

Question: what is the mystical side of Judaism and how has it shaped and changed my relationship to tradition and my own personal healing:

Let me begin by stating that my response will take place at three levels.

1. The historical
2. The phenomenological
3. The personal existential.

1. Historical

In the first response we may begin by stating that historically Jews have been exposed to different methods of studying texts from ancient times through the late antique period where the methods of the schools of Greek rhetoric were employed by the Rabbis as well as the early church Fathers in their interpretation of biblical texts.¹

In the late antique period the Hechalot literature and especially the Shiur Quoma talk of highly anthropomorphic descriptions of the divine. Scholars such as Bar Ilan have concluded (unlike Scholem) that this literature was very early and coincidental with Talmud. These texts betray a

different approach to textual reading and come from an experiential practice that was more akin to the Dionysian mysteries than the more rigid and orthodox interpretive methods of Apollonian thinking.

Why should there be such a mystical strand already this early that re-interprets the plain meaning of biblical passages in such highly esoteric means? Why is the Schechina described in such erotic terms, what on earth would such texts do for the students of its day, and surely this has little to do with norms of ethics and morality. Nor with the legalistic frameworks that characterized Pharisaic traditional interpretation.

Clearly Gnostic and neo-platonic influences were strong in the late antique period to the extent that Jews as well were influenced to read texts in such a way, and experienced mystical states of being and visions just like in the late prophetic works and other biblical narratives that describe the mystical visions of the Throne and Chariot. These were then recorded and older texts interpreted in light of these experiences.

Maaseh Merkava and Maaseh Breishit were classical works that described the heavenly chariot and palaces and such texts have been shown by Idel to have acted as

manuals for adepts, visionaries and mystics. Other non-canonical texts such as the Dead Sea scroll community in Qumran were also supposed to have had mystical visions. By the first century there were numerous sects all claiming truth by virtue of their particular interpretive strategies, such as the Dead Sea community, the Damascus sect, the early Christians, the Alexandrian school and the Sadducees.

The multiplicity of interpretations were not only in aggadic works but also halachic and the move to a single authoritative behavior was a late feature of the Gaonic period.

I am thus moved by the clearly fluid approach to the biblical text, the multiplicity of voices in this period and the various traditions and behavioral norms. This also informs my reading such texts. It is only in the medieval period that this all gets straight jacketed into philosophical and halachic norms and the Gnostic and mystical texts go underground in the face of apologetic texts that put on a brave philosophical front to face the challenge of Arabic and later Spanish Christian philosophy.

2. The Phenomenological

There is in the heart and soul of man a clear desire to transcend his body and merge with the infinite spirit of the universe, God or the transcendent. This impulse is seen cross-culturally in all major faiths. To the extent that we may speak of a polar divergence within all traditions we see an orthodoxy pitted against an undercurrent of Gnostic and mystical teachings be they those of the Christian monks of the Egyptian desert (the desert fathers) of the second century, the Sufi mystics of the 9th or the cabbalists of the Safed. These traditions refuse the distance of the deity and through their respective practices of worship and contemplative rituals attempt to make contact with the divine achieving *unio mystica* well described in the literature.

This deep desire in man expressed in this subterranean river underlying all major faiths seeks to get deeper into the experience of the divine and all have in common certain characteristics as outlined in the pioneering work of Zaehner at the turn of the century. I will choose only one example, the so-called "Dark night of the soul" first coined by St. John of the Cross² all mystics seem to have to

cross this dark path to get into the clarity of the light at the other end of the spiritual tunnel. Such inner suffering and torment was associated with a working of the pain for an ecstatic experience on the other side of a grace and illumination. In Jewish texts it is clear that the aim is to internalize kedushah (sanctity) and tahara (purity) of the body so that one may experience the divine in a similar fashion. Whereas the orthodox tradition might have seen the physical body in a fallen state, this mystica side insisted on the body as a temple for the indwelling! of the divine. By making the body the locus of experience and privileging it by sanctifying it and bodily needs, the adept hoped to make his body an inner temple and a chariot (Merkava) for the divine; thereby experiencing first-hand the presence of God "in the gut". This is not for the spiritual high of the worshipper alone rather these acts actually affected the cosmic level where "tikkun" (the actual repair of divine defects in the higher realms) fixed those cosmic calamities that occurred during prehistory or the fall of man. The acts of mere mortals thus had a cause and effect in the supernal worlds above. Following The teachings of the Ari (Rav Isaac Luria of Safed around 17th century), the theurgic drive is added upon the conventional

mystical states that might have allured some. Now the added demand to perform tikkun in the world by deep meditative techniques is a prerequisite for all performance of the commandments. The Zohar suggests that the "Holy community" of men who engage in mystical speculation actually hasten the coming of the Messiah.

3. The Personal - Existential

My own life has been a journey. Coming from the U.K. religion was very similar to traditional youth's experience; the literal or plain meaning of the text was paramount, (who ever heard of midrash or deeper levels of interpretation?). But since I took texts seriously I found during the course of my life struggles for meaning a gap, between the simple plain meaning of the text and what I needed to hear, those words that might satisfy my hungry soul. I felt like in a Baptist church trapped by the literal readings of the text but knowing in my gut that a deeper level must be out there somewhere.

I fully realize that the texts that speak to others maybe sufficient for their own spiritual journeys but for me as I met up with the very core of my own crisis the fact that I

was born 5 years after the Holocaust, my father a survivor, my grandparents absent because of Hitler and all his side of the family killed, my obsession with human suffering and the trials of my own life, the addictions, the betrayals, the failure of my life, the character defects that glare and continue to plague me, all these added up to an examined life that fell short to the standards I was brought up to believe in and made no sense when reading the texts received literally.

Theodicy on the general level and the judgmental God on the personal level failed to satisfy in a spiritual sense. The Halacha as practised made no sense; the "materiality of spirituality" was repulsive, the hypocrisy of the holier-than-thou world made me nauseated. On coming to the USA and meeting my father-in-law I was introduced into the world of serious Talmudic learning and spent half a year with him after my marriage in Israel in intensive study, learning the skills to master Talmud. Philadelphia brought me into the yeshiva world under the tutelage of Reb Mendel Kaplan of blessed memory, where I studied daily for 5 years. I found that, for me, mastery of the Talmud was not sufficient to answer my spiritual problems and

anxiety so that my life was now split between the frum yeshiva world and my inner life of torment.

I began to study Midrash when I was in Israel after the family moved there in 1992 and had the privilege of studying daily with Rabbi Dov Shapira in Jerusalem. Here too was a man who embodied all the orthodox ideals but stayed pretty much to the exoteric message of the text. During this time I also underwent two years o Freudian analysis, which I now see to be a mostly cruel process. I avidly read most of Jung?s writings in these two years while working on my thesis for Brandeis University.

I saw in midrash a trajectory of Jewish Theology whereby the rabbis took daring steps to read the biblical text in radical ways so as to mine the text for meaning and keep it relevant and sacred for them the multivalent voices of midrash gave me comfort and hope that tradition might still be alive through creative Midrashic work so in my thesis I attempted to plot a trajectory that might form the basis for a post-Holocaust Jewish theology along the mines of midrash. I used the parables of the king as first outline by Dr David Stern at Penn and tried to take off where he had left off pushing the theological envelope a little further by the use of the king parable and its possible effect as a tool

following catastrophe. Using the similar metaphor for King Arthur and the character of Lear in Shakespeare I tried to suggest that the conflicted king and wounded king might be a possible appropriate metaphor for a post Holocaust theology.

After the death of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach in 1994, I was handed a book called "lemaan achai veraiy" an anthology of his teachings. I was literally blown away by the content. His was a teaching I had never experienced before. I began to look at the sources he was quoting including "the Izbitzer, Reb Zadok and Reb Nachman". I had never heard of these Rabbis but they seemed to be a constant refrain, being quoted above all others. I was surprised since he had been involved with Lubavitch sect of Hassidism yet here he was quoting these unknown masters.

This started me on the road towards chassidut and the "pnimiut" of Torah the inner aspects and esoteric reading of the biblical text. The Mei hashiloach, of the Izbitzer and the works of Reb Zadok and the Beit Yaakov took another two years to come to grips with the technical terms the beginning of kabbalah and the implications for theology. Finally I had found a text that began to come alive once I mastered the intricate technical terminology and

kabbalistic phraseology. These texts moved me to seeing my inner self and my unfolding in different ways and the immanence of the divine insisted upon in all these Hassidic works moved me in ways hitherto unimaginable. The study actually began to affect my behavior. An unconditionally loving God, the insistence on the holiness of each person, the presence of God within not only out there, and the holiness of the material world fit my vision well.

On arriving in Chicago alone, the community most welcoming was that of Chabad so naturally I was able to deepen my Chassidic knowledge with learning partners in Chabad texts especially Reb Yitzchak Chakiris. Reb Hershey Worch also studied with me the texts of Izbitz and Chazan Willy Silber influenced me greatly in the practical customs of Hassidism. In Israel I was fortunate to learn kabbalah with George Lasry at least a taste of the inner workings of Torah.

What has this line of learning given me?

In my own journey I have always felt the split between body and soul, the world as I experienced it in the inner

world of spirit. Always wanting to unify the two, the Talmudic frum world only seemed to exacerbate the split. In music, art, literature, love, nature, astronomy, human anatomy I saw the wonder of nature and the human spirit but again could not equate or reconcile it with the darker side of life, the human misery, poverty, man's inhumanity to man, theodicy and the Holocaust.

In my own life I was tormented by what was professed and the gap between the puerile theology of orthodoxy and reality. The world of suffering human beings was becoming too much to bear for me, and crisis in my own life precipitated my radical departure to Harvard Divinity school for a degree in theology in 1986. Here I was to study the Documentary hypothesis and a less fundamentalist reading of texts, their architecture and history, the scholarship behind bible study. From there to Brandeis and midrash studies. In these years I also attended Dartmouth University summer school for literary criticism (all the time paying bills and supporting the kids through Hebrew day schools!!) which gave me an understanding of post modernism and post critical thinking.

What emerged was a highly critical approach to my tradition and texts, and the beginnings of my ability to "read myself" in the texts, the way the text acts as a mirror of one's own inner life. The skills I received plus the spiritual crisis informed my readings of the texts of catastrophe in chapter 6 of my thesis. These texts allowed me to project a trajectory of rabbinic thought that began with post-hurban Midrash all the way to a possible post-holocaust theology.

This was all well and good but still I was talking about God and evil as if it was all "out there" and it still did not answer my burning existential questions and deep pain within. Once I began working the Hassidic texts I was digging into a new level of the text. Here the personalities of the bible were less figures of morality or archetypal characters as portrayed in Midrashic texts, rather more internalized aspects of the human soul, Abraham representing the archetypal aspect of kindness (chesed), Isaac strict judgment and restriction (gevurah) and Jacob a balance. Now the texts were demanding that we look inside to find the immanent God present in all of life, both good and even bad. Now the demands were much greater than merely the intellectual appreciation of a transcendent

Deity who demands obedience of His commands. Now the command to engage Him and struggle with Him as did the forefather Jacob, and wrestle with the dark side, Jung's shadow, the Esau within. The famous quote from the Baal Shem, ("Umivsari echeze bo") from the verse in Job; "from my flesh I will behold Him", is taken to mean within my flesh, as if the immanent expression of Godliness in my flesh is sufficient an experience if not the only possible access to experience the Divine.

This is a compelling myth claimed by Hassidut really reached into my soul so that finally I was coming closer to the vision of reality the spiritual map that fit me. Still the old addictions and existential pain did not let up resulting in weekends hugging trees with men's work (Robert Bly, the Jungian James Hillman and various shamans!), the Phoenix project with Jack and vipasana meditation retreats. Finally the 12-step recovery program the most successful twentieth century spiritual movement helped me with the road to spirituality and a connection to a loving caring God of my definition.

I guess the texts we are learning take for granted that the world of a transcendent Deity who demands our behavioral observance is insufficient. That there is a dual

Torah the one we have had for 2000 years and the future ?Torah of the Messiah? which is currently closed and esoteric but will be revealed in the future. This Torah is the inner core of the revealed one we have. Access to this inner Torah is for the few and privileged. It means experiencing the divine within if that is at all possible. For me it has been transforming. I must admit that my inner healing is merely a work-in- progress and that it rests on three pillars, the first is the study of these texts which have opened up for me the possibility for a conscious contact with the Divine in my lifetime and the sanctifying my body in sacred time and space. The second is the recovery work I do by participating in groups that follow the 12-Step traditions and "work the program" step by step in a fashion that exposes one?s character defects and tries to remove them. This work is ever so important since one cannot hope to become a vehicle for the Divine (Merkava) if one?s base instincts are not controlled, and the 12-step program provide a convenient and powerful support network to effect this. Lastly I have found the meditation practices are essential to quieten the mind from the outside frenzy and focus the mind on the inner state of being.

From all this I have applied the inner work I have done to that of my work with healing and patient care. It is through the daily practice of the steps, the study and meditation that I can become slowly a better healer of my patients, listening to them as I would a deep sacred text and allowing the spirit to flow through me in an intuitive way, entirely non-rational, in a loving caring being there for my patients, suffering alongside them as they make their own journey into acceptance and healing.

When we speak of Mitzvot then, there seem to be two approaches. One is the Leibowitz approach whereby the commander in chief commands and the mitzvah represents the fulfillment of the command, because of His power and my commitment to Him. By fulfilling the mitzvoth I hereby connect to Him in the only way possible by fulfilling His commandments. Torah study is the other way to connect. In both paradigms there is a gulf of difference and distance between man and God.

Reb Nahman talks of mitzvoth as the "naaseh" of naaseh ve'nishmah (L.M.22) "we will do and we will obey" where the "nishma" is the listening to the voice, the esoteric voice, the "nistar" of torah the non-behavioral aspects of the text. All non-mitzvoth ?related texts are consigned to

nistar and beyond rational understanding. Only through prayer and mediation is this inner aspect of nishma accessed.

Thus for me, this aspect is the mythic. The narrative parts of torah teach not history but meta-history, myth and narratives that speak to my situation and distress in each generation. The search for the key to unlock the mystery of my life encoded in the Torah is the struggle for finding meaning, listening to the non-mitzvot aspect of torah, the nishma aspect?in these narratives are the mythic themes of birth death renewal family people ethnicity man?s relationship with the divine and suffering. In myth I find my own struggles mirrored in the text, and the mitzvoth then become the vehicles by which I am able to access mythic behavior and ritual which expresses the deepest aspects of my souls? desire.

Through mitzvoth and ritual behavior I somehow connect to those deeper mythic realities a deeper map of my life. The reality map for me has been chassidut which plots the mitzvoth along the axis of myth and ritual in a meaningful paradigm of life/death darkness/light, God/man, family and ethnicity, land and space. In my recovery I find meaning in the meditations and rituals associated with surrender and

defeat, in the psalms and the Sabbath table, the altered time and experience of sacred time, sacred space and people. In the Rebbe I find solace inasmuch as he too suffered, and does so for the sins of our generation, that he has connection beyond mine to meaning and divinity. In this paradigm the earth becomes alive and organismic , creatures fulfill their place in the grandeur of the living world, and cause and effect loom larger than ever, from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic. No longer is the world a machine and our bodies subject to mastery, rather we live in concert with them humbly bowing to nature and our bodies in a sacred way.

1 Where Lieberman has claimed influence such as the "13 middot by which the bible has been interpreted" that use Greek methods to extract an oral law of precepts that govern our every detail in life halachically.

2 It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that the verse and prose works combined of St. John of the Cross form at once the most grandiose and the most melodious spiritual canticle to which any one man has ever given utterance.

The most sublime of all the Spanish mystics, he soars aloft on the wings of Divine love to heights known to hardly any of them . . . True to the character of his thought, his style is always forceful and energetic, even to a fault.

When we study his treatises--principally that great composite work known as the Ascent of Mount Carmel and the Dark Night--we have the impression of a mastermind that has scaled the heights of mystical science; and from their summit looks down upon and dominates the plain below and the paths leading upward . . . Nowhere else, again, is he quite so appealingly human; for, though he is human even in his loftiest and sublimest passages, his intermingling of philosophy with mystical theology; makes him seem particularly so. These treatises are a wonderful illustration of the theological truth that graced far from destroying nature, ennobles and dignifies it, and of the agreement always found between the natural and the supernatural--between the principles of sound reason and the sublimest manifestations of Divine grace."