

# The Origins of Jewish Renewal, An Exploration

with Rabbi Diane Elliot

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עולם חסד יבנה

*olam khesed yibaneh, ya-la-lai-lai-lai-lai-lai-lai-lai (4x)*

This whole world is made of love, *ya-la-lai-lai-lai-lai-lai-lai-lai-lai (2x)*

And when we know that G~d is love, *ya-la-lai-lai-lai-lai-lai-lai-lai-lai*

Then we will build our world of love, *ya-la-lai-lai-lai-lai-lai-lai-lai-lai*

(psalm 89:3, setting by R. Menachem Creditor, Eng. words by R. Diane Elliot & Mark Rubin)

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כל פרנס שמנהיג את הצבור בנחת זוכה ומנהיגם לעולם הבא

*kol parnas sheh'manhig et ha-tzibur b'nakhat zokheh oo-manhigam l'olam ha-ba*

Any community leader who leads the congregation with gentleness merits to lead them in the world-to-come.

(Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 92a, based on Isaiah 49:10: "They will not hunger and they will not thirst; heat and sun will not afflict them, for their Merciful One will lead them, and along streams of water will guide them.")

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By the beginning of the eighteenth century, after a decade of rebellion by Ukrainian peasants against their Polish overlords and a subsequent war with Sweden, in both of which Jews were made to suffer brutally, the once vital Jewish community of Poland was in ruins. In response to this crippling, the world of Polish Jewry turned in upon itself and became so rigorously restrictive and hermetic as to drain it of the possibility of creative spontaneity. The Jewish community lay in a torpor of congealed ritualism; and its most esteemed activity, the learning of Torah, became abstruse, elitist, and far removed from the grim realities and miseries of everyday existence....

Conjure the bitterness and frustration felt by ordinary unlearned Jews in a culture entirely focused on learning. If learning is the exclusive path to God, how does one come to God when one is a shoemaker, a wagon driver, a water carrier, when one must work day and night and has little time for study?

The answer came from the Baal Shem Tov: Learning is not the only way to God. One can also approach God through a life of fervor and exaltation experienced for the sake of heaven; through prayer and joy that transcend everyday existence and transform human suffering by imbuing all of life with hope, purpose, sanctity, thereby raising earth to heaven, restoring the unity of creation, and redeeming the world.

"Nowhere in the last centuries," wrote [Martin] Buber in *Hassidism and Modern Man*, "has the soul-force of Judaism so manifested itself as in Hasidism.... Without an iota being altered in the law, in the ritual, in the traditional life-norms, the long-accustomed arose in a fresh light and meaning." He summed up the teachings of Hasidism in this way: "God can be beheld in each thing and reached through each pure deed."

(Chaim Potok, Foreword to Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*)

The Ba'al Shem Tov often danced with his *hasidim* in joyous ecstasy. Once, Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye asked him about the meaning of the dancing. The Besht said, "There are many paths in the service of the living God and He, so to speak, cherishes them all. One path followed by many great rabbis and their students is to stand in silent fear and awe before the Lord who created the world. Everything is contained in that silent awe—whatever the mouth can utter or the body can express by its movements. When a person experiences the joy that he's actually a part of God, that he is bone of His bones and flesh of His flesh, so to speak, that there's nothing separating him from his Creator, then, words and movements are superfluous, because they're only garments—mere external coverings—for the feelings and thoughts within them. The naked thoughts and feelings are absolutely pure, on the level of *Ein Sof*, Infinity. In their total silence, these great rabbis speak with their Creator, just as the trees of the forest speak with Him in their quiet vitality, just as the sea speaks in its silence and the sky in its blue wordlessness ... and so too all of existence and the *sefirot* also before they are clothed in the worlds, before the universe was formed.

"But there is another path, that of *Hasidism*. Great sages of our people followed this path even hundreds of years ago. When Rabbi Akiva prayed, he began standing in one corner of the room and ended up in another corner, because of all his bowing and prostrating. He couldn't pray quietly; his love for His Creator was so strong that it couldn't be contained within the four cubits of his personal space. He had to sway and move and, as it says in the Song of Songs, 'leap over the mountains and jump over the valleys'; that was how he served his Creator! That's the *hasidic* path. When *Hasidim* are engaged in worship, an explosive spirit swirls within their souls that cleave to the living God. It shakes their body and limbs until the body starts to dance ecstatically, because dances are the body's prayers, on the level of 'All my bones shall say, "Oh Lord, who is like unto You!' " The body and all its limbs dance to the rhythm of the heart, which moves and flows with the prayer of the universe. And the heart feels that its beating is only an echo of the motion of the worlds and that with its beating it embraces those worlds that unite with their Creator and become, so to speak—like the union of male and female—'one flesh.' "

The Ba'al Shem Tov continued his explanation to Rabbi Yaakov Yosef, saying, "I chose the second path, or really, my soul chose that path. I was impelled to choose it by some hidden force. When I dance with the joy of doing a *mitzvah*—a joy I experience every moment—I'm rejoicing that I merited to serve my Creator, to pour my heart out before Him in prayer, to eat and drink with devotion (since that is too one of the ways of serving God, on the level of 'Know Him in all your ways'). When my heart is filled with joy, I feel an ecstatic delight in dancing, in unifying heaven and earth—jumping toward heaven above and then connecting with the earth below. That's why I dance ecstatically."

(adapted by Yitzkhak Buxbaum from his book, *The Light and Fire of the Baal Shem Tov*, pp. 155-157)

The old shall be renewed, and the new shall be made holy.

(Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 214)

The modern synagogue suffers from a severe *cold*. Our congregants observe a respectful distance between the prayerbook and themselves. They say the words "Forgive us for we have sinned," but of course they are not meant. They say, "Thou shalt love the Lord they God with all thy heart..." in lofty detachment, in complete anonymity, as if giving an impartial opinion about an irrelevant question.

An air of tranquillity, of complacency prevails in our synagogues. What can come out of such an atmosphere? The services are prim, the voice is dry, the synagogue is clean and tidy, and the soul of prayer lies in agony. You know no one will scream, no one will cry, the words will be still-born....

We have developed the habit of *praying by proxy*. Many congregants seem to have adopted the principle of vicarious prayer. The rabbi or the cantor does the praying for the congregation. In particular, it is the organ that does the singing for the whole community. Too often the organ has become the prayer leader. Indeed when the organ begins to thunder, who can compete with its songs? Men and women are not allowed to raise their voices, unless the rabbi issues the signal. They have come to regard the rabbi as a master of ceremonies.

Is not their mood, in part, a reflection of our own uncertainties? Prayer has become an empty gesture, a figure of speech, either because of lack of faith or because of *religious bashfulness*. We would not admit that we take prayer seriously. It would sound sanctimonious, if not hypocritical. We are too sophisticated. But if prayer is as important as study, if prayer is as precious a deed as an act of charity, we must stop being embarrassed at our saying a prayer with devotion.

(Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, "The Spirit of Jewish Prayer," pp. 101-102, originally delivered at the 53rd Annual Convention of the Rabbinical Assembly of America, June, 1953)

Nearly three thousand years have passed since Sinai, three thousand years since our ancestors received Torah as a way of life. From the beginning there were words. We know that our fathers of the past decided to transmit revelation and all subsequent events by word of mouth: first came the oral tradition, only later to be recorded as the written law. And so we moved through history, remembering and transmitting the past in the experience of our own lives.

And yet some of us remain at the beginning, the word still to be formed, waiting patiently to be revealed, to rise out of the white spaces between the letters in the Torah and be received. I am speaking of the tradition of our mothers, our sister-wives, the secret women of the past. How would they have spoken of their own religious experiences if they had been given a space to record their stories? How would they have transmitted the written word? Would their ceremonies, rituals, and customs have been the same?

In order for Jewish women truly to be present in Jewish history and everyday life we must find the female voices of the past and receive them into our present.

(Lynn Gottlieb, "The Secret Jew, An Oral Tradition of Women," in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, ed. by Susannah Heschel, 1983/1995, p. 273)

In 1988, I was one of the women who *davenned* for the first time ever at the *Kotel* in Jerusalem with a *Torah*. In fact, I had the great honor of *opening* the *Torah* for the women that morning on December 1, 1988. It wedded me to the action. I helped form the International Committee for Women at the Kotel, and became a name-plaintiff in the historic lawsuit on behalf of Jewish women's religious rights. After seven years [now 30 years] the matter is still pending. The suit was heard by the Israeli Supreme Court.... I often tell people that what we did was the equivalent of Catholic women taking over the Vatican and officiating at Mass; and that I believed that women's mental health would vastly improve as a result of actions like this.

In the beginning, many Jewish and Israeli feminists, secularists, and radicals, tried to pry me loose from what they saw as an unimportant, or even reactionary struggle. Didn't I see that we were only arguing for a piece of a tainted pie, that we were settling for too little, and for the wrong thing? They had a point—but they were also wrong. Women have as much right as men do to exercise our rights as Jews—even if, from the feminist point of view, all patriarchal religions need to be transformed/overthrown. In the course of this struggle I have seen how a moderate, liberal, demand for women's civil and human rights, is treated as if it's a revolutionary demand. Which, in a sense makes it revolutionary.

(Phyllis Chesler, Foreword, *Jewish Women Speak Out*, ed. by Kayla Weiner and Arinna Moon, 1995, p. viii)

A spiritual seeker is a person whose soul is awake, whose spirit has experienced—whether the mind knows it or not—that slap that gets the first breath going in a newborn. Such a soul is not content to stay on the level of mere observance, ritual and dogmatic belief that it encounters in most Jewish settings. It needs a more personal and mystical approach. It wants an open-sky Judaism: A Judaism that invites the infinite and operates at a higher level of spiritual consciousness. It senses the divine just beyond the surface of everyday existence and wants to connect to that. It yearns to achieve for itself those inner experiences that lie at the heart of religion's external forms. A mystical approach to Judaism is therefore less dogmatic and more experimental. It doesn't have a low ceiling, capping the mind and frustrating its desire to unite in love and awe with a vital, living universe. It is open-minded, open-souled. It says, "Try this. If you feel it as a living reality, we're getting somewhere."

(Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *Jewish with Feeling*, 2005, pp. xi-xii)