

An Interview with Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi

Frank Donnola

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Frank Donnola: Would you tell me something of your involvement with Kabbalah, your lineage as it were, and your teachers?

Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi: Kabbalah incorporates so many things: theology, metaphysics, customs, folklore, so that it's rather obscure. In fact somebody who read one of my books said "This is Kabbalah without cobwebs." And I suddenly realised this is the kind of work I was supposed to do. To clarify it so that intelligent people could key into and understand and make use of this extraordinary system, which covers the whole of life. It's not just a metaphysical system, it's also a working method of living.

Now many people think of Kabbalah in terms of ritual and magic. In the Jewish household, the rituals are concerned with everyday life. The Kabbalist lives in everyday life. Yes, he retires, he meditates, he contemplates, he prays. We have mantras of the names of God - all these are part and parcel. The magic side really belongs to the occult tradition in Europe, which adopted it from the time of Cornelius Agrippa in the sixteenth century. There are elements of German, Slavonic, French and English local customs of magic which they grafted onto Kabbalah. Kabbalah formed the framework which they hang all these various things on. That's really not my concern. I'm aware of the fact that it exists, but my interest is primarily the spiritual one.

Going back to my own best roots and the roots of the Judeo-Christian esoteric tradition. Because of course, Joshua ben-Miriam bar-Joseph, otherwise known as Jesus, was himself of course Jewish, and he would have been very familiar with this. He would have come down from the Galilee, and he would have attended the various schools of the soul in and around Jerusalem, and undoubtedly he visited the Essenes in various places, where they were all talking about the things we talk about in the language of their time. So that really was my starting point.

As regards my teachers, there are two kinds. There's the physical one who introduces you to the basics, and then there is the interior teacher. This is something that one can't say a great deal about, because you have to experience that kind of interior conversation, with what is called in Kabbalah the Maggid, one's teacher.

Donnola: It's a kind of intimacy that can't be shared because it's just too personal.

Halevi: It's not that it's too personal, it's that the questions you ask and the answers you receive are related to your particular psychology and background. I suppose in that sense it's personal. And the person I have a particular affinity with is a man called Ibn-Gabiról, who lived in tenth-century Spain, in Andalusia. Now, he wouldn't have been called a Kabbalist, but in one of his poems, Kether Malkuth, he describes the Ladder of Being or Chain of Being. And this was adopted by the Kabbalists of Gerona. Many of his ideas, which were Neoplatonic, as seen from the Jewish point of view, were integrated into Kabbalah. And I feel a tremendous sympathy with Ibn Gabiról, in a sense. So if somebody was going to say "Who's my teacher?", I would say Ibn Gabiról.

Donnola: Very good. Obviously Kabbalah covers so many things. One which I found interesting was that it introduces more of an erotic element to the notion of God, with the Shekinah as the Bride of God. I know that started as the Presence, and then evolved from that, but what's your perspective on it?

Halevi: First of all, one has to speak about the general background. There are basically two strands which are woven together in the Kabbalah of the Middle Ages. The first is the important one, which Gershom Scholem called the Gnostic system. That is, the one that came from Babylonia (the Jewish schools there which were then the leading schools of the Judaic world.) They used symbolism, they used everyday symbols, and of course one of those is the relationship between the male and the female. This was one way of describing coming into union. So that symbolism was used very much in what I would call the mythological system.

On the other side, which is where Ibn Gabirol comes in, you have the metaphysical ones, the philosophical ones, the idea of the sefirot, the paths, the emanations, the four worlds, the analysing of the psychology of human beings. You bring them together and you get the Zohar, and what's done in the Zohar was a weaving together of these two. And so it's not so much an erotic image, it's rather like when the Chinese speak of the union of yin and yang, and the presence of the Tao.

And the Shekinah, which simply means the dwelling place of the Divine Presence, was seen as the negative pole, the yin, to the yang of the Creator, in that sense. So it was simply used as a device to convey that active/passive, yin/yang connection. The sexual element was not really erotic - it has much more to do with symbolism.

Donnola: Nevertheless I've read that a pious Jew who was also a practising Kabbalist would make love to his wife at midnight on the Sabbath, because it was believed this was when the Holy One made love to His Shekinah.

Halevi: Well, the custom was that if the conjugal rights were not performed, especially on Friday night, that was grounds for divorce, that was part of the custom. They would often take the existing customs and simply turn them into Kabbalistic metaphors. So devoted Jews, or someone who followed the custom, would perform exactly the same action, but with this notion of heaven and earth coming together, in the same way the early religions pictured the sky god and earth goddess coming together. It's a very common symbol, which they often worked into the customs that came into Kabbalah. In fact, they're much more ancient.

Donnola: What I recall from reading a little of the Zohar, with the Tetragrammaton, the four-lettered Name, each letter becomes a kind of person or hypostasis: the King, Queen, Prince, and Princess...

Halevi: The Name, which Christians would know as Jehovah, was the last name given to Moses. If you remember, when Moses said on Mt. Sinai, "What should I say? Who sent me?", God says, "EHIEH", I am, God says. And then, "EHIEH ASHER EHIEH," "I am that I am." The final name is the name which is called the Tetragrammaton (nobody actually knows how it's pronounced) to be the memorial. One can take that to mean that the first names are to do with the esoteric: I AM, I AM THAT I AM. The last one is the name by which the children of Israel, in other words, those who don't understand, let That be the memorial. It's much simpler, and you don't have the implications of the first names, it's almost an afterthought. That name, which is four letters, if it's set upright, makes the figure of a human being. This is Adam Kadmon.

You can see the yod is the head, the first heh is the shoulders and arms, the vav is the heart going down to the genitals, and the last heh is the hips and two legs. This represents the four levels of existence: the divine, the spiritual, the soul, and the body. So that's the first four letters. They represent four realities. But if you look at that name in its vertical mode, it has three pillars, which represents the right-hand Pillar of Mercy, the left-hand Pillar of Justice, and the middle Pillar of Grace, and divine will.

So this name had a tremendous effect as a mantra, both as a word and a visual mantra, to such a degree that it was eventually forbidden to say this name. Not because it was against the commandments, but because it should not be taken in vain. Somewhere around the time of the Second Temple, this name was being spoken in the streets, in the home, in the same way people take the name of Jesus in vain. So it was forbidden to be said because it was losing respect. Not simply that but more,

it was that it should never be taken in vain. Because if you speak the name of God, you should know about Whom you're speaking!

However, it's become a focus, if you like, of a whole cult, and people over generations will add things, add more and more significance to it. Some of it is truly esoteric, and some of it is fantasy. This always happens in esoteric work.

Donnola: Yet I remember something from the Zohar saying each letter was almost a distinct separate being.

Halevi: It's a universe. Each letter represents a completely different world. If we take the yod (y), it represents the number ten. It's the seed that contains everything!. The ten is also the ten sefirot. So that's the divine world. It also represents the head of Adam Kadmon. You know, this the place where consciousness resides, omniscience. The first heh (h), the shoulders and lungs, is the place of air, the upper part of the body. With vav (w), the head of the vav is where the heart is, and the lower part of vav is where the genitals are. So that's the area of emotions, passions. And the second heh (h) is hips and legs, which are the organs of movement and volition.

So there you have at the bottom the world of action, and the elements, then you have Yezirah, formation, which is a watery world - the world of the heart. And then you have the first heh, which is air, ruach, Spirit. And then you have the yod, which is the head, which is the place of consciousness and enlightenment.

So that can be used as a mandala to be seen, or a mantra to be said. And to contemplate what the name is visually, what the letters represent, and the three pillars - it's a whole symbolic cipher. You see that's why that Name is so important, in many texts, which is why when you normally read it, in Hebrew you say "Adonai," which means "My Lord". It's a courtesy title.

Donnola: Would you talk about love from a Kabbalistic point of view?

Halevi: There are two ways of saying love Kabbalistically. One's the sefirah Hesed, which means loving kindness and mercy. In its positive aspect, it allows, it tolerates, it's benign, it's incorporative. But each of the sefirot have their negative side. The dark side of Hesed is to tolerate evil and allow it to flourish, and also to love in order to bind with love, to envelop with love, like the Yiddisha mama. So that's the dark side.

Its opposite is Gevurah, which means "strength," but is often interpreted as justice. I would call it discrimination, specifically. That's its positive side. But the negative side is the judgement of the inquisitor, severe criticism, harshness.

They all have their dark side. Even if you take, for example, Kether, the highest one of all, which is the Crown, the highest level of all, the dark area of that is that when people experience it, they think they're God. And the lunatic asylums are full of people who actually think they are God. It is true that they have a spark of divinity, sometimes they've had a flash of divine illumination, but that doesn't make them the Buddha. The next thing you know, you see them walking around with flowing robes, and acting as if they were some great saint.

Donnola: They could be experiencing how everything is ultimately divine. A person could have an experience of that but think it is their exclusive property, and they can't see it in anyone else but themselves, and that's the ego putting itself in the place of God.

Halevi: That's right. We had a young man who had such an experience and believed he was Maitreya! And he came to see me, came and had tea with me, because I couldn't resist meeting the Maitreya!

Donnola: Yeah, of course!

Halevi: He rang me up and said, "This is the Maitreya, I'd like to see you." Naturally one is curious about such people, and it was a young man, a typical Englishman, with grey flannel trousers and a tweed jacket - and bare feet! In the middle of London! Well, one look at him and you could see he was crazy.

So we sat down, and my wife Rebecca brought tea, and he said, "You may ask me any question." And I said, "How do you make a living?" He said, "Well I've got money in the bank." I said, "What happens after that?" He said "Well, uh, I don't know." I said "But you are the Maitreya, you're supposed to know about such matters." He couldn't answer that.

The next moment, I was aware of things in the room standing on either side of him. One of them was a weeping woman. I described her to him, and he said, "That's my mother." The other one was a rather refined-looking man with a beard - he was shaking his head. I described him and the young man said "That's my teacher." I said, "What about the three entities on the right? They're wearing blue robes with woollen cowls, but there's nothing in there, there's darkness!" He said, "I don't know what they are." I said, "But you're the Maitreya -you're supposed to Know these things!" He said, "Well, what do you think they mean?" I said "They're wearing wool - remember wolves in sheeps' clothing!"

After we'd talked some more, I said, "I think you should be very careful about speaking about the Maitreya." He rang me up a few weeks later and said, "You were right, I must have been crazy!" He'd had a psychotic episode in which he'd experienced divinity, and believed he was divinity. So that's the shadow side of Keter - you actually think you're God.

Donnola: When did you begin to be able to experience presences, and know who they were and what they were about?

Halevi: Well, I've always had a sensitivity towards places. It really started with the death of my mother. She had had a heart attack and had passed on. I was sitting in a room meditating, and her voice came through quite clearly. And it was a series of messages, one of which for example was "Look, the funeral's taking place today, and I want the place to look nice, I don't want our relatives and friends to think I didn't keep up the house! Will you sweep the leaves from the front path, and put a certain piece of furniture back?" I said Okay, I'll do that. I did that and my uncle came in, and he said "By the way, your mother wants you to sweep up the front path and move that piece of furniture back." And that's when I suddenly realised I had that faculty.

Now, I never worked for it, but it's said that during the course of one's Kabbalistic work and development. Those centres begin to open, naturally, in the same way as you grow to the age of twenty-five, the various glandular systems come on-stream. It's the same with psychic capacities. It's not a Great psychic capacity, but it's enough to discern and see certain things at certain times.

Besides, I always ask the basic question when somebody comes to me: why are they really here, what are they really telling me? And any good analyst or counsellor has this skill, or should have. What do they really want? Very often people will say "I've got this series of questions." And they don't ask you questions, they tell you how much they know to impress you. And I'm sitting there drinking tea, politely, in the English manner. And I look at my watch and say "I'm awfully sorry, but I've got my day's work to finish." Because they've really just come to demonstrate how clever they are.

Donnola: What do you feel Kabbalah has to say Now? We know a lot of the history of it. What do you feel Kabbalah has to say to the present, and the rapidly approaching 21st century?

Halevi: Very important question. I think the orthodox religions, both Judaism and Christianity are losing the intelligencia, the more sensitive people, because they're too concerned with form, the social, the political. Therefore, many Christians and Jews have been looking to Sufism, Buddhisms, all sorts of isms. Many of them have travelled to India and Turkey, in search of those things. There has been in the last twenty years a tremendous surge of interest in esoteric matters, and Kabbalah is part of those ancient traditions of the West, which have said "But we have it in our own backyard!"

And I meet many Jews, as well as Christians, who simply say "We did not realise that here were techniques of meditation, here was that ancient psychology, we already had it. We had to go to India to find out it was here." So I see Kabbalah in modern terms, relating to our own times.

Now, if an esoteric tradition doesn't move with the times, it dies. And history is littered with esoteric traditions that were

frozen. The Church is still frozen to a certain degree, either in the Middle Ages or in the 17th/18th centuries - it hasn't moved since. Now, Kabbalah is something that undergoes a transformation about every 200-300 years. And I think what we're seeing is the meeting of a deep need, particularly among the intelligencia of the Jewish community and, I'd say quite a number of Christians.

So in a way that's what we're about. I write my books really for people on the margins between the religious world and the secular but educated world. And strangely enough my books occupy a very traditional position in that margin between the two. I don't write in Hebrew, though my books have been translated into eleven languages (the first one's just going into Hebrew right now.)

And I get letters from all over the world saying "At last - I've found something that makes sense to my Western mind!" It's very much the Western Esoteric Tradition.

We have work to do, we have a place to be, and that's how I see it. The Rabbinim of course don't approve, because they don't think I'm traditional. In fact I'm in a sense more traditional than they are, because I'm talking about the sense of Kabbalah, they're talking about Yiddish Kabbalah. I've got no objection to the Jewish culture - I love it, I come from that background myself, but many people want to get to the heart of the tradition, to what are the principles of Kabbalah.

Donnola: The point, it seems to me, is not ultimately to be Jewish (or Christian for that matter) though this material is all thoroughly Jewish - but it goes deeper than that.

Halevi: Much, much deeper. Plotinus said there is no higher religion than Truth. There's what's called the Perennial Teaching. And that turns up in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Zen, Hinduism, it's exactly the same. What happens over the centuries is that they all accrete Customs, which become more important as the Form, and then they forget the Content. What I've been trying to do is get back to the content. So when somebody reads an ancient text, because they have the background in modern terms, they go "AH, That's what Gikatilla or Cordovero is talking about, or they say that's what Thomas Aquinas was talking about - they have this - it's a Key, a very important key, and particularly for Westerners.

Donnola: It seems, to me anyway, that what distinguishes Kabbalah from the more general forms of Judaism or Christianity is - while the mainstream religions are involved primarily with devotionism.

Kabbalah, like Zen, is about direct experience, of the upper worlds, and to become conversant with those worlds, as part of the path of rising up.

Halevi: In all religion, there has always been what's called the outer and the inner. The exoteric is concerned with the rituals and the forms the customs buildings and so forth. But people have a sense of the Holy One, the universe, poetic images, it's the way of feelings and emotions. Many people in a sense want to know what is behind this, and that is where the esoteric element comes, they want to know by direct experience, or by contemplation, or seeing an esoteric diagram. Why is a cathedral built like that? It IS beautiful, it does raise your level, but what is it that's behind it?

That's where the study of Kabbalah - which can be devotional - but it's intelligent - comes in. It's to do with intelligence and consciousness. Not just I believe this because I've been told to believe. I believe because I have experienced it! And Kabbalah, as with Sufism and Christian Mysticism, is to do with direct experience.

Now Faith means you Know. Belief means I believe it to be true, but it may not be true. But Faith, True Faith, means I believe because I know it to be true, I've Been there!

You know you talk to people for example who've had a near death experience, and they say I Know about death, and I'm no longer frightened of it. Because they've Been there. They've been through that barrier and returned. That's Real knowledge, and Kabbalah is concerned with real knowledge.

Donnola: That's what the Gnostics were all about. As you mentioned, Gershom Sholom describes some of Kabbalah as Jewish Gnosticism.

Halevi: That's right. At that particular point Gnosticism was the New Age. It was unconventional. But in Gnosticism there was a spectrum, between the genuine Gnostics, those who Know, and the lunatic fringe. In the same way all New Age operations (and early Christianity was also a New Age Operation) there are always the fanatics. And most of the material we've got on Gnosticism was written by its enemies. But the real Gnostics often kept a very low profile, for obvious reasons. But the original meaning of Gnostic was: someone who had THAT experience.

For well over twenty years, **Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi** (Warren Kenton) has been writing, lecturing, and teaching on that venerable system of Jewish mysticism known as Kabbalah. He has published a dozen books translated into ten languages, including *School of the Soul*, *The Work of the Kabbalist*, *Adam and the Kabbalistic Tree*, *The Anatomy of Fate*, and a novel, *The Anointed*.

Halevi concentrates on what he calls the Toledano Tradition, which he regards as the purest version of Kabbalah, formulated in medieval France and Spain, as opposed to the later Kabbalah of the seventeenth-century rabbi Isaac Luria, which became the dominant form in Judaism and remains so today.

Whether or not one agrees with him, Halevi articulates what Kabbalah has to say to a modern world, and he speaks very much as an educated contemporary man who knows that his tradition must grow and evolve with the times to an audience that is both Jewish and Christian. Part of his work lies in preserving the ancient tradition, but he also tries to make it more inclusive, enabling these two religions to meet, work together, and perhaps heal old divisions and wounds. Indeed I think it would be fair to say that for Halevi Kabbalah is an esoteric philosophy that transcends religion and is open to all who are serious and sincere.

A graduate of the Royal Academy of Art, Halevi has written and taught at universities on art, architecture, and theatre. He is a fellow of the Temenos Academy at the Prince of Wales Institute in London. A hale and robust man in his early sixties, he lives in London with his wife Rebekah.

Our conversation took place in a noisy cafe in the old part of the small Spanish city of Gerona during a pilgrimage tour conducted by the Kabbalah Society in May 1996. Halevi speaks in a soft yet precise accent, with firm conviction, instructive rather than dogmatic. His public talks often invited spirited but friendly combat.

Frank Donnola is a poet and a student of the Mysteries living in San Francisco.

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