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BEING AS ONE

Rabbi Shoni Labowitz finds holiness at home

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Shoni Labowitz has had quite a spiritual journey.

She grew up in a family blessed with a long line of Orthodox rabbis, and she had a yeshiva upbringing in Baltimore.

Yet by her early 20s, she had become "a universalist-humanist-Taoist-feminist-kabbalist who happened to be born Jewish."

Her pursuit of connectedness with God eventually led her back to her roots - to Judaism's own deep mystical traditions. Today, she is an ordained rabbi, one of the spiritual leaders of Temple Adath Or, a Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., Jewish Renewal congregation.

She recently authored "Miraculous Living: A Guided Journey Through the Ten Gates of the Tree of Life," a guidebook of meditations and practices to

imbue life with the esoteric, powerful sanctification of kabbalah, Jewish mysticism.

Labowitz sees herself as reclaiming an essential part of Judaism almost buried by Jews' assimilation. "We have this incredible Judaism - it's not just bagels and lox." Jews know this deep in their kishkes, she says, despite religious knowledge and understanding she terms "pediatric."

[Giving: key to spiritual growth](#)

"There is a hungering" among (many adult) Jews, she says. "They only knew the Judaism that was Sunday school. They never got to learn the beauty in Judaism. They learned the rules and regulations, the God that judges. They never got to the other side: the God that loves, the God that laughs, the God that loves joy."

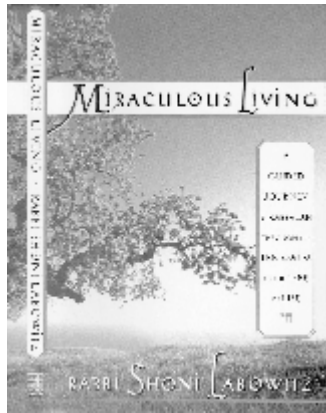
You cannot see my face and live.
Exodus 32:20

More basic than that is a void where the most rudimentary part of Jewishness should be, she says. "Many people don't have even the rich memories I have of tradition. When I talk about my grandmother baking challah, the rich and beautiful fragrance, so many people don't have that."

But while the lushness of her traditional upbringing gave her a stronger Jewish foundation than many of her contemporaries, her discomfort with some aspects of that upbringing spurred her to look outside Judaism for fulfillment.

"I was blessed with a solid foundation in Judaism," she explains. "I also feel blessed that I

have grown to embrace beyond that."



In the introduction to "Miraculous Living," she writes that in her childhood, "God was an authority figure who was sometimes judgmental, sometimes compassionate, sometimes angry, sometimes jealous, always distant. The rabbis in my school and in the community were all men who portrayed God in male imagery and language. They taught me integrity, and I was expected to believe as they believed. But hard as I tried, I could not imagine a God who was not part of my own imagination as well as theirs."

No one has seen God and lived. To see God, one must be nonexistent.

Hazrat Inayat Khan

The image of God as specifically male was a major block for Labowitz. "As I blossomed into my own femininity, I felt even more isolated from the God I was told to love and accept," she writes.

According to Rabbi Harris Cooperman of the Phoenix Hebrew Academy, male-specific God imagery actually runs contrary to Jewish notions of God. Jewish tradition teaches that God is not defined by human notions of gender.

"The difficulty lies in the fact that much of the liturgy interprets God in mostly masculine terminologies," he says. "It's a language problem."

In a phone interview from her home in Florida, Labowitz says the corrupting Western philosophies are alien to Jewish teachings.

"We have Westernized Judaism," she explains. "Look at 19th century philosophy - the Rationalists. If you couldn't see it or touch it, it didn't exist. That philosophy doesn't allow for occurrences that are non-rational. But those things do exist."

The response to this philosophical environment, she adds, was that "mysticism went underground."

A man's or woman's mind may make him or her a Buddha, or it may make him or her a beast. ... Therefore, control your mind and do not let it deviate from the right path.
Buddha

The constructs of philosophical rationalism, says Rabbi William Berk of Temple Chai, for years prevented Judaism's most liberal branch, the Reform movement, from embracing the kabbalah.

"In the infancy of the Reform movement," he says, "there was a tremendous emphasis on rationality and a complete trust in science. Therefore, there was a great suspicion and distaste for anything smacking of mysticism."

The developments of the last 50 years, including the forced rethinking of faith in "human beings and rationality and science" caused by the Holocaust, as well as the influence of the Chassidic movement and re-establishment of the State of Israel, have encouraged people to re-examine kabbalah and other mystical philosophies long discarded, Berk says.

In the Reform movement today, "there's a tremendous openness to Jewish mysticism and the Chassidic takes on it," he says.

Searching for a religious base that recognized the non-rational realm, Labowitz was drawn to

Eastern traditions. Her pursuit of Taoism and Buddhism led to travels to India and Nepal.

She remained connected to Judaism throughout. Her husband, Phillip, is an ordained Conservative rabbi. But it wasn't until she began to study with Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a shepherd of the Jewish Renewal movement, that she came to understand that the loving, giving God she had been seeking was there in Judaism all the time.

Jewish tradition describes God as ein sof, without end, she says. "If you have an image of God that is limitless, you begin living a life of limitless possibilities."

She began studying the kabbalah's Tree of Life with Shachter-Shalomi. "I learned that the tree was an ancient template for living a powerful, joyous, sacred life," she says.

When a thought passes through the mind of the good person it becomes divine and proclaims: O Thou art divine.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

Cooperman cautions against viewing kabbalistic philosophy as the essence of Jewish thought. "It's alluring but incomplete," he says. Kabbalah "has to go in conjunction with the law" of the Torah.

Without accompanying practice of the Torah's laws, says Rabbi Chaim Silver of Young Israel of Phoenix, students run the risk of "trying to make Judaism another Eastern religion."

In the Torah, says Silver, "God is saying he wants us to become spiritual. That's the reason he created the world. It takes sacrifice, commitment, obligation. Torah is the mechanism that brings us there."

Berk sees study of the kabbalah as a "first step" into the Jewish door, but says that Torah study is also necessary.

"You can dabble in it, even have it shape a little bit of your life, but real depth and real understanding is impossible without a solid Jewish understanding and Jewish learning -- the Torah and Talmud," he says.

For her part, Labowitz says she sees kabbalistic study and daily integration of its principles as a door through which Jews who feel alienated can return. "You teach it because the world needs it. Whoever is open to receiving will receive it at whatever level they're at."

Local reading

Rabbi Shoni Labowitz will read from and sign copies of "Miraculous Living" from noon - 2 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 17 at Jewish Quarter of Scottsdale, 10701 N. Scottsdale Road, Scottsdale. Telephone 905-5202.

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