



Canaima National Park, Venezuela. Menachem Kallus went as far as the Amazon looking for authentic spiritual experiences

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well as of the works of other previous masters. Kallus had fallen in love with the Baal Shem Tov from the moment he encountered his teachings during his first sojourn in Chabad-Lubavitch, not only because of their content, but also because of their tone. Even though these words of guidance and spiritual exercises are being retold here second- or third-hand, the Besht's voice comes across as direct and non-condescending, neither pietistic nor sentimental, devoid of the hidden threats and warnings that often accompany esoteric literature meant only for the eyes of the elite.

Instead, the Baal Shem Tov conveyed faith in the power of each individual to touch, experience, unite with and even influence the divine spheres in order to bring spiritual and material blessing down into the world. He speaks with authority, but also sounds as if he is speaking to equals. The idea that access to mystical knowledge must be democratized if the world is to achieve the spiritual transformation promised in the prophecies of messianic

times is the theme of the most famous of the few surviving letters written by the Besht himself. Writing in 1746 to his brother-in-law, who had moved from Podolia, in Ukraine, to the Holy Land, the Baal Shem Tov describes putting his head down on the prayer lectern while leading the Rosh Hashanah services, while, his body inert, his spirit rises through dimensions populated by souls and angels until reaching "the Palace of the Messiah." As any good Jew would do he greets the Messiah with a question: "When will you come, sir?" The Messiah's answer startles him. "When your wellsprings flow outwards, and when everyone can do the unifications and soul ascents of which you are capable."

At first, he was downcast and discouraged, the Besht reports. How could such an awesome revolution take place? But the Messiah teaches him a few "simple unifications" – he doesn't elaborate in the letter – that might make this transformation possible. One can only assume that the teachings on meditation and prayer recorded in "Pillar of Prayer" contain within them at least some of the secrets alluded to in the letter.

What emerges from this book is a vision of human consciousness in constant contact with the divine in forms hidden and revealed, fallen and elevated; in darkness and light, majestically enthroned and in continuous process; aspiring to liberation and already redeemed. In this vision, our will, minds and emotions – the totality of our inner selves – can and should be marshaled at all times, and in all situations, in order to serve God by breaking through the illusion of separation and darkness and revealing the ecstatic truth of his unity, which includes and integrates everything, including the material world and our selves and the secret core of all our desires.

Sparks of holiness

The struggle for direct connection with the divine – for "*dveikut*" – is underway during every human activity and every waking hour, according to the Baal Shem Tov, but prayer is an especially intensive arena. For

the Besht, as for his predecessors in the Jewish mystical tradition, Hebrew letters and words, if we so intend, are gateways through which hidden worlds can be encountered, consciousness expanded, sparks of holiness raised up out of the darkness of the human condition and divine light drawn down into this world. Exactly because of this potential for goodness and revelation, prayer is almost invariably accompanied by distracting thoughts, as if the dark matter that is a necessary part of the weave of selfhood must inevitably offer resistance. The Besht's innovation is in seeing opportunity in this dynamic. Rather than resisting the resistors, the Besht encourages practitioners to follow their distracting thoughts to their roots in the divine.

This is accomplished through an array of contemplative tactics: first by *hakhna'ah* "surrendering" – by realizing that the structure and content of all thoughts emerge from the divine; then by separating (*havdalah*) – shifting one's mind, for example, from desire for earthly pleasure to longing for the divine; and finally, by sweetening our thoughts (*hamtakah*), so that they connect with the divine source itself, the fount of all pleasure.

What is practiced intensively in prayer is meant, on some level, for everyday pursuits as well. "The perfect person," the Baal Shem Tov teaches, "would be able to unite with the Divine Presence in every step she or he takes and through everything such as one does – even in physical acts such as eating or business dealings – in all of them one is able to unify with God's presence and recognize the Divine origins of one's occurrences, in a particular way."

According to Menachem Kallus, the idea of finding God in the ongoing story of one's own life, as the Besht suggests, is also a confirmation of the value of each individual life, and of the meaningfulness of life within the material realm – a recipe for an engaged mystic, one who is of the world rather than withdrawn from it.

Kallus' translation, though sometimes overly sophisticated and wordy – the Baal Shem Tov in Hebrew is more simple and direct – is precise and masterful. But it is his notes, really a full-fledged commentary on the text, that are truly dazzling, and will remain a treasure trove in their own right for generations to come. Kallus is conversant in a huge range of works, from the Torah and Talmud, on through the Zohar, the Tikunim – written a generation or two after the Zohar, also in Aramaic; the works of Abraham Abulafia, the 13th-century neo-Maimonidean linguistic and psychological mystic, and of Moshe Cordovero, the 16th-century sage, whose works represent the summit of the Spanish kabbalistic tradition; and the Lurianic corpus, as well as the modern scholarship in these areas.

His commentary enriches by anchoring the Besht's teachings in a kaleidoscopic array of texts and ideas, creating a multidimensional Jewish mandala of contemplative consciousness. Although the multitude and variety of concepts might seem daunting, even labyrinthine, to the uninitiated, Kallus

also has a rare capacity for making ideas obscured by technical kabbalistic terms comprehensible to all. It's worth wading through the copious notes, knowing that there is a lot that will be difficult to understand, for the sudden illuminations he provides.

Both the translation and the commentary are also evidence of the potential gains for all of us when a scholar of Jewish mysticism is also learned in other traditions. In this case, it's Tibetan Buddhism, which has a highly developed language for states of consciousness. Kallus draws upon his knowledge of Buddhism to elucidate terms that are embedded in the intricate cosmological and redemptive structure of Lurianic kabbala and would thus otherwise be incomprehensible to the lay reader. He can do this only because he knows kabbala so thoroughly – otherwise the risk of inauthentic comparisons and superficial similarities would be great.

"Pillar of Prayer" is a lovingly produced book of engaged scholarship whose purpose is not only to increase knowledge, but also to spark the religious imagination. An essay by Rabbi Miles Krassen, a scholar of Jewish mysticism and of comparative religion, introduces Kallus' translation and commentary with a convincing presentation of the Baal Shem Tov as the avatar of a new spiritual paradigm wholly relevant for our times. In a long essay at the end of the book, Rabbi Aubrey Glazer, who leads a congregation in Harrison, New York, evokes the 18th-century context of Hasidism's founder, noting both the far-flung presence of Turkish Sufi mystics in the Carpathian Mountains of Ukraine, where the Besht lived, as well as his legendary aborted journey to the Land of Israel, which ended prematurely in Istanbul and during which he almost surely encountered Sufi practitioners. Glazer shows how tales of the Baal Shem Tov's journey are entwined with symbolism that hint at the existence of an ongoing dialogue of religious imaginations in which Sufism and Hasidism share both geographical and spiritual space – that new paradigm toward which both Krassen and Kallus are pointing.

The book is part of a series called Spiritual Affinities, initiated by Glazer for the scholarly interfaith publisher Fons Vitae, dedicated to emphasizing such shared spaces and the often subterranean or even subconscious conversations between religions, in which spiritual traditions influence and inspire each other without fully admitting or even being cognizant of this cross-fertilization and exchange.

At a moment in which fundamentalism of various stripes seems to have grabbed religion's high ground, "Pillar of Prayer," rooted in an erudition that allows us to soar rather than weighing us down, enables us to reimagine the Baal Shem Tov and Hasidism as guides for a future Judaism, potent and spiritually democratic rather than moribund and authoritarian. For this, we are indebted.

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