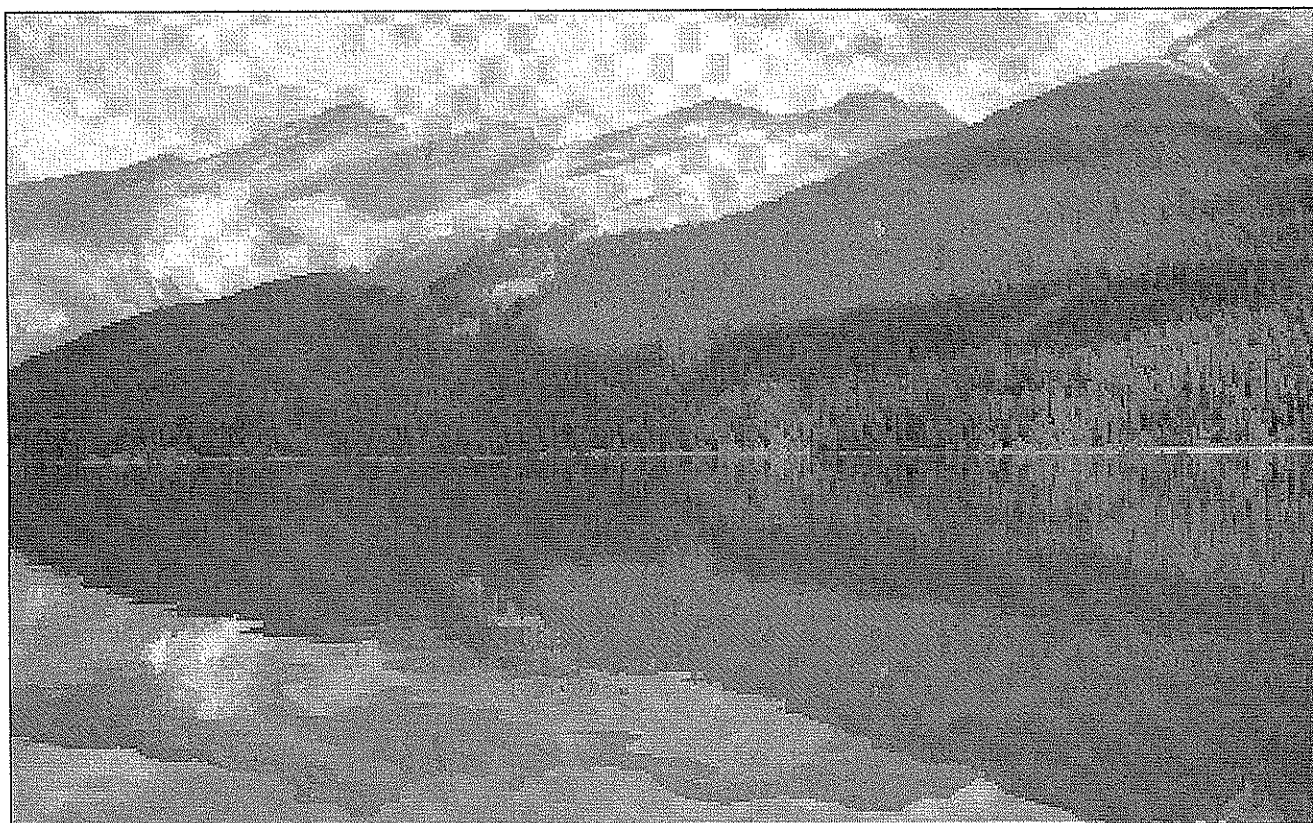


Reflections

Kabbalah for All People

CHARLES BURACK

"Reflections" is an occasional section in Interreligious Insight. Pieces draw on various traditions to unfold an important theme in spirituality, philosophy, or interreligious work. We hope that readers will make their own fruitful connections for dialogue and engagement. This issue offers a interfaith perspective on the spirituality of the Kabbalah tradition.



Receptivity; photo art, Cetta Kenney

Kabbalah is the mystical heart of Judaism. The word “Kabbalah” means “reception” and refers to the received mystical tradition. It also suggests that Kabbalists emphasize receptivity – to the divine presence everywhere. Over the last two millennia, various Kabbalistic movements have offered deeply spiritual interpretations of divinity, humanity, cosmos, and scripture. Jewish mystical ideas and practices have profoundly

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influenced – and been influenced by – Christian and Muslim mysticism. Today, there are many different forms of Kabbalah, including Jewish, Christian, and Hermetic.

I have been teaching Jewish Kabbalah courses at various universities and institutes since 1999. Most of my students have been Christians, and some have been Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Taoists, Wikkans, and Jews. Over the years, I have been amazed by how open my students have been to the beauty and profundity of Kabbalistic ideas and practices. It is sheer delight to share Kabbalah with them. This sharing with people of diverse heritages deepens the understanding and experience of Kabbalah – for me and my students. In this essay, I would like to share some of the most moving and inspiring experiences that have graced my classes.

Traditionally, Kabbalah was an esoteric tradition passed down one-on-one from master to student or in small groups. Although the word “Kabbalah” was not coined until the Middle Ages, historians generally date the origins of Kabbalah to the apocalyptic period in the first century B.C.E. Some say that Kabbalah stretches back to the Biblical period, and the tradition itself states that Primordial Humanity (Adam Rishon) received the divine wisdom of the Kabbalah.

Kabbalistic ideas and practices are very powerful and so have traditionally been considered potentially dangerous to the practitioner. As a result, Kabbalists devised various requirements to ensure the safe, correct, and effective transmission of esoteric knowledge and methods. To be a Kabbalist you had to be a man, married, anchored in Jewish community and learning, committed to a traditional life, at least forty years old, and of sound mind and body. Of course, history reveals that many great Kabbalists did not meet all of these criteria. One of the youngest and greatest Kabbalists was Rabbi Isaac Luria. While only in his thirties, he became the leader of the renowned Jewish mystical community in 16th-century Safed, in northern Israel. In the early 18th century, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, popularly known as the Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name), founded the Chasidic movement in Eastern Europe and made Kabbalistic ideas and practices more available to the common people, thereby making Jewish mysticism less of an exclusive esoteric practice among the scholarly elite. In the 19th century, Hannah Rachel Werbermacher, popularly called the Maid of Ludomir, gained renown as a female Chasidic rebbe who possessed great spiritual wisdom.

Because of the esoteric nature and transmission of Kabbalah, the vast majority of Jews worldwide have not been familiar with their own mystical tradition. In the 20th century, however, key Kabbalistic texts and teachings started to become available to the general populace through the translations and commentaries of modern scholars such as Gershom Scholem, who became the first professor of Jewish Mysticism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. These texts and teachings enabled both Jews and nonJews to learn more about this rich spiritual inheritance. By the last decades of the 20th century, some of the major Jewish denominations began adopting more egalitarian views, including the ordaining of women rabbis, and as a result, there are

now various feminist and egalitarian approaches to Kabbalah. And, of course, with the recent popularization of Kabbalah in the America media, everybody seems to know about it!

A TRADITIONAL, CONTEMPORARY AND INTERFAITH APPROACH

My approach to Kabbalah is rooted in Jewish tradition and shaped by the Jewish Renewal movement, as well as by my own interfaith and integral orientation. Jewish Renewal weds the mysticism of Chasidism with the progressive, egalitarian, and ecological ideas and values of contemporary Western civilization. When I teach Kabbalah, I present both traditional and contemporary approaches and draw connections with other mystical and spiritual traditions. As a former rabbinical student, I am steeped in Jewish learning and tradition. I left rabbinical school because I found orthodox Judaism to be too ethnocentric, sexist, rigid, and ahistorical. After a decade-long hiatus from Judaism, I returned through the door of Jewish Renewal, which I found profoundly spiritual, open-minded, inclusive, and creative. Over the last two decades, my spiritual practice has also been deeply informed by Buddhism, Sufism, nature mysticism, and the creative arts. I have also been significantly influenced by Taoist, Hindu, and Christian mysticism. In short, my spiritual path is interfaith and integral. I try to bring this integrative spirit to all of my Kabbalah courses. I believe that Kabbalah has powerful insights and methods to offer anyone who has an open mind and heart and is seeking a deeper connection to divinity in themselves and in all beings.

In all of my Kabbalah courses I include an experiential dimension because I believe that it is crucial to experience Jewish mystical practices, not just study the teachings. In Kabbalah and other mystical traditions, spiritual experience plays a central role in healing, insight, transformation, and growth. In my classes, we engage in a variety of meditations, chants, prayers, and healing practices. We do them “for real” – not as exercises. Many students have profound epiphanies, breakthroughs, and healings.



Spirit: original art, Lonnie Hanson

CHRISTIANS RESPOND TO KABBALAH

One of the first Kabbalah courses I taught was a Doctor of Ministry seminar at Matthew Fox's University of Creation Spirituality. Nearly all of the students came from Christian backgrounds, and several were ministers and priests. On the first day we studied the foundations of Judaism – God, Torah, and Israel – and some of the ways in which Kabbalists radically interpret these foundations. I explained, for example, that many Kabbalists

offer a radical interpretation of the Shma, the central prayer in Judaism. The opening words of the Shma are “Shma Yisrael Adonai Elohaynu Adonai Echad” (Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One”). From a mainstream Jewish perspective (uninformed by Kabbalah), the Shma simply affirms the oneness of divinity: there is one God and no other. This is the traditional monotheistic credo. In contrast, many Kabbalists understand the Shma as affirming the divinity of the Oneness: all that exists is One, and this Oneness is filled with and surrounded by divinity. God/dess is present everywhere and at all times. The Hebrew word for the “divine presence” is the feminine noun “Shekhinah.” In Kabbalah, Shekhinah represents a feminine, receptive aspect of divinity. She is the most palpable manifestation of divinity: the gleam and glimmer of existence, the archetype and substance of the cosmos. She supports and guides humankind and plays an instrumental role in human repentance and redemption.

Each day of the weeklong seminar, I introduced several new chants and prayers. By midweek, most of the students could chant with ease, grace, and devotion. On Friday morning, the chants and prayers reached an amazing pitch of intensity. As we started chanting the Shma, the air seemed to come alive with spirit. Soon, my eyes began to fill with tears, and as we chanted in unison the final word “echad” (one), my cheeks were wet with joy, and I felt absolutely certain that we were at one with one another and with the Source of All. We continued our beautiful service with a few more chants and prayers, and then I brought our service to a close. After a minute or two of profound silence, one of the students raised his hand. He was a middle-aged Protestant minister. I could see that his face was glowing, and his eyes sparkling.

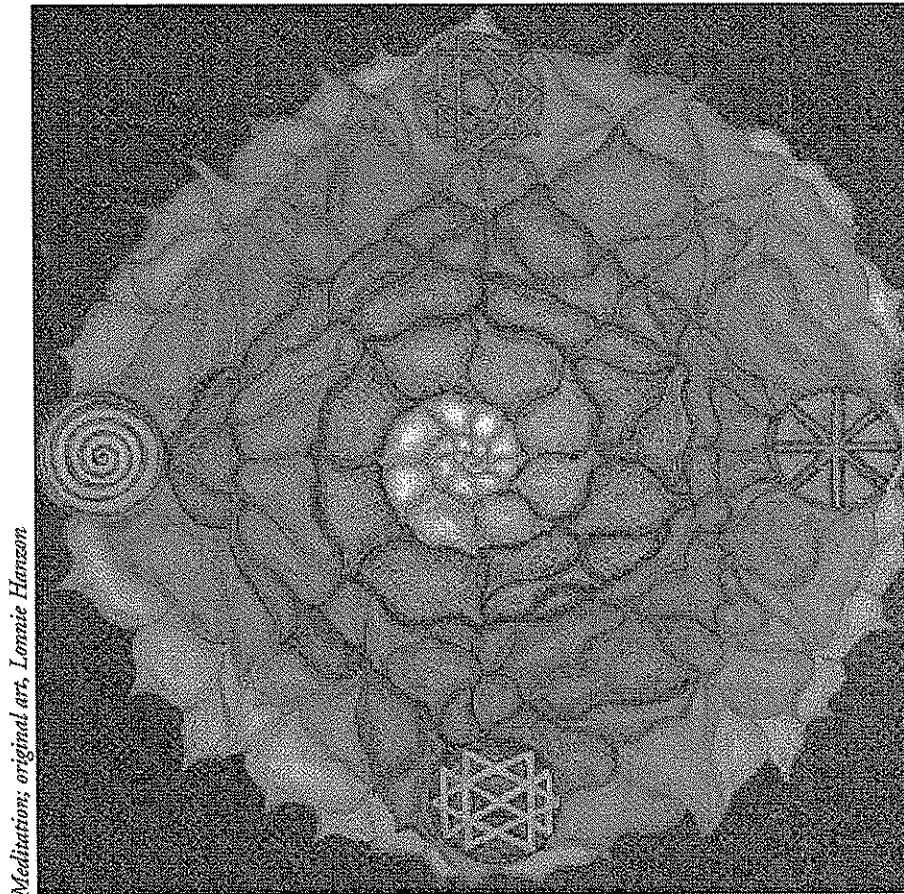
“During the Shma, I could feel the Shekhinah’s presence!” he said.

A dozen heads nodded in agreement.

“I did too!” I said, smiling. The experience was both deeply transformative and deeply healing for me. Throughout my life, I have been all too aware of the conflicts and distance between Jews and Christians. Over the years, I had participated in many interfaith dialogues, some of which were profoundly moving, but there was something even more profound and more moving about praying together in a spirit of unity. The deep oneness I experienced with my Christian brothers and sisters that morning was powerfully healing for my heart and nurturing for my soul. In the depths of my being, I felt that underneath the clash of theologies is a fundamental unity of spirit waiting to be rediscovered and reaffirmed.

BUDDHISTS RESPOND TO KABBALAH

Every group of students brings its unique experiences, insights, and knowledge to my classes and to the Kabbalah. When I teach at the California Institute of Integral Studies, many of the students are well versed in Buddhism, Hinduism, Integral Yoga, astrology, and hermeticism, and they make interesting comparisons with the Kabbalistic teachings and practices. In 2002, one of the students in my graduate seminar on “Kabbalah, Cosmology, and Psychology” was an extremely intelligent and intense young man who had been studying



Meditation; original art, Lonnie Hanson

and practicing Buddhism for several years. I will call him “Ben.” From the first day of class onward, it was obvious that Ben was excited by the parallel ideas and practices that he found in Kabbalah and Buddhism. For example, he saw a strong link between the Kabbalistic idea of Ayin (divine Nothingness) and the Buddhist idea of shunyata (Emptiness). Both traditions teach that infinite, formless energy gives rise to endless, ephemeral forms, and both emphasize that this infinite spaciousness can only be fully experienced with a silent mind. They also agree that chanting and meditation are among the best methods for quieting the mind and opening to a consciousness of infinite potentiality. Ben was also intrigued by the nondual emphasis in both traditions: many Kabbalists affirm the fundamental unity of divinity and world, while most Buddhists emphasize the interdependence and “not twoness” of all existence, as well as the unity of Samsara (worldly, conditioned existence) and Nirvana (transcendent, unconditioned reality).

I like to tell my students about the origins and meanings of words. The Bible itself is continually revealing the hidden meanings of key words, often through puns and other forms of word play. In Genesis, for example, Jacob wrestles throughout the night with a powerful man-angel. At dawn, this angelic being injures Jacob’s thigh, but Jacob proves to be the superior wrestler. When the angel demands that Jacob let him go, Jacob insists on receiving a blessing as a condition for release. The angel then asks Jacob what his name is, and after hearing the response, blesses Jacob by giving

him a new name, “Yisrael” (Israel). The Biblical text explains the meaning of this name as “he struggled with God” (sarita im Elohim) (Genesis 32:29). In recognition of this transformative experience, Jacob names the place Peniel [literally, “Face of God”], “for I have seen God face to face” (Genesis 32: 29, 31).

I believe that the deep wisdom of the Bible, and of every authentic scripture, speaks to all human beings, not just to a particular people. Often, I tell my students, “If you are someone who wrestles with God, consider yourself an honorary Israelite! You can understand the Shma as saying to you, ‘Hear, O Godwrestler, the Eternal One beyond the world (Adonai) and the Eternal One in the world (Elohim) are one. All is divine. All is one.’” I am also careful to add with a smile, “You should know that most orthodox rabbis would not agree with my making you honorary members of the tribe!”

Our class was an “intensive” in the true sense of the word. We met from ten to four for five straight days. Each morning, I would ask the students if they had had any unusual dreams, insights, or experiences that might be related to our class readings, discussions, or practices. Midweek, Ben raised his hand and said, “Last night I suddenly woke up in the middle of the night, around 2 a.m., and started chanting the Shma. It was automatic, spontaneous. It was so powerful and compelling that I just gave into it. It was amazing!”

I could feel my own amazement as he related this experience, his face all aglow. Yes, I thought, this being deeply touched and transformed by the divine in and beyond all beings is the true meaning of “echad” (One, Oneness). And how wonderful that the Shma is able to touch a Buddhist “Godwrestler”!

About a year later, I attended a conference at CIIS. During one of the breaks, a young man with a shaven head and shining face came up to me. “Do you remember me?” he asked. I looked at him but couldn’t quite remember if and where I had met him. Then suddenly I had a glimmer of recognition. “Oh, yes,” I said, sensing that I knew him but still not quite sure how or where.

“That Kabbalah class I took with you last year changed my life!” he said with a huge smile. “I have incorporated some of the chants and meditations we learned into my Buddhist practice.”

As I looked at him, I could see the joy and peacefulness in his being. He seemed to radiate happiness and contentment. “You look great!” I said.

“I feel great,” he said. “Thank you for a wonderful class!”

“Thank you!” I said, still in awe of his luminous presence, and grateful for the power of Kabbalistic practices.

A CHANT THAT CHANGES LIVES

Let me close with another story of mystery and transformation. A few years ago, I was teaching an undergraduate course on “Kabbalah and Psychology” at John F. Kennedy University, an innovative and progressive school that emphasizes a holistic, transformational approach to education. The students in my class came from a wide

range of religious, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. In one meditation we explored the ways in which we expressed the divine qualities of Lovingkindness (Chesed) and Strength (Gevurah) in our daily lives. These qualities are understood to be polarized energies, and they are associated with the right and left arms, respectively. In a healthy, whole, and holy person, the two energies are in dynamic balance: Lovingkindness involves giving generously and loving unconditionally, while Strength involves setting limits, establishing protections, and being able to say “no” or “enough.” Many of the students who had chosen career paths in health care and other service industries discovered that they expressed much Lovingkindness in their lives but had trouble setting the limits and protections associated with Strength. We talked about how excessive Lovingkindness can lead to burnout if it is not counterbalanced by the limit-setting power of Strength. One student said that she discovered that she manifested a lot of Strength in her life but had more difficulty expressing Lovingkindness. She indicated that this realization made her want to bring more generosity and kindness into her life and her relationships. I was impressed by her humility and courage in making this public pronouncement.

One of my favorite students in the class was a dynamic and insightful African American woman, whom I will call “Sarah.” Sarah had her own business, and had come back to school to complete her degree and further her growth. Throughout the class, she made profound connections between the Kabbalistic ideas and her own personal and professional life. She also indicated that she found many of the practices very powerful.

The following year, I offered a 2-day course on spiritual poetry, and was delighted to see that Sarah had enrolled. At the beginning of my classes, I usually ask students what drew them to my course. When it was Sarah’s turn to speak, she said, “I really loved the last class I took with you – on Kabbalah and Psychology – and so wanted to take another class with you. One of the chants we did in that class really changed my life. I have always been a deeply spiritual person, but all my life I’ve been seeking a certain opening, a certain breakthrough, and I had it while doing that chant.”

Sarah didn’t identify which chant it was, but a little voice in me said, “Elohim Chayim.” The divine name “Elohim Chayim” means “God of Life” or “Living Divinity.” The name appears prominently in a High Holyday prayer that beseeches the Living Divinity to “Remember us for life, Sovereign who desires life, and inscribe us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, God of Life.” It is understood that during the Ten Days of Repentance, from Rosh HaShanah (the Jewish New Year) to Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), our fate – health, wealth, life, death – for the coming year is being determined. It is a time for deep self-reflection and examination and for the mending and realigning of our lives. The Elohim Chayim chant is “Elohim, Elohim, Elohim! Elohim, Elohim Chayim!” (God, God, God! God, God of Life!).

I wasn’t certain that “Elohim Chayim” was the chant that had touched Sarah so profoundly, but I decided to follow my intuition, my inner voice. Perhaps, it was just a hunch; perhaps, it was “the still small voice” revealing something important to me.

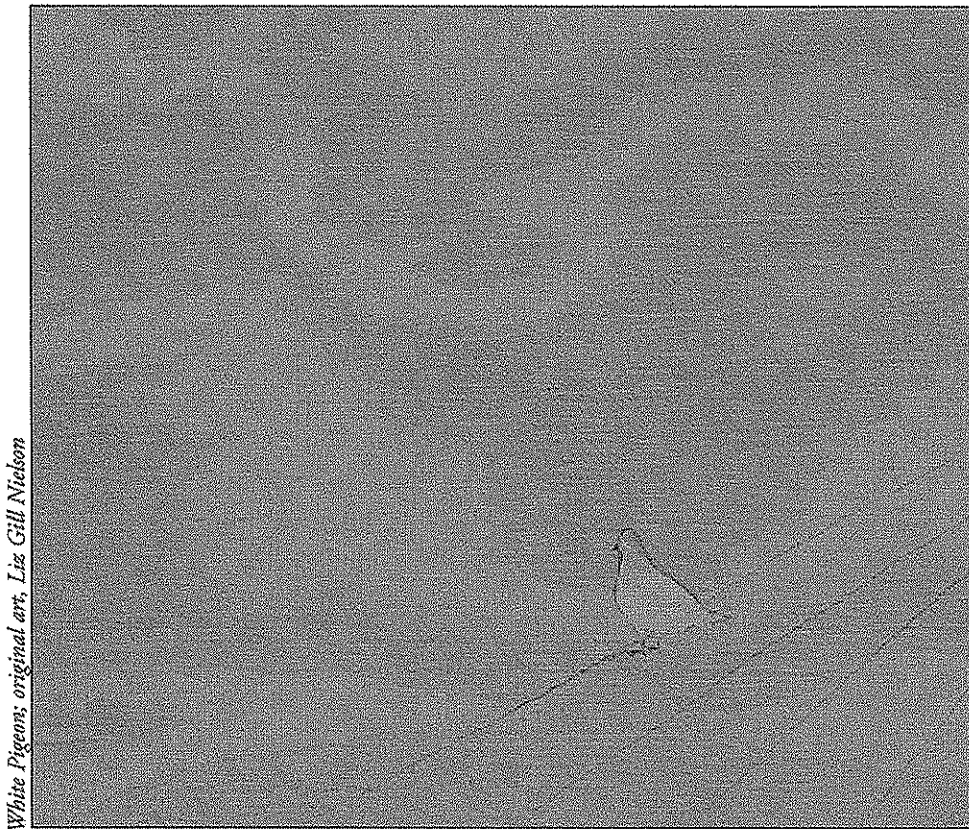
Our morning session concluded, and we took a lunch break. During lunch, I decided to begin the afternoon session with a chant. I often use chants and meditations in my sacred poetry classes because they help the students to get into an expanded state of consciousness that gives them greater access to the poetry as well as to their own spiritual experiences. Though it was not a Kabbalah class, I thought I would begin the afternoon session with the Elohim Chayim chant, partly because I knew it is such a wonderfully joyous and transformative chant, and partly because I sensed it was the chant that had so touched Sarah.

I closed my eyes and invited the students to close theirs. After demonstrating the chant once, I asked them to join in. We chanted for several minutes, eventually reaching a beautiful intensity of joy and harmony. Then I progressively slowed down the chant and made it quieter and quieter. Upon bringing the chant to a close, I became silent, and we sat together in silence. The silence was so still, so vital, and so peaceful – so full of holy bliss and togetherness! After several minutes, I asked the students to slowly open their eyes. Looking around the room, I noticed that Sarah was beaming.

“Would anyone like to share their experience of the chant?” I asked.

Sarah immediately raised her hand. “That was it!” she exclaimed. “How did you know?”

“A still small voice told me,” I said, smiling.



White Pigeon, original art, Liz Gill Nielson