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Taking Torah on the road

Judaism in the Air

by Toni L. Kamins

January 27 - February 2, 1999

It's 5:30 Sunday morning. You're just getting to bed— or maybe you're just waking up and feeling energetic enough to go biking. But wait! How about a little Torah first? Each Sunday morning on WMCA (570 AM) *D'var With Rabbi Chaim Friedman* holds forth for half an hour, with discussion and analysis in English of the Torah portion of the week.

The Torah is the first five books of the First Testament (or Old Testament, depending on your orientation) of the Bible— Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. A portion of the Torah is read in the synagogue on Mondays, Thursdays, and Saturdays throughout the year; the sum of each week's readings is known as a *parsha*. The *parsha* of the week forms the basis for *D'var's* programming. If your head is left spinning by the parsing of myriad Clintonian sentences, you ain't heard nothing yet! Scholars have been parsing Torah words and phrases for millennia and they still have plenty to say. Indeed, the discussion of such minutiae forms the basis for Jewish philosophy and Jewish life. Once you get into it, you may become addicted.

But *D'var* is just the tail end of an entire Saturday night-Sunday morning lineup of Jewish radio programming on WMCA (which, oddly enough, is a Christian-owned station). Beginning at 8 p.m. with a comedy- oriented quiz show and ending with *D'var*, you can take your pick of news from Israel, interviews, call-in, and other more spiritual fare. From 8:30 to 9, for example, sit back and listen to cantors intone ancient Jewish liturgical music. All that singing may well be heard by a higher power, but just to be certain, come back at 10:30, when *Moshiach in the Air* discusses the Jewish concept of the Messiah. From 11:30 p.m. until 2 a.m., Zev Brenner hosts a live call-in show with newsmakers and celebrities.

On the left side of the dial, Marilyn Neimark and Esther Kaplan preside over *Beyond the Pale: The Progressive Jewish Radio Hour* (WBAI, 99.5 FM, Sundays at noon), which covers politics and culture from a progressive Jewish perspective. Recent shows have included a discussion of the language of the Holocaust, lately inflamed when the Japanese American National Museum mounted an exhibit on World War II Japanese internment camps in the U.S. The museum's labeling of them as concentration camps set off protest within the Jewish community over the use of the term.

Is your longing for spiritual gratification satisfied by your career? Do you find contentment on the Web? If the answers are no, Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis has some alternatives. Each week she delves into the beauty

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and mystery of the Jewish *neshama* (soul) on her *Hineni* program (Manhattan Cable Channel 35, Sundays at 3 p.m.). *Hineni*, Hebrew for *Here I Am*, teaches that Judaism is not some archaic set of rules, but a living source of wisdom that can be both a guide to and a respite from the travails of modern life. Her goal is to "help you infuse your life with more meaning through your Jewish heritage." Founded by Jungreis in 1973, the Hineni organization, at its center (232 West End Avenue, 496-1660), offers a series of programs in Torah, Talmud, cabala, prophets, history, rituals and ceremonies in the home and synagogue, and Hebrew language and prayer.

Celebrate your newfound spirituality with some Jewish music videos. The *Jewish Music Video Countdown* (Manhattan Cable Channel 53, Sundays at 9 p.m.), produced by Talkline, features everything "from schlock rock to [the late Shlomo] Carlebach," including comedy, Israeli music, and more cantors. If you think you won't have heard of any of the artists, think again. Mandy Patinkin has come out with a collection of Jewish songs and, according to Talkline producer Zev Brenner, Barbra Streisand is about to release one. And if you're not yet sick of Adam Sandler's Hanukkah song, here's a place you can hear it.

A spirit of a very different sort is the stuff of the horribly dull and irritating *Uncomfortable Questions for Comfortable Jews* (Manhattan Neighborhood Network Channel 16, Thursdays at 10 p.m.). It is produced (and I use the word only in its loosest manner) by Jewish Direct Action, an offshoot of the Jewish Defense League, and hosted (after a fashion) by the pseudonymous Chaim Ben Pesach, a talking head in baseball cap and sunglasses who sits in front of a photo of the late Meir Kahane and pontificates ad nauseam and barely intelligibly on violent solutions to the Arab threat, the stupidity of the American government, and the cowardice of American Jews. Surely public access TV at its finest.

Kabbalah Kraze

At last year's Oscars, Madonna wore a red string bracelet. Not an innovative AIDS awareness ribbon, it signified Kabbalah's protection from negative energy.

The rock star has been studying Jewish mysticism, which emerged around the beginning of the Common Era. The history of Kabbalah evolved from a secretive, elite club to a mass movement to forbidden teachings, and has reached unprecedented popularity. Kabbalah literally translates from the Hebrew verb *to receive*, specifically to receive tradition through oral teachings. In the second century C.E., Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai wrote the most famous Kabbalah text, *Zohar*, deeming the Torah a coded version of the spiritual dimension of the universe.

At the midtown Kabbalah Centre, Michael Moskowitz explains that Kabbalah is the study of receiving God's energy in the form of things we want from life, ranging from knowledge to love to perfect health. To understand Kabbalah, the Centre does not require its students to accept God's existence. It urges proactive rather than reactive behavior and sharing love and tolerance. The Centre offers classes in Kabbalistic teachings on astrology and reincarnation, and a 10-week basic course for \$168.

Did ancient and holy rabbis who developed or studied Kabbalah intend for its transformation into digestible self-help lessons? The current Kabbalah craze seems like an attempt by individuals, trapped in modern chaos, to find quick answers without fully understanding complex sacred texts. Maybe Madonna has a better teacher.

— Deborah Schoeneman

The Kabbalah Centre, 155 East 48th Street, 644-0025, free introductory lesson Monday nights at 7 p.m.

Aura Authority

Do you want to live forever? You will— at least your soul will— but you can't take your body with you. However, if you live a spiritual life in your present incarnation, your chances of returning to earth with the body you've always wanted are greatly improved. So say the teachings of theosophy, a religion based on the workings of nature throughout the cosmos. First introduced to the West in the mid 19th century by the Russian mystic Helena Blavatsky, theosophy is a body of teachings dealing with people's evolution toward an inevitable reunion with God, and the hidden reasons behind existence. Theosophy has two main pillars of thought: karma and reincarnation. Karma, the more popular of the two, is a result of all previous and present actions you commit while incarnated; in other words, "you reap what you sow." Reincarnation is the reappearance of souls in physical bodies on earth in order to live out the results of karma. Theosophists believe these two doctrines to be the only real salvation for a world gone haywire. Most of theosophy is based on ancient books such as the Bhagavad-Gita and the Upanishads, which both deal with humans' plight as spiritual beings "trapped in a coat of flesh."

Theosophy is truth bordering on science fiction. Theosophists believe we are currently living in "Kali Yuga," an iron age when people have fallen almost completely away from God. Their texts suggest that we are living on one of seven earths, each of which has its own moon; the other six are beyond a human being's normal sense of perception. The human body, they say, has an aura or "astral body" that extends in all directions— which, of course, means there's much less space on the subway than you thought. To learn more about this fascinating practice, visit the library at the United Lodge of Theosophists and check out *The Ocean of Theosophy* by William Q. Judge (1893), *Isis Unveiled* by Helena Blavatsky (1877), *The Secret Doctrine*, Helena Blavatsky (1888), and the Bhagavad-Gita.

— Trevor David

The United Lodge of Theosophists, 347 East 72nd Street, 535-2230
Library is open Wednesdays 6:30 to 7:20, Fridays and Sundays 6:45 to 7:20, and by appointment.

Instant Spirituality

1. Get up as soon as your alarm clock goes off. Immediately open your eyes and jump out of bed thinking positive thoughts. Your first mental impressions set the tone for your entire day, so be conscious of your first thoughts.
2. Focus on your goals for the day. By concentrating on exactly what you want to accomplish, you mentally create your surroundings.
3. Meditate on yourself and your environment. Take a moment to feel at peace with who you are, wherever you are. Calm your body, be still, and imagine yourself experiencing the moment for the first time.
4. Breathe deeply and evenly from your diaphragm. Take long, deep breaths into your abdomen, and slowly exhale through your mouth, taking care to exhale all the air.
5. Destroy negative thoughts before they take root.
6. Be open to the universe, to new experiences, new people, new ideas. Nothing makes life more suddenly interesting than looking at it from a new perspective.
7. Imagine yourself flying, soaring through clouds and over mountains; this puts you in touch with the ethereal nature of what spirit is, and releases you from daily stress. And, since you are what you think, the mental sensation of flying acts as a stimulator of endorphins, calming and soothing your mind and body. Happy flying! — T.D.

Religion On The Internet

When you search for God, do you use Lycos or Yahoo?

You can buy a car, order plane tickets, or meet a mate, all in the blue glare of your computer screen. Why not also seek communion with God? Despite the often antagonistic relationship between technology and spirituality, a great place to find religion is on the Internet.

Allyn & Bacon's Sociology Links: Religion (www.abacon.com/sociology/soclinks/religion.html) lists over 70 links to both mainstream and alternative religions. Click on Catholic, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhism, Hare Krishna, Rastafarianism, Santeria, Zoroastrian Doctrines and Rituals, Wicca and Witchcraft, or, my personal favorite, First Presleyterian Church of Elvis the Divine.

For online prayer requests, check out CforC (formerly Computers for Christ) (www.cforc.com) or Christian Broadcast Network (www.cbn.org), where they promise to pray over your e-mail ("in one of our prayer chapels") but don't promise to respond.

Even such insular groups as Lubavitcher Jews (www.chabad.org) and the Sikhs (www.sikhs.org) are online. Like Christ's apostles for the new age, everyone is spreading the word.

As the millennial end approaches, watch the proliferation of evangelical

and End Times sites (see Eternal Destinies at www.primenet.com/~etdt for a hair-raising example). Technology may be the devil, but it's also the best way to light a flare in our mediated modern night.

— Tamara Fishman

Head End

The Active Side of Infinity (HarperCollins, \$25), Carlos Castaneda's final "nonfiction" book on his apprenticeship with Yaqui Indian shaman don Juan, hits stores this month. Castaneda, the reclusive Peruvian-born Californian, died of liver cancer on April 27, 1998. Or, as his more romantic fans prefer to believe, he passed into the "Dark Sea of Awareness," disappearing in a flash of light. *The Active Side of Infinity*, coincidentally, focuses on the topic of death. Under the tutelage of don Juan, Castaneda brings a wide range of memories and repressed feelings to the surface, essentially making peace with the world before he leaves it for bigger and better things.

The new book combines conceptual theories, Mexican adventures, and faux anthropology. Fans of his peyote-driven classic, *The Teachings of Don Juan*, will be sorry to hear that this book is drug-free.

Nothing will dissuade the Castaneda loyal from reading and believing everything that takes place in *The Active Side*, but what of those who question the "nonfiction" label? Beyond the sentimental reality that it's Castaneda's last or the assurance that it will be an easy read— one which won't deviate from its self-created Yaqui-Sorcerer genre— they may not be persuaded.

— Aaron Tillman

Apocalypse Now

Millennium madness rears its many heads as we enter into the new year, and the Internet is the medium through which it roars. Believers in the apocalypse proliferate on the Internet with as much veracity as any old-fashioned fire-and-brimstone sermon.

Are the End Times really here? These sites will tell you how to prepare for the Rapture.

home.cwnet.com/crm/ The Open Scroll: Christian Research Ministries. Discovering the Mysteries of Bible Prophecy in the End Times. Highlights: A Prophetic Schedule Book, Celestial Revelation, and the usage of an encrypted revelation for "The Secured Word."

www.webcom.com/enddays/ Catholic Prophecy On The Coming Great Chastisement And Personal Salvation. You can count on the Roman church to spout out biblical links ad infinitum. If you can't find your salvation here, well, have a nice afterlife.

www.MT.net/~watcher/ UFOs, Aliens & Antichrist: The Angelic Conspiracy & End Times Deception. Way, way out there, but strangely thought-provoking, is the juxtaposition of heavenly bodies with cosmic realities and how everything ties together in a massive upcoming alien invasion— the apocalypse of biblical lore.

www.beastwatch.com Taking *The Omen* to the next level, this site offers one of the most thorough and step-by-step methods of keeping track of the Antichrist and his minions and saving yourself along the way.

www.mille.org/indexA.html The Center for Millennial Studies takes a scholarly approach that works best when engaged in the Interactive Bibliography compiled by Dr. Ted Daniels.

— Athima Chansanchai

Mind Rinse

Like *Seinfeld*, Zen meditation is mostly about nothing. At least that's a comparison the people at Still Mind Zendo, an interfaith Zen community, might make. Their routine is simple: remove your shoes, sit on pillows or chairs with open eyes gazing at the floor, and clear your mind, counting to 10 over and over.

It's not as easy as it sounds. I chose to sit on a pillow, my legs crossed. At first, I couldn't count past four without succumbing to random thoughts: the dumb rap hit on Hot 97; buy lettuce on the way home; do my socks smell? With each mundane intrusion, I bounced back to one. After 25 minutes my back ached and my feet grew numb. Despite attending the gym three to four times a week, I found simply sitting still and erect uncomfortable.

When the meditation ended an hour and 45 minutes later, I felt no different (other than a soreness in my lower back) and wasn't sure if I'd come again. However, walking to the subway I felt a refreshing lightness, as if my mind were a blackboard— layered with scribbles and erasures— that had been wiped by a damp cloth. This strange, energizing feeling was the surprising reward for my efforts. Maybe it's worth a second round.

— Ernie Glam

Still Mind Zendo 691-2972, \$5 suggested donation

Prayer Port

Airports, so antiseptic and filled with the shrill yammerings of jet-lagged travelers, have always given me the creeps. But a family emergency last October led to my discovery of JFK Airport's interfaith chapel. Strangely, I found comfort there, amid the nasal dronings of an operator paging a passenger and the muffled thuds of luggage skidding across linoleum.

Tucked inside the second floor of International Air Terminal #4, the chapel doubles as a synagogue. Catholic and Protestant services are offered and prayer rugs for Muslim worshipers sprawl in one corner of the room.

JFK's interfaith chapel is one of 32 nationwide, according to Father James Devine, who heads the airport's Our Lady of the Skies Catholic Chapel. "We're here to serve the travelers," explains Devine. "And that is like a ministry of the moment."

Daily from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. the chapel draws passengers who seek consolation (like the families of those killed in last summer's Swissair Flight 111 crash), or want to pray for someone ill whom they're flying to see, or just want to chill out in private.

Inside the chapel, everything feels hushed and slightly amniotic. Panels of stained glass patch through soft light. It is lovely. Just as I closed my eyes, the last call for a flight to Ghana worked itself into the rhythms of my prayer. — Nita Rao

Buddhamerica

A Buddhism craze hit these shores about 50 years ago. How does a religion so seemingly antithetical to late-20th-century American values translate without losing its soul? How does it change when juxtaposed with democracy, individualism, feminism? These questions are at the heart of *Tricycle*, a quarterly magazine founded seven years ago by editor in chief Helen Tworikov to explore the broad theme of Buddhism in America. Not wedded to any particular school or tradition of the faith, the magazine contains interviews, articles, poetry, and humor from sources as wide-ranging as Spalding Gray, who interviewed the Dalai Lama (!) for the debut issue, and Richard Gere (perhaps our country's best-known Buddhist celebrity) to various Buddhist teachers from both Asia and the States. Especially popular was a series of issues featuring Jack Kerouac's previously unpublished Buddha bio *Wake Up*. But more than just a religious journal, *Tricycle* (the title is an ideological mishmash of three Buddhist catchwords: triads, wheels, and cycles) is a musing reflection of life at large: not just Buddhism but sex, music, racism, sexism, sports, movies, the environment, you name it— seen through a Buddhist lens. Dubbed "Buddhism for the hip-hop generation" by one reporter, *Tricycle* takes an ancient religion and hooks it into the here and now— in the true Buddhist tradition. — HOLLY MCWHORTER

To subscribe to *Tricycle* (\$24 annually) call 1-800-873-9871.

Solstice

Winter solstice signals the return of light and serves as a universal metaphor for humanity's optimism in times of darkness. So the day before the solstice, I skipped Sunday mass at Saint Patrick's Cathedral to attend a celebration hosted by sprightly dance therapist Dassie Hoffman.

The five-hour ritual included Hoffman's combination of myth telling, ceremonial movement, and catharsis, rigorously exploring how archetypal images of Demeter, Persephone, and Hecate apply to female struggles today. Hoffman insists that "the event's primary purpose is to teach women about the solstice and the trinity of the triple goddess. It allows women to embody the teaching, not just hear it but take it into their body and learn from it physically and spiritually. I create a safe environment in which women find relevance in their own lives." Although Hoffman does not intend a therapeutic effect, she conducts the event much like a dance therapy session. "Trusting that participants are psychologically stable, you carefully select music, give clients very little instruction and let them move in a way that is meaningful to them. We will let them push it as far as they can, and serious issues may surface." She cautiously structures her sessions to allow self-revelation but avoid dangerous outcomes.

This event is for women only. An enthusiastic husband and wife were firmly rejected at the door. Hoffman emphasizes the need to keep it a women's event. "Had there been a male presence, many of the serious issues discussed wouldn't have surfaced." Amid altar worshiping, wildly emotional dance, and song, discussions grew intensely personal. Conversations touched on defiance of the established patriarch (i.e., male bashing), midwifery, underwater births, abortion, divorce, and mother-daughter woes.

If you seek traditional worship, look elsewhere. At best, Hoffman's inclusive ceremony serves as a cultish party for Mount Olympus's most empowered goddesses.

Dassie Hoffman's next myth and movement ritual is "Aphrodite Day: a celebration of the teachings of Aphrodite and Psyche," Sunday, April 25, 1-6 p.m., \$65

— Jessica Guarnaschelli

Dassie Hoffman, Center for Experiential Psychotherapy, 57 West 58th Street, Suite 10G, 980-1355

*One of nine articles in our **Mind/ Body/ Spirit Supplement**.*

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