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## Personal Transformation

### Prosperity and Spirituality

An Interview with Rabbi Shoni Labowitz

By Ray Greenleaf

Born into a long line of rabbis, Rabbi Shoni Labowitz has been exploring the spiritual path all her life. From a Jewish girls school in Baltimore to spiritual journeys in ashrams in the United States and India, and finally to a return to her Kabbalistic roots after being inspired by the teachings of Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi (See PT, Fall 1999), Labowitz has developed a deep spiritual understanding of life. Labowitz lives in Florida where she draws on Kabbalistic and other mystical traditions in her work developing Living Waters, a spiritual health spa. She also hosts the radio program Spiritual Focus and serves as a co-rabbi with her husband at Temple Adath Or in Fort Lauderdale.

She is a believer in miracles and her first book, "Miraculous Living," is a wonderfully written guide through the "Ten Gates of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life." Combining Taoist, meditative and traditional kabbalistic teachings, Labowitz in her book, gives us a rich tapestry in exploring the Ten Gates which are, intention, wisdom, understanding, compassion, strength, harmony, success, glory, creativity and nobility. She recently published her second book, "God, Sex and Women of the Bible: Discovering Our Sensual, Spiritual Selves" which reinterprets the stories of women of the Bible. I spoke with Rabbi Labowitz at her home in Florida and we began by exploring the subject of prosperity.

Personal Transformation: Begin by discussing prosperity from your personal perspective.

Rabbi Shoni Labowitz: I will start with tithing. I know well the power of tithing and what it can do in someone's life. There was a time when my husband and I did not earn a salary. We weren't sure where our income was going to come from. I attended a lecture where a young man talked about how tithing had turned his life around. I thought we were charitable and generous, but I realized that tithing meant taking ten percent off the gross of your income. I returned home—we had maybe \$40,000 to our name, and we had two children in high school, ready to go to college—and I looked at my husband and I said, "It feels right, and I want to tithe \$4,000." We gave anonymously and all of a sudden, we had incredible sources of income.

My husband is also a rabbi. We formed our own community when we realized that we were transforming the way we were living religiously. We attracted people and had our own prayer services. There came a time when we needed to ask these people, if they were serious, to start a membership and to make the community financially viable. My father is a rabbi, and I flew up north to ask his blessing, because it was hard for me to ask people to make a

commitment with money. He taught from the Talmud, and told me that even if someone tithes for the sake of getting ten times in return, it is good tithes. Sometimes we tithe altruistically but even if you want to get ten times back, it is okay. He blessed me and I came back and started a membership, introducing people to the fact that they needed to pay membership and make the community financially viable. It worked. Today, when we get nervous about the temple or our own finances, and I feel like we might slip into the red, I look to see where we tithed last. Even if tithing puts us in the red, somehow things come back. In my tradition, Kabbala, the Kabbalists teach that God does not want a schlepper as a partner. God wants you to be prosperous, God wants you to have pleasure in life. What kind of a partner would you be if you did not feel your own sense of wealth and richness and abundance with all of God's gifts?

Transformation: This speaks to how prosperity and spirituality go hand in hand.

Labowitz: It is all one and the same. If you feel you do not have time, then you give time. If you feel you do not have money, then you give money. If you feel you do not have love, you give love. It works in everything.

Transformation : In your book "Miraculous Living," you describe the ten branches of the tree of life. One branch is success. Talk about the relationship between success and prosperity.

Labowitz: They are tied into each other. On the tree of life, you have to first go through intention. You have to know what your intention is. You can not know if you have succeeded if you do not know what your intention was to begin with. Then, from intention, you have to be open to accepting all of what God is giving you, which is wisdom. From wisdom, you have to siphon all that God is giving you and move it into understanding, and then you need to have compassion. Before you can be strong, you have to have compassion. This is the path of the tree of life. Compassion means giving because it feels good to give, not because you want to have something in return, loving because it feels good to love, regardless of whether you are loved back. You move from compassion to strength and from strength to a sense of harmony. Then you understand what you are succeeding in, then success comes in. Success has to do with being able to maintain a certain lifestyle. Success does not always mean getting the goal. Success means understanding that you receive the goal along the way, in the process of what you are doing. Often, when we walk the spiritual path and we reach moments of consciousness, we slack off. Success is being able to maintain the path and to know that if you slack off, or take a side road that gets you nowhere, you can come back, you can always come back to the path.

Transformation: On the path, what role does psychological work have with spiritual development?

Labowitz: I am not well versed in psychology, that is not my background; however, I am called more and more by therapists to help their patients spiritually. This says to me that the heart yearns for something beyond what my local life may dictate. We are part of a greater plan; we are part of a larger story than our local lives. Everybody born into this world has a mission, a unique mission to each person, and so psychology and spirituality are beginning to blend. The local story is the process by which we move toward a much larger story—the story of the spirit residing in each person that lets us know our lives have meaning and purpose.

Transformation: An aspect of psychotherapy is telling your story.

Labowitz: Telling your story is so important. Stories affect how we think about ourselves. We are walking myths. I have led women's spirituality groups for more than 20 years. I hear women's stories, especially through the different

sexual stages of their lives. In the Bible, we can, without changing the text, retranslate some of the Hebrew words and come up with stories that empower rather than disempower women. Take, for instance, the story of Eve. Throughout Western history, Eve is seen as the one who brought sin into the world. In the verse, God tells Eve, "Don't eat from the tree, for you will die." In Hebrew, that verse says something completely different. It says, "When you will eat from the tree, you will die a certain death." To me, that is the template for the meaning of stories. To eat from the tree of knowledge means that if you ingest your own knowing, if you speak about what your spirit inside of you knows to be true, then you need to be prepared to get old, die, and burst anew.

Transformation: Which is the central aspect of the psycho-spiritual journey and the process of individuation.

Labowitz: It is telling your story in a whole new way. This is why I wrote "God, Sex, and Women in the Bible." The Bible never says sex is for intercourse. Instead, it says, "to know." What we yearn for more than anything is to know each other and be known by each other.

Transformation: In both books, you write about sexuality. In "Miraculous Living," it is cultivating divine sexuality, and in "God, Sex, and Women in the Bible," it is about the passionate nature of the women.

Labowitz: Yes, and also about how they cultivated divine sexuality. We live in a tumultuous, chaotic, violent era, but there are people who say "We are one." If we are one, then we are one with God as well as everything else, and God is one with everything. We are God, God is us, and we are sexual beings. We are not just human sexual beings, we also have divinity within our sexuality. I talk about that in the biblical story of Leah. In Genesis, it says that Leah was hated and despised and God opened her womb. She developed a relationship with a source beyond herself that made her feel beautiful. The Talmud says that when women came into her presence, they felt joy. The teaching is to take a negative and turn it into a positive through your relationship with God. I am talking about a sense of godliness. When you have that relationship with godliness, you begin seeing it in everyone with whom you come in contact.

Transformation: This speaks to the issue of deserving prosperity and richness.

Labowitz: So often we do not feel that we deserve it. I am sure you scrap with that and so do I. I do not know anyone who does not. I remember seeing the magnificent movie "Schindler's List." I did not cry until the end of the movie when Schindler made the statement, "I could have done more. If only I had done more." That hit me, because that is what everyone feels. I feel that the message of God is that you are beautiful, you are good enough, you are succeeding, because when you go to bed at night, you feel wholesome and whole. That does not mean you are going to stop here, but here you are good enough, and for the next step, you will be ready for that, too.

Transformation: Talk about manifesting vocationally and how that relates to prosperity.

Labowitz: Miracles are the simplest way that people see manifestation. You look for a parking space and it appears or you think of a friend and he calls. When I think of my life, everything is a miracle. Before I wrote my first book, I did not think I was a writer. I was a teacher and a rabbi and I was doing a ceremony for this man from New York. The family came in for an unveiling, the ritual where you unveil the gravestone a year after your loved one's passing. I met this man at the cemetery and he happened to be a literary agent. Within ten minutes, he said, "You have a book in you," and within six weeks, I was contracted to write a book.

Transformation: You wrote that the writing of the book "Miraculous Living" was a miracle.

Labowitz: I was at dinner celebrating this book I was supposed to write and in he walks, a man I had not seen for one year. I asked him to join us for a drink. He said, "You'll need a place to write." He gave me a magnificent apartment facing the ocean, on the beach, for four years, in which I was able to write two books. These are miracles.

Transformation: In "Miraculous Living," you talk about the importance of breath in prayer and meditation.

Labowitz: Breath. There's a prayer that we say in the morning, in Hebrew, that means, "every breath shall praise you, God." The Kabbala teaches that God is the breath that breathes inside of you. The key, for me, in meditation, is to focus in on my breath and to realize when I am breathing, that it is God breathing in me.

Transformation: So, befriending your breath is befriending God within you.

Labowitz: Right, it enables you to become porous. As you get into your breath, you empty and you become porous. You leave yourself open for new things to happen, but first you have to be really porous, you have to say to yourself and intend in every cell of your body to let go. You let go of your last moment, your last thought, and you become porous, like material, and God breathes in your life. Adam was created by the breath of God. The breath of God gives us life and continuously refreshes and renews us.

Transformation: Can you talk about the use of prayer in your work?

Labowitz: Prayer, like God, is in everything. Prayer is the transmission of energy. Some of us are inspired by words, others by music, others by chants. When we have prayer services, we include all of the above, and people usually dance in the aisles. The Kabbalists teach that to reach true enlightenment, you need to know how to dance. It is the spirit dancing through your feet. We celebrate Shabbat, the Sabbath, and whether we're doing it in our community or in the privacy of our own home, our prayer becomes song, and our song becomes dance. Prayer is also living a prayerful life. It is not just saying the words, it is action. It may not always be loud actions or big actions. Even in small actions you feel the transmission of energy from God to you, from you to God of another, and from you to the God of the world.

Transformation: Which brings us to the question about compassion and responsibility and social action.

Labowitz: The Kabbalist tree of life has ten gates. The first three gates are gates of the mind, they all exist in thought.

Transformation: Intention, wisdom, and understanding.

Labowitz: Yes. In order to move from your mind to the actual living of it in the world, you need compassion. Compassion is truly unconditional love—giving because it feels good to give, not because you are going to receive. It is giving because you know you need to give, because you know it is your place in this world. Not everyone gives in the same way in the same place. We each have a unique mission. I remember speaking once with Sister Joan Chiddister. She is socially and politically active, and she travels all over the world. She told me, "I speak because I need to speak." God gives her this message, she puts it out, and then she leaves. What the recipients do with it is their responsibility. Often, we make our compassion like strings tied to people, when in actuality, compassion means to give and to receive without strings. Giving is one thing, receiving others for who they are is another. I might not

agree with you, but I can honor you for your mission in this world.

Transformation: In "Miraculous Living," the ninth branch of the tree of life is creativity. Speak about creativity in relation to prosperity and spirituality.

Labowitz: The Kabbala calls the ninth branch the gate of creation, which means sexuality, and is considered the foundation. It is interesting that sexuality and creativity and foundation are all one in the Kabbalistic tree of life. Everybody has the ability to create, and it is not just creating children. Every thought is another child that you birth into this world, and thoughts are seeded in you from God. We are born of God and we have a mission to fulfill. We are not an "oops" of creation, we are not an accident that happened. We were meant to come in, and we were meant to come in through the parents that we chose, and we were meant to do something. In order to feel that creativity, we need to acknowledge ourselves and love ourselves, recognizing that we carry a spark of God. Every part of who we are has a divine aspect. What is unique about Judaism is that we have an invisible God. God is in everything, everywhere, at all times. God's glory shines throughout the world. If God is a god I cannot see visually, then God is a god I can only imagine. How I create that image of God for me at any moment speaks to not only who that God is in the universe, but who that God is in me. I am as limited as I limit my image of God. I am as creative as I am with that image of God.

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