



**From Then Until Now:
A Historical Overview of Jewish Spirituality
by Greg Sterling**

Abraham Joshua Heschel, in *The Sabbath* (1951), tells of a story in which a rabbi enters heaven in a dream. The rabbi sees the great sages of the Talmud, the Tannaim, sitting at tables studying. "Is this all there is to Paradise?" he mutters. Instantly, a voice responds: "You are mistaken; the Tannaim are not in Paradise, Paradise is in the Tannaim."

This essentially is the situation of most contemporary American Jews—a population looking in on its own tradition from the outside and asking, "Is this all there is?" And although many of us may have an intuitive sense that there's more, we have no idea how to mine Judaism's spiritual riches.

Assimilated Jews often fall into one of two camps. Judaism is either an important history and culture to be preserved, like a museum artifact, or an archaic system of rules, ancient stories, and quaint rituals that have little or nothing to do with the demands and pressures of daily life.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Seeking Authentic Spirituality

Jewish spirituality, unlike some other traditions, isn't about renunciation or monasticism or celibacy. Judaism is about finding divinity in this world and leading a spiritual life in the midst of all the chaos and pressures of family, community, and work. It is also about the personal transformation inherent in the journey from "slavery" to "freedom."

Yet to find "authentic spirituality," Jews often feel they must look East or to some source other than the one right in front of them. And most congregational rabbis, like the figure in Heschel's story, don't themselves perceive the inner spiritual meaning of Judaism, which has been preserved mainly in the teachings and practices of Jewish meditation and Kabbalah, "received tradition."

An Ancient Tradition

The origins of Kabbalah and Jewish mystical practice trace back at least to the first century C.E. and perhaps much earlier. The late Aryeh Kaplan argued that Jews were meditating during the Biblical era: "Isaac went out to meditate in the fields" (Genesis 24:63). But whether this was meditation as we understand it today, there is no dispute that Jewish meditation is an ancient tradition.

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First Century Mysticism

One of the earliest forms was Merkavah (chariot) meditation. Dating to the first century C.E., Merkavah mysticism aspired to recreate the enigmatic vision of the Biblical prophet Ezekiel. The so-called chariot was a metaphorical spiritual vehicle that transported practitioners to a place of prophetic vision. Prophecy, in those days, was not about foretelling the future, but about cultivating the capacity to experience spiritual ecstasy.

A contemporaneous set of practices was directed toward ascending to various celestial palaces. This Hekhalot (palace) mysticism envisioned distinct heavens or palaces—seven to be exact—each with increasing spiritual significance, leading ultimately to a direct experience of God.

Thirteenth Century Spain

Centuries later, during the Medieval period, the center of Jewish spirituality shifted to Spain. During the 13th century, a Spanish mystic named Abraham Abulafia developed meditative practices involving elaborate permutations of the Hebrew alphabet. This was, and still is, one of the primary practices of Jewish meditation. Meditation on the four-letter name of G!d (YHVH) is such an example. Abulafia also used chanting and music to help him achieve mystical experience.

Thirteenth century Spain also produced the seminal text of Jewish mysticism, The Zohar ("Book of Splendor"). A multivolume mystical commentary on the Torah, it was written by Moshe de Leon, who claimed it had actually been authored by second-century Talmudic sage Simeon bar Yohai.

Sixteenth Century Safed

After the Inquisition and expulsion of Jews from Spain, Safed, in Northern Israel, became the center of Jewish mystical thought.

It was in Safed that Moses Cordovero produced a definitive commentary on the Zohar. It was also there that the single most influential thinker in all of Jewish mysticism emerged in the 16th century—Rabbi Isaac Luria. Also known by the acronym ARI ("the Lion"), Luria originated the idea that the purpose of human history is tikkun, repairing or healing the world. That concept and Luria's other ideas heavily influenced later Hasidism, and continues to shape modern Jewish thought, as well.

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Eighteenth Century Hasidism

Hasidism, which was founded in Eastern Europe by the Baal Shem Tov in the mid-1700s, adopted and modified the Lurianic system. Perceived as anti-intellectual by its opponents, Hasidism emphasized joy and spiritual devotion and ultimately devekut, a merging with or attachment to God. One of the practices of Jews was to meditate an hour before and after prayer to deepen their intention and ready themselves for connection to The Divine.

Modern Jewish Spirituality

Personal growth and transformation are two central goals of Hasidism. It is through Hasidism and the writings of its various spiritual masters that Jewish mysticism comes down to us today.

The common goal of all of these historical schools and practices is direct knowledge of The Divine. Another way to put it is this: Authentic Jewish spirituality seeks the opening of the heart to let the light of HaShem (one of the many names of God) shine through and guide our actions and conduct in the world.

Finding Deeper Meaning

True Jewish spirituality penetrates to the heart of Torah, prayer, and mitzvot (Divine commandments), and illuminates them with the insight that these are tools to cultivate ourselves and our relationship with HaShem. Jewish meditation is a helpful starting place and offers a way into the deeper meaning of these traditional practices.

Another way to see all this is through the lens of teshuvah (return). At the time of the Jewish High Holidays, we are called upon to repair our relationships with others, with ourselves, and with HaShem. It is not just a turning away from sin or idolatry (in its many guises), but a turning toward other people with compassion, a turning toward The Divine and, perhaps most important, a turning toward our authentic selves.

According to The Zohar, the deeper we approach that authentic self, the closer we come to The Divine. It is this quest to open the heart and know God that is the essence of all Jewish spirituality.

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