement and in other spiritual groups (most New Age sects are full of Jewish people). So we bring those awarenesses; it is a safe and flexible place for feelings and personal sharing, and for innovations. There are no rules for rituals and there are no leaders. We 'do' our Judaism on all 4 levels - body, heart, mind and spirit. And we usually start with the body - putting 'breath into the bones'.

A great spiritual inspiration to the Chavurah movement and to Jewish spiritual renewal generally is the work of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, for many years Professor of Jewish mysticism and psychology of religion in North America, and the founder of the P'nai Or, a religious community in Philadelphia. He escaped from Europe in 1941 and has become a teacher of Chassidism and Kabbalah the core of Jewish mystical wisdom. He seems to combine his academic abilities with true spiritual charisma. He is very much a

teacher of the heart. He has worked with mystics of many other traditions; Buddhist, Christian, Native American, Hindu and Sufi.

He teaches Kabbalah, the 'reality map' of the four worlds, Judaism's equivalent to the Native American medicine wheel or the Indian chakra system, in a way that is accessible and exciting. His work on the counselling and psychotherapy techniques of the Chassidic masters in Eastern Europe makes a fascinating and relevant study for anyone involved in those fields today.

Zalman regards himself as 'the antennae on the Jewish bug' - scouting out new territory in the semi-dark, moving forward by instinct into what comes next. He finds no conflict between tradition and innovation, because he sees his work in 'Aquarian Judaism' as part of a continuous chain. He is a person who unifies apparent opposites - past and future, humanism and transcendentalism; Judaism and Universalism.

His work includes a new approach to **mityvot** (obligations or commandments which sees Halacha ('The Way') as path of personal growth through action and consciousness, rather than blind obedience. He calls this the Psychohalachic process - the intention transforms the practice, and the practice transforms the individual.

Zalman has much to say about a whole range of subjects, from the nuclear family and late 10th century city life to the Jewish

teachings on death, reincarnation and the phenomenon of souls recycled during the Holocaust. He has also done some much needed, very moving and authentic new translations of Hebrew prayers.

existing between person and person, men and women, older and younger, richer and poorer, group and group, nation and nation. Wherever tensions and resistances are reduced, so that energy can be shared, the quantum leap is made to the Messianic era.

I would like to conclude by quoting a paragraph from one of Zalman's books, 'the First Step - a Guide for the New Jewish Spirit'

That being, or sum of beings that we call Messiah is held prisoner in the surface tensions

The Messianic future, with its blessings, awaits us at the other side of our awakening, so let us light the candles of our souls and welcome the Sabbath.'

Zalman is speaking in London on August 20th -see insert in this edition of Self and Society. It is hoped that the evening will mark the beginning of a strong Jewish spiritual renewal movement in Britain.



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