

# *Spectrum*

## A Journal of Renewal Spirituality

Volume 2, Number 3, Fall-Winter, 2006

A Publication of *The Reb Zalman Legacy Project*

# *Spectrum: A Journal of Renewal Spirituality*

*SPECTRUM: A JOURNAL OF RENEWAL SPIRITUALITY* is a quarterly on-line journal seeking to continue the process of spiritual renewal (as taught by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi) through new teaching and commentary on Judaism and ecumenical spirituality.

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# Why Neo-Hasidism?

BY NATAN MARGALIT

*Natan Margalit* is currently Assistant Professor of Rabbinics at Hebrew College. He has a B.A. from Reed College, a Ph.D. from U.C. Berkeley, and rabbinic ordination from a Jerusalem Seminary. Rabbi Margalit has taught at Bard College, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Pardes Institute, and other places of learning. He has taught Jewish thought and spirituality for over 15 years, exploring issues of gender, ecology and innovative approaches to Jewish texts.

*For this issue, we have asked Rabbi Margalit to discuss the issue of why he felt a Neo-Hasidism conference was necessary in 2003, and why it is an important topic for Judaism today (N.M.-Y., Editor).*

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I USED TO BE ONE of those spiritual seekers who loved to *daven* at the Breslav *shul* in Old Katamon in Jerusalem. Friday night there was like a taste of heaven. The pure sounds of *Lecha Dodi* opened our hearts and our faces shone with delight. This was truly *Shabbat!* Of course, there were more Hebrew University professors, tourists and explorers like myself than actual Breslav Hasidim, but the spiritual power came from the small core of Breslavers. I knew that Breslav was not my community, but when I prayed at “my” modern shuls, we never reached the heights of the Hasidic prayer. As the Israeli scholar Ernst Simon said, “the people I liked to *daven* with, I couldn’t talk

to, and the people I talked with I didn’t care to *daven* with.”

Slowly, though, I saw this situation begin to change. I discovered Yakar in Jerusalem, the various “Shlomo Minyans” or “Happy Minyans” around the world, the Renewal davvening of Reb Zalman, Shefa Gold, Jack Gabriel, Jonathan Kligler in Woodstock, N.Y. and more. A shift was occurring, but still, the majority of the Jewish world wasn’t paying much attention.

Looking around, I noticed that all the denominational rabbinical schools, and therefore almost all the rabbis and Jewish teachers in America had their roots in the

*misnagged*, anti-Hasidic, tradition. This anti-mystical, rationalist style of Judaism may have been helpful in the modernizing of Judaism in the 20th century, but with the baby-boomer generation and beyond, American religion and many Jews along with it had shifted toward something more personal, more experiential, something we call “spirituality.” *Kabbalah* has become somewhat of a fad, but to my ear, the cosmic maps of *kabbalah* were not as relevant to the spiritual yearnings of contemporary Jews as the inner spiritual psychology, soulful *niggunim* (melodies) and emotionally expressive forms of prayer that come out of the Hasidic tradition.

But I found that if you put the word “Hasidic” in any flyer for a class or seminar, people will run the other way, as the word “Hasid” today evokes an image of anti-modernity and rigidity. There is a need to carve-out a new category, one that is not that of the Brooklyn “black hat,” nor the Lubavitcher in his “*Mitzvah*-mobile,” but which acknowledges the connection to Hasidic sources, while opening that rich tradition to a wider audience.

It is not surprising that the 20th century institutions in America emphasized the non-mystical stream. The impulse to modernize came first to those Jews whose

Judaism already favored the dispassionate pursuit of learning. It only made sense that the modern reformers would come primarily out of the highly intellectual tradition of the anti-Hasidic Lithuanian *yeshivot* and the modernizing German Jewish communities. Thus, the history of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Hebrew Union College, even Yeshiva University, is one of moving from non-mystical, rationalist European Judaism to a modernizing, rationalist American Judaism.

The Hasidic movement was busy in the 19th and early 20th centuries fortifying itself against modernity, not integrating with it. And, the modern scholars were themselves inclined to dismiss Hasidism as primitive nonsense. But there were a few exceptions, and those few exceptions were vital. Hillel Zeitlin was perhaps the first truly Neo-Hasidic Jew, straddling the Hasidic and modern worlds. He was an anomaly as a modern who was not Hasidic exactly, but who deeply identified with Hasidic spirituality as his path. Much more well-known and influential, Martin Buber brought the Hasidic story into Western literature, and described in deep, empathetic language the nuances of Hasidic spirituality. Yet, his influence was intellectual and philosophical. His students would never

create a movement or take up Hasidic forms of spiritual practice. While these figures are vital to understanding where we are today, the 2003 Neo-Hasidism Conference in New York did not concentrate on them as much as on later figures who have brought us to a new moment, a “second wave of Neo-Hasidism.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel was the first pillar of Neo-Hasidism in America. He was the “fish out of water” at the Jewish Theological Seminary, suffering the misunderstanding and even scorn of the strongly *misnagged* leanings of that institution. Yet, Heschel’s teachings, his writings, and his students lay the groundwork for Hasidic theology to find its way into non-Hasidic American Jewish circles. He not only created a beautiful, poetic modern language for Hasidic ideas, but he made an essential innovation—trading the mostly inward, “quietistic” (as the scholars call it) spirituality of the Hasidic masters for a passionately involved, political and social activism. He truly brought out the essence of Hasidic teaching in a way that it could not have been expressed in its original European context, but which was now possible in the open society of 20th century America. His students—Arthur Green, Marshall Meyers, Arthur Waskow, Michael Lerner, Burt

Jacobs and others have all made important contributions to bringing aspects of Heschel’s Neo-Hasidism into American Jewish life in concrete ways.

In our generation, two major figures, Reb Shlomo Carlebach and Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, integrated their Hasidic spirituality with the counter culture of the ‘60s and ‘70s. Reb Shlomo’s close followers may not consider themselves “Neo-Hasids” in so far as they remain Orthodox and considered him to be their Rebbe in the traditional sense. Mimi Feigelson was one presenter at the conference who falls into that category. But of course, Reb Shlomo’s influence went far beyond his closest followers. His music and his Torah and his acts of kindness, touched thousands in the Jewish and non-Jewish world. I first began to appreciate Reb Shlomo back around 1989 when my friend, the rabbi and journalist Micha Odenheimer dragged me to a gathering in someone’s home in the Old City where Reb Shlomo was teaching. Reb Shlomo started strumming and singing and talking. About three hours later, I suddenly realized that he was not randomly meandering around, but had been weaving a Hasidic Torah the entire time, and had brought us home to the depth of the teaching without us even noticing. I began

to see his genius for dressing the most profound teachings in simple, infectious language and mesmerizing song. Reb Shlomo brought Hasidic masters such as the “Ishbitzer Rebbe” out of near obscurity, and many including myself have come to see their Torah as vital for our generation.

Reb Zalman’s genius ranges widely into brilliant intellectual flashes of insight, word-smithing, both written and oral, ritual innovation (“davenology”), and integrating other spiritual traditions while maintaining his deeply rooted Jewishness. But most of all he has created in the most direct sense a Neo-Hasidism of our time, organizing Jewish Renewal institutions, P’nai Or, and ALEPH. ALEPH is the only non-Hasidic “movement” (or not quite a movement) which functions on the Hasidic model. He has taken on the awesome task of being a *rebbe* and modeling “*rebbe*-craft” while fully embracing the post-modern world. What that means is still somewhat in flux, but no one has seen the need or risen to the challenge as much as Reb Zalman.

As Reb Bob Dylan said, “There’s something going on here, but you don’t know what it is . . .” One of the hopes I had for the conference was that it would be an opportunity for academics to put this new phenomenon on the table, examine it and

bring it out of the shadows. Whether that happened or not is not clear, but today (conference presenters) Shaul Magid and Chava Weissler have carried on the kind of scholarship that I had hoped the conference would spark, taking Renewal Judaism seriously as a religious phenomenon, exploring it and placing it in context of American religion and Jewish theology.

The two keynote speakers at the conference were Reb Zalman and Arthur Green, who I am currently working with at the Hebrew College Rabbinical School. I felt that they presented a wonderful balance in their approaches: Reb Zalman emphasizing the grass roots, mystical and “shamanistic” aspects of the current incarnation of (neo) Hasidism. Reb Art balances the academic with the rabbinic and gives us a clear and accessible articulation of Neo-Hasidic theology which can be a mainstream Jewish theology of the 21st century.

Both emphasized the need for this new phenomenon to deepen beyond the adulation of charismatic rebbes and short-lived *Shabbaton* experiences and take on the work of learning the original sources, commitment to daily practice and establishing viable communities. Renewal, and Neo-Hasidism in all its forms today, is

an audacious, on-going experiment to see if post-modern, non-Orthodox Jews can carry the true spirit of Hasidism into the 21st century. The experiment is in full swing. To create a new Hasidism with the fire and depth of the original followers of the Ba'al Shem Tov, in the open, global, pluralistic context of America today is not a simple

task. But since when has Judaism had only simple tasks? The Hasidic masters created a Jewish inner language of freedom, choice and personal experience of God that perhaps only can come into fruition in a world such as ours. Call me crazy, but I'm betting on it.