

Towards a New Jewish Spirituality

HaRav Mikha Lindenberg

Mysticism has always been part of Judaism. First and foremost, one need only contemplate that the Torah itself is a kind of "printout", an expression, of God's will, and what can be more mystical than that? Therefore, the Torah itself is by nature esoteric, even if its content is in the main *exoteric*.

In every generation, every phase of the existence of the Jewish people, there has been mysticism. Besides the nature of the Torah itself, there is the fact that some people are mystically inclined. Some people are more legalistically inclined, but not everyone can be a lawyer. Some are artistically inclined, but not everyone can be an artist or craftsman. Some are poetically inclined, some are not. Some have more spiritual natures in terms of their personalities and aspirations; for others, spiritual or "mystical" ideas are simply not compelling or even comprehensible. And the Torah, because it is the life-guide of an entire people, is of course broad enough to make room for the entire range of personalities. We see that there has always been a mystical element to Judaism, in one form or another. Therefore, those who claim that mysticism *per se* is a foreign addition fused onto Judaism are mistaken.

However, *how* the mystical element of Judaism manifests depends much on the existential state of the Jewish people at any given time.

In the time of the First Temple, the reality of prophecy pervaded Jewish spirituality. In fact, one could make a sound argument that without prophecy, Jewish mysticism is an attempt to cross an unbridgeable chasm. Prophecy and all the practices associated with it could be seen as a kind of central pillar to Jewish mysticism, spanning the existential gulf between man and God.

But another, very crucial factor emerges when one looks at the Tanach in a profound way. It is true that prophecy included an ascetic element, but this was only one aspect and not a total, all-encompassing path or "hashqafa" (outlook). For instance, we find that Elisha, the successor to Elisha, was a farmer, a man of the land, and certainly did not fit the ascetic mold. We find that prophecy often came to a prophet not when he or she was engaged in deep solitary meditation, but suddenly, in the midst of mundane affairs. And, of critical importance, the prophets were not solitary hermits, but intimately involved with the affairs of the world, including matters of state. What we

find is that Jewish mysticism was wedded, in a healthy and symbiotic way, to life in the physical world. There was no inherent contradiction—even if some prophets and their disciples may have favored a more ascetic lifestyle—between the mystical quest and dealing in a direct, proactive way with the physical world. We do not find, at all, that Jewish mysticism entailed attempting to affect the physical world through mystical means.

During the following centuries, when prophecy no longer existed, and much more so even later, during the last exile, Jewish mysticism morphed into a new creature, a central component of which was abandonment of the physical world, and its corollary of attempting to affect the physical world through spiritual means. This of course can readily be understood in terms of the harsh realities of exile itself, in which time and time again Jews were reminded that they were temporary residents, producing a relationship with the physical world which undoubtedly included a core element of tenuousness and cognitive dissonance. The Jew could be a "ger" (sojourner) but never a "toshav" (settler). And whenever he deluded himself into thinking that he could root himself firmly in foreign lands, the harsh reality of exile sooner or later asserted itself with a vengeance. Because the connection to the land on which the Jew lived was so fickle, and the realities of life often so oppressive, and also because of the influence of foreign modes of thought which conceptualized of spirituality as something antithetical to the physical, Jewish spirituality became more and more characterized by an escape from the material world. Mysticism became more and more characterized by asceticism, and by striving to affect the physical world through mystical means.

This was intimately connected to an understanding of how the Jewish people would one day ever get out of their state of exile; since the Jewish people were so fragmented and powerless, and the realities of life often so harsh, it should surprise no one to what degree the notion that redemption would be an entirely trans-historical event became deeply entrenched in the Jewish psyche. What happened to Jewish mysticism, following the publication and spread of the Zohar and in a much more pronounced way in the wake of the expulsion from Spain, is that the focus became more and more on affecting the redemption of the Jewish people through mystical means. Redemption as a historical process, driven by *human* endeavor, had been essentially wiped off the map for the vast majority of the people, and there already existed a background of detachment from the physical world. All this fueled a mysticism and spirituality which endeavored to change the reality of the Jewish people through what they felt they *could* do and of course had always done—that is, Torah and *misswoth*. Of course, in this new brand of mysticism, the most efficacious way to do this was through Kabbalistic

intentions (kawanoth) during all aspects of service to God, but first and foremost during formal prayer (tefilla). This new thrust of mysticism is extremely pronounced in the writings of the Ari; even the theoretical, descriptive system of the Ari (such as in the Ess Haim) can be seen as providing a kind of backdrop for this endeavor.

However, it is axiomatic that healthy spirituality is inextricably linked to a healthy attitude towards *physicality*. The Torah never admits a dualism between the two, so that one can even speak of a dialectic tension and resolution between two separate poles or aspects of existence. Rather, spirituality and physicality form one seamless whole. Although some wish to conceptualize Kabbalah as a kind of Noah's ark which floated above the vicissitudes of exile, this is not so; Kabbalah, and more broadly, Jewish mysticism and spirituality, were very much affected by the exile and its concomitant quality of detachment from engaging with the physical in a healthy way. Just as in other aspects of Torah, Jewish spirituality broke down in the galuth (exile) and was forced to assume a warped, distorted form in many ways foreign to its true nature.

One of the great challenges facing us today is to fashion a new Jewish spirituality in which there is no short circuit between the physical and super-physical realms of existence. We must close the circuit, to generate a healthy Jewish spirituality which is, as we've said, intimately linked with healthy Jewish *physicality*. It is not true that all forms of mysticism influenced by the exile must be summarily rejected. There is much of value to be extracted. But, these aspects must be integrated into a new system. They must be *upgraded*.