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2024

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### Recommended Citation

Lancaster, B. Les, "Judaism and the Transpersonal" (2024). *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies Advance Publication Archive*. 91.

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# Judaism and the Transpersonal

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The interplay between Judaism, especially its mystical tradition, and transpersonal psychology is examined, focusing on two major aspects. The first concerns stages in the spiritual journey, which are analyzed for their psychological import. The stages are symbolically depicted in the biblical narrative of the Exodus from Egypt, a journey from "slavery" to "freedom." Here the Hebrew term translated as "wilderness" is seen to act as a code word, applying to five successive stages each of which I analyze in psychospiritual terms. The role of the divine feminine, the Shekhinah, is emphasized on account of Her specific role in exile and return. The second area explored is more historical, detailing ways in which Jewish and Kabbalistic ideas have impacted western culture in directions that underpinned the later rise of transpersonal psychology.

## The Journey

Then Israel sang this song, Spring up, O well; sing you to it;  
The princes dug the well, the nobles of the people excavated,  
with the sceptre, with their poles.

And from the wilderness [they went to] Mattanah;  
And from Mattanah, Nahaliel; and from Nahaliel, Bamot;  
And from Bamot [in] the valley that is in the country of Moab,  
to the top of Pisgah, which looks toward Yeshimon.

*Torah*, Book of Numbers 21:17-20.

The *journey* lies at the core of Judaism. There are three foundational narratives that constitute the Torah:<sup>1</sup> the narrative of Creation, that of the journey from slavery through the wilderness to the "Promised Land" (Canaan/Israel), and that detailing construction and implementation of the portable temple (Tabernacle) that travels with the people on the journey. Creation itself is a journey—the journey from the inner unknowable essence of the Source to the realm of the physical, where God becomes knowable through the agency of human consciousness. The journey through the wilderness is the *return*, the path by means of which the initializing impulse from the recondite mystery that is the unknowable God is returned, in order that God might perceive the actualization of Their potential. The journey is, then, at one and the same time, the process through which human consciousness is fulfilled and the movement towards re-integration of the Source. Both human

potential and divine potential are realized in the cosmic dance of unification (Lancaster, 2008).

Whilst there may be a range of possible definitions of transpersonal psychology, each emphasizing differing aspects of its subject matter, all would agree that it draws not only on research and theories in psychology but also on the insights into the nature of mind and the human potential for achieving enriched states of being found within humanity's great spiritual and mystical traditions. In common with other religions, Judaism brings material of great relevance to transpersonal psychology since its interest lies not only with the divine (which is beyond the realm of psychological discourse), but also with the human condition and the ways through which the mind may be disciplined, refined, and attached to higher realms.

The journey depicted in the above extract from the biblical book of *Numbers* is elaborated in the rabbinic commentary preserved in the Talmud:

If a person makes himself as the wilderness, which is free to all, the Torah is presented to him as a gift [Hebrew word *matanah* means “gift”] as it is written, “And from the wilderness, Mattanah.” And once he has it as a gift, God gives it to him as an inheritance [*nahaliel* means “inheritance”], as it is written, “And from Mattanah, Nahaliel.” And when God gives it to him as an inheritance, he ascends to greatness, as it is written, “And from Nahaliel, Bamot” [*Bamot* means “heights”]. But if he exalts himself with pride, the Holy One, blessed be He, casts him down, as it is written, “And from Bamot, the valley...” But should he repent, the Holy One, blessed be He, will raise him again. (Talmud, 1908, *Nedarim* 55a.)

The Jewish tradition revels in the subtleties and ambiguities of language. Here, what appear as simple place names in the Torah are found to imply way stations along the path: If one can achieve the internal discipline symbolized by the wilderness, God opens the way (Torah given as a gift) through which a person can begin the journey of ascent; ego-inflation brings about a descent, yet the person can resume the path through repentance, the Hebrew for which essentially connotes “return.”

The wilderness is an apt symbol of the silence and emptiness of the contemplative state, and finds expression in many spiritual and mystical traditions. The desert plays an especially prominent role in Christian teachings, for example, not only in view of the biblical narrative but also on account of Jesus’ time in the desert and the legacy from the Desert Fathers (McGinn, 1994). For Meister Eckhart, the desert symbolizes both the ground of the soul and that of God, which are one and the same nothingness. Judaism typically emphasizes the importance of an empty mind as the preliminary to prayer: “The first thing to which you must accustom yourself is to free your mind from every thought while you recite [the core prayers],” wrote Maimonides, the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish philosopher (*Guide* III: 51; Guttman, 1995, p. 190).

A close reading of the biblical book of Exodus reveals that the term wilderness is a code word indicating stages of challenge on the spiritual journey.

In order to grasp these challenges and the routes to overcome them in terms relevant to transpersonal psychology, it is necessary to go beyond the literal meaning of the text, as is customary in Judaism. The first challenge is that of fear and is encountered at the *Wilderness of the Reed Sea* (Exodus 13:18).<sup>2</sup> The people are confronted by an army chasing from the rear and a seemingly impenetrable sea in front. The antidote to fear is faith. The well-known “miracle,” whereby a path opens through the midst of the sea, is said to have occurred only when the intrepid Nachshon ben Aminadav, one of the princes of the people, waded into the sea up to his nostrils, trusting that God would do His part, as it were (*Midrash Tehillim* 114:8). In contemporary language, the sea is the unconscious, and the first step in a transpersonal journey entails opening to its depths with inner balance:

People who attempt to cross the sea without being purified and without the guidance of enlightenment are drowned; they get stuck in the unconscious and suffer a spiritual death in so far as they cannot get beyond their one-sidedness. To do this they would need to be more conscious of what is unconscious to them and their age, above all of the inner opposite, namely those contents to which the prevailing views are in any way opposed. (Jung, 1970, p. 200)

The people arrive at the *Wilderness of Shur* where the challenge is that of finding water to drink: “And Moses brought Israel from the Reed Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water” (Exodus 15:22). When they do find water, it is undrinkable. In the story, the water is transformed from bitter to sweet when Moses casts a tree into the water. The tree symbolizes the esoteric teaching, and this challenge may be conceptualized as the need for a guide on the path in order that the waters of the unconscious might be brought to the sphere of the conscious mind in a controlled way.

The next wilderness is that of *Sin* (NB: The Hebrew word has nothing to do with the English “sin;” rather it is etymologically connected with *Sinai* and *s’neh*, meaning “bush,” referring especially to the bush where Moses had his

initiatory revelation). Here the challenge is that of food (Exodus 16:3). The antidote is *manna*, a crystalline, white substance that comes with the dew: "And the people of Israel saw and said one to another, *man hu* ("what is it?"), for they did not know *mah hu* (what it was)" (Exodus 16:15). The English term manna derives from the Hebrew *man* (what?), but does not adequately convey the point that it is the ability to ask the question that becomes the true sustenance. The profound connotation of manna as nourishment for the soul becomes elaborated in the Kabbalah. The 13<sup>th</sup>-century mystic Gikatilla (1994) applied the Hebrew *hu* (it) to the recondite Source of creation; *man hu* implies recognition of Source. The very ability to question means that something was recognized as being present, and ultimately there is nothing beyond the question since the Source cannot be named. The asking *is* the knowing, but not in the sense of knowing through separation (Ouaknin, 1995). The deepest connotation of manna is conveyed in the *Zohar*<sup>3</sup> in its description of the crystalline dew which is distilled daily in the brain of the Holy Ancient One and drips down through the chain of being to nourish all. To put it in more general terms, the manna should be understood as the fruit of spiritual practice. Through concentrative or meditative states in which the habitual role of "I" is attenuated, one may develop inner guidance for navigating the encounter with the unconscious.

A challenge of a rather different order arrives as the people leave the wilderness of Sin. They demand to know, "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Exodus 18:17). What kind of a question is this, one might well ask, when, according to the narrative, God has just sent plagues on their enemies, split the sea to reveal the royal road, provided a pillar of fire for night-time reading, rained food from heaven, and extracted water from a rock! The surface reading seems somewhat strained, to put it mildly. The mystical reading, however, recognizes that a deeper concern was being expressed:

The explanation is as given by R. Shimon: They wished to know whether the divine manifestation which they had experienced was that of the Ancient One, the All-hidden One,

the Transcendent, whose designation is *Ayin* (Nothingness), or of the Small Countenance, which is designated by the Tetragrammaton ("Lord"). (*Zohar* 2:64b.)<sup>4</sup>

The "children of Israel" doubted whether the immanent presence of the divine was truly accompanied by the transcendent divine essence. The significance of this doubt is intimated in the immediately following biblical verse: "Then came Amalek and fought with the people" (Exodus 18:18). In Jewish thought, Amalek represents the archetypal spiritual antagonist, the force opposing spiritual advance. The antidote to this spiritual challenge is given in the text (Exodus 17:11–12): The battle is won to the extent that Moses' hands remain uplifted towards "heaven." In other words, this is a test of one's resolve to maintain awareness of the transcendent Source, to maintain conscious connection with the nothingness that underlies all.

The final wilderness described in Exodus is that of *Sinai* (Exodus 19:1), famous for the ultimate encounter between God and Moses on the mountain. Again, there is a challenging time for the people on the journey. Moses is detained on the top of the mountain, and the people think that they are bereft of leadership. In this hiatus they turn to idolatry—the incident of the golden calf (Exodus 32). Again, reading more deeply beyond the simple story, one can discern the teaching: Do not cloud your connection with the infinite by placing gurus or objects supposedly representing the infinite in its stead. There comes a point on the journey when one transcends the need for any kind of intermediary. Ultimately each person must stand alone, open to all possibilities where the transcendent source of the unconscious is ever unfolding.

The pattern of these five stages of challenge and progression on the spiritual journey may be correlated with that portrayed in a concise statement of the spiritual path by the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Isaac of Acco (*Me'irat 'Einayim*, p. 218):

He who has merited the secret of attachment to the divine will merit the secret of equanimity. And if he merits the secret of equanimity, he will merit the secret of intense meditative

concentration. Once he has merited the secret of meditation, then he will merit the Holy Spirit, and from that he will reach prophecy. ( see Fishbane, 2009, p. 256.).

Of course, neither the language of the Torah nor that of Isaac of Acco equates directly to that of psychology. But Table 1 indicates the parallels that are relevant here. The exact details of these parallels are not the focus here—brief notes in the Table may suffice for the interested reader to pursue. The fact is that different ages, and, more especially, the different kinds of writing in those ages, formulate things differently, but the journey itself remains. The challenge to understand the transformational journey lies at the core of transpersonal psychology,

Isaac of Acco	Exodus	Transpersonal psychology	Notes on parallels
adhere to the divine	faith that a way into the sea will be found	path to access the unconscious	unconscious as realm of connection to the divine
equanimity	transform water	access unconscious in controlled way	equanimity = overcome emotional turmoil that can result from triggering of unconscious content.
meditation	distil "manna"	adopt regular practice / discipline	"manna" as inner, spiritual elixir from divine "brain"
holiness	overcome Amalek	maintain conscious connection with Source	"holiness" = recognition of root in transcendent realm
prophecy	overcome idolatry	open to the infinite Source	prophecy as state of adhering to God (see below)

**Table 1.** *The spiritual journey: parallels across different formulations in Judaism and transpersonal psychology.*

and the hints I have gathered above from Jewish sources can contribute to meeting that challenge.

There has been considerable debate within transpersonal psychology as to whether the transformational journey is best described as involving *ascent* or *descent* (Daniels, 2005). In brief, ascent in this context means aspiring to ever more refined states of consciousness, whilst descent implies encountering the “dynamic ground” of the unconscious (Washburn, e.g. 2003). Hillevi Ruumet (2006) has described the journey as entailing successive cycles of ascent and descent, a pattern that I would identify with that depicted in the biblical narrative. Whilst the literal meaning of the biblical story is couched in terms of superficial needs (water, food) and transgressions, the pattern of recurring challenges is indicative of a deeper understanding of the journey. The *Bahir*, a key work of the early Kabbalah that was circulated in the 12<sup>th</sup>-century, explores the roles of descent and ascent in mystical practice using deceptively simple language:

His students said to him: “From above to below we know, but we do not know from below upward.” He said: “Is it not one matter, from below to above and from above to below?” [...] “Go and see.” He sat and expounded to them: “Just as the *Shekhinah*<sup>5</sup> [divine presence] is above, so is it below. And what is the *Shekhinah*? As it has been said, this is the light that was emanated from the first light which is wisdom. It surrounds everything as it says, ‘The whole earth is full of his glory’ (*Isa. 6, 3*).” (*Bahir*, para 116; Abrams, 1994, p. 201.)

As focus of the ultimate journey to union with the divine, the *Shekhinah* epitomizes the integration of ascent and descent. Moreover, She becomes the nexus for outward and inner journeying. Outwardly, the *Shekhinah* is described as accompanying the people. She is present with the people in the desert journey, and She is present with the Jews throughout their exilic journey. Indeed, the whole notion of exile over the past 2000 years of the Jewish experience is mirrored in the concept of the *Shekhinah* being exiled from her masculine consort, the male divine principle (Lancaster, 2008). Inwardly, the Jewish mystic is enjoined to

become united with the Shekhinah, which in turn enables the Shekhinah to be united on high in the Godhead. Ezra of Gerona (13<sup>th</sup>-century) underlined the seminal role for the Jewish mystic of uniting with the Shekhinah in his designation of kabbalists as “the group who receive the presence” (cited in Wolfson, 2005, p. 389), in which phrase the verb “receive” is the root of the Hebrew *Kabbalah*, and the word “presence” is the *Shekhinah*.

### Kabbalistic Psychology

In the writings of another 13<sup>th</sup>-century kabbalist, Abraham Abulafia, the quest of kabbalists to “receive the Shekhinah” takes on more psychological dimensions. He wrote that the Shekhinah is the “end of thought” (cited in Wolfson, 2000, p. 139), meaning the realm where human thought intersects with the divine intellect. The psychological orientation of Abulafia’s approach is evident not only in this emphasis on the nature of thought—which is found more generally in kabbalistic writings—but also in the system of complex practices he taught. Abulafia referred to his approach as the “Path of the Names” in view of the overarching role played by divine names, and as “Prophetic Kabbalah” since the goal is to attain the state of prophecy, understood as union with God (Idel, 1988, 1989).

At the core of Abulafia’s system is a distinctive practice that involves permuting and combining Hebrew letters and divine names. Abulafia identified the practice with the *work of the chariot*, a term drawing on the biblical book of Ezekiel and applied to mystical praxis in the earliest texts of Jewish mysticism. Not surprisingly in view of Abulafia’s emphasis on language, this connection with chariot mysticism derives from an etymological link between the Hebrew for “chariot” (*merkavah*) and “combination,” (*harkavah*). A further allusion is given whereby *ma’ase merkavah*, Hebrew for “work of the chariot” is shown to be identical numerically<sup>6</sup> with *Shem b’Shem*, meaning “name with name” (i.e., combining one divine name with another). Gikatilla (cited in Idel, 1989), one of Abulafia’s pupils, wrote explicitly:

Know that the letters of the Honourable name, whose secret is *YHWH* are exchanged by combining them with the letters that follow

the letters of the name. This is the secret of the *merkabah*, and you must be aroused concerning the great matter contained therein. (p. 51)

Preliminaries to the core practice taught by Abulafia included fasting, cleansing the body, ensuring that one is in a secluded place, wearing white, wrapping oneself in the prayer shawl and wearing ritual objects (*tefillin*), and lighting candles. No doubt these acts would heighten the sense of expectation, and might be construed as encouraging a degree of dissociation from normal ego-dominated consciousness. The linguistic practice itself entails specific configurations of the breath and body movements whilst working with letters and names. The combination of trance-inducing techniques and the linguistic practice itself is likely to have brought about further dissociative, or auto-hypnotic, tendencies. Moshe Idel (1989) characterized Abulafia’s practice as promoting a deconstruction of language as an instrument of communication in order to inculcate an expansion of the mind. Elsewhere I have discussed this deconstruction as being likely to impact on the mystic’s sense of self and outer reality given the seminal role of language in their normal construction (Lancaster, 2000). The role of the divine names would then be that of re-constituting the sense of self and reality around the internalized schema of God, which—being imageless—may have eventuated in a notably open state and expanded sense of self (cf. Friedman, 1983; Pappas & Friedman, 2007). This whole psychological scheme is clearly in line with Abulafia’s (cited in Idel, 1988) own conceptualization when he wrote that, “Man is [tied] in the knots of world, year and soul [i.e., space, time and persona] in which he is tied in nature, and if he unties the knots from himself, he may cleave to He who is above them” (p. 135).

Abulafia’s linguistic practice is predicated on an early mystical work, the *Sefer Yetzirah*, composed sometime between the second and seventh centuries CE, which explored the way in which God was said to have used the Hebrew letters as agents in creation:

Twenty-two foundation letters. He placed them in a wheel, like a wall with 231 gates. The wheel

revolves forwards and backwards.... How? He permuted them, weighed them, and transformed them. [The first letter] *Alef* with them all and all of them with *alef*; [the second letter] *bet* with them all and all of them with *bet*. They continue in cycles and exist in 231 gates.<sup>7</sup> Thus, all that is formed and all that is spoken derives from one Name. (*Sefer Yetsirah* 2:4–5.)

The mystic is evidently pursuing an act of *imitatio dei* by combining and permuting the letters in the manner advocated by Abulafia (cited in Idel, 1988). Initially this entails writing, then chanting, and finally the process is internalized in the heart:

One must take the letters ... first as instructed in the written form which is an external thing, to combine them, and afterwards one takes them from the book with their combinations, and transfers them to one's tongue and mouth, and pronounces them until one knows them by heart. Afterwards, he shall take them from his mouth [already] combined, and transfer them to his heart, and set his mind to understand what is shown him in every language that he knows, until nothing is left of them. (p. 20)

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to describe the complex features of Abulafia's techniques in full. These brief elements serve to illustrate the distinctive psychological aspects. I have emphasized (Lancaster, 2004) in particular the wheel-related imagery which suggests the associative nature of the practice: "And begin by combining this name, namely YHVH, at the beginning alone, and examine all its combinations and move it and turn it about like a wheel returning around, front and back, like a scroll" (Abulafia, as cited in Idel, 1988, p. 21). As Scholem (1941/1961, p. 135) pointed out, Abulafia's practice entailed developing associations in a controlled meditative state:

In fact this is nothing else than a very remarkable method of using associations as a way of meditation. It is not wholly the "free play of association" as known to psychoanalysis; rather it is the way of passing from one association to

another determined by certain rules which are, however, sufficiently lax.

The intended goal of these practices may be conceived as both mystical and magical. The former is articulated in terms of closeness to—or even union with—the divine, and the latter, in terms of unusual powers of creation. Thus, Abulafia wrote of the ability to create new forms, and even a new universe, once one has mastered his practices. This magical orientation draws from older Talmudic sources where it is said that the righteous are capable of creating a world, and that "Rava created a man" (Talmud *Sanhedrin* 65b). The magically-created humanoid, or *golem*, spawned a wealth of fanciful legends, and seems to resonate with one of the most basic of human aspirations. Psychologically, the difference between magical and mystical goals may involve shades of difference in the specific altered state of consciousness cultivated and degree of agency exercised.

In her study of the *Zohar*, Melila Hellner-Eshed (2009) identified three states of mystical consciousness: "rose" consciousness, "tree of life" consciousness, and "white-light" consciousness. The naming of the first state as *rose* consciousness derives from the *Zohar's* opening discourse on the "rose of the valley" depicted in the biblical Song of Songs. Just as the whole edifice of the *Zohar* opens with this metaphor, so *rose* consciousness is viewed by Hellner-Eshed as the initial mystical state through which the further states may be accessed. For the *Zohar*, the rose depicts the Shekhinah. *Rose* consciousness is accordingly the state through which one becomes aware of the divine presence. There is an intensification of the senses, through which one discerns an extra dimension, as it were.

The *tree of life* consciousness to which *rose* consciousness opens is named after the central glyph of the Kabbalah. The tree of life depicts the entirety of creation from the ultimate source—the first stirrings to action in the recondite mind of God—to the final manifestation of the divine presence in the physical universe. For Hellner-Eshed (2009), this state of consciousness is characterized by centeredness and an inner knowing of all things; it conveys at one and the same time both the center of the tree of life and

its totality. It is a state of presence and stable clarity, through which one may aspire to influence the mysterious dynamic of the Godhead. Accordingly, it is quintessentially a *participative* state (Lancaster, 2008). Indeed, a distinctive feature of Kabbalah is its emphasis on *theurgy*, the human role in promoting harmony within the Godhead. Practices described as *unifications* are directed primarily at unifying the divine realm. Secondly, such unifications would seem to bring about greater integration within the mind of the practitioner by harnessing the associative potential of the mind. I have argued that this associative potential brings within the orb of consciousness normally unconscious contents (Lancaster, 2004).

*White-light consciousness* brings awareness of the oneness and unity at the heart of all being. It may be identified with the undifferentiated roots of thought, and depicts the alignment of the human mind with the “amorphous dimension that precedes order and language” (Hellner-Eshed, 2009, p. 349). Whereas rose consciousness is depicted as having a feminine quality and tree of life consciousness as being masculine, white-light consciousness transcends any duality associated with gender.

As I pointed out earlier, all spiritual and mystical traditions have bequeathed profound insights into the nature of the mind as these relate to their soteriological aspirations. Transpersonal psychology draws extensively from these insights. Whilst there is much commonality across traditions in asserting that the ego-dominated, grasping state of mind should be transcended, the traditions differ in their approach. Judaism places a major emphasis on language and the role of language in penetrating to deeper levels. In the first place this means deeper levels of the Torah, but, in view of the Torah’s place as world soul this comes to imply deeper levels of reality, and implicitly, deeper levels of the mind: “Throughout the entire Torah we find that the revealed co-exists with the concealed. So it is with the world, both this world and the higher world, everything is concealed and revealed” (*Zohar* 2:230b).

It is this emphasis on the interplay between the concealed and the revealed that leads to a distinctive kabbalistic psychology. Classical

kabbalistic sources describe creation as an emanative process, through which the initial divine spark progressively unfolds:

From within the concealed of the concealed, from the beginning of the descent of *En Sof* [the infinite divine essence], radiates a faint light which is unknowable, concealed in recesses like the point of a needle. It is the mystery of the concealment of thought, unknown until a light extends from it into a place of tracings, from where all the letters go forth. (*Zohar* 1:21a.)

In both Abulafia and later within the Hassidic tradition<sup>8</sup> these stages in the unfolding of the spark of creation become understood in more psychological terms. Each stage within the downwards process of creation is identified as a state within the upward path towards adhering to God. Of especial relevance to psychology is the designation of the “concealed thought” as a realm of *preconsciousness* by Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezeritch (1704–1742). For Siegmund Hurwitz (1968), the meaning of the Hebrew phrase translated here as “preconscious” is: “A kind of thinking, conceiving, or consciousness which preceded the actual thinking, conceiving, or consciousness of the moment” (p. 174) This aspect of mind is generally concealed from normal consciousness—a point underscored by Hurwitz’s inclination to refer to it as *unconscious*. There is, however, more to this term than might be implied if one thinks of it only as a kind of cognitive preconscious or psychoanalytic unconscious, for it refers also to a higher dimension of mind. Spiritual advancement is viewed by the Maggid as requiring an *ascent* to the level of the preconscious, experienced as “a creative pool of nothingness” (Matt, 1995, p. 87).

This Hassidic notion of the pre- or unconscious as intermediary between human and divine accords with the thought of Carl Jung, whose work remains central to transpersonal psychology. Indeed, in an interview, Jung (1977) acknowledged that the Maggid “anticipated his entire psychology” (pp. 271–272). Sanford Drob (2003) suggested that, in view of the potent influence that kabbalistic sources had exerted on many of the alchemical texts Jung had studied, Jung came close to developing



a kabbalistic psychology. Indeed, late in his life, Jung acknowledged the key role that kabbalistic teachings concerning the union of masculine and feminine potencies in the Godhead had played in his thinking. As Drob has asserted, kabbalistic teachings play a seminal role at the “very fount of many Jungian ideas” (p. 97).

### **Discovering the Unconscious: “Otherness” in Society and Mind**

The opening quote of this chapter takes on additional significance in view of the fact that it includes one of the lines (“Spring up, O well; sing you to it”) that appears in an inscription written by Sigmund Freud’s father, Jakob, in a Hebrew Bible with German translation he gave to his 35 year-old son in 1891 (Ostow, 1989). The inscription was written in Hebrew, and, in its use of subtle allusions, reveals the extent to which Jakob was steeped in the Jewish tradition. Many have discussed the level of transmission between father and son on this account (Klein, 1981; Ostow, 1989; Rice, 1990; Rizzuto, 1998; Yerushalmi, 1991). If, for example, as Freud (junior) avowed, he did not know the language, why would his father write for him in Hebrew? It has been suggested that Freud concealed—consciously or unconsciously—the extent to which psychoanalysis was connected to his Jewish roots in order to ensure its acceptance at large within a generally anti-Semitic environment. Both Richard Bernstein (1998) and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1991) have argued that Freud *intentionally* built psychoanalysis on Jewish foundations: “Freud, the proud, godless Jew, conceived of his own discovery of psychoanalysis as continuous with the tradition introduced by ‘the great man’ Moses, whose legacy had decisively influenced the character of the Jewish people” (Bernstein, 1998, p. 83). In an imagined “Monologue with Freud,” Yerushalmi wrote:

I think that in your inmost heart you believed that psychoanalysis is itself a further, if not final, metamorphosed extension of Judaism, divested of its illusory religious forms but retaining its essential monotheistic characteristics, at least as you understood and described them. In short, I think you believed that just as you are a godless

Jew, psychoanalysis is a godless Judaism. (Yerushalmi, 1991, p. 99.)

Mortimer Ostow (1989) suggested that his father’s lines were fulfilled when Freud revisited the Bible in his last major work, *Moses and Monotheism* (Freud, 1939/1964): “Freud obeyed his father’s request to ‘sing to’ the old well that had sprung up anew, the Bible” (Ostow, 1989, p. 490).

To extend the point slightly, I would suggest that a well is profoundly symbolic of the unconscious, and that psychoanalysis functions to bring “water” from the depths to the surface. By formulating a new way to “sing” to the waters of the unconscious, Freud honored his father’s words. And, critically, the *new* way was not radically new since it bears striking resemblance to the associative path cultivated by the Rabbis and further developed in kabbalistic practices. Just as exploring linguistic associations became the rabbinic method for reaching into ever deeper levels of the Torah, so free association was Freud’s preferred method for uncovering unconscious realms of the psyche.

Moreover, as David Bakan (1958) has pointed out, Freud’s insistence on the sexual basis of the psyche is in accord with the kabbalistic emphasis on the dynamic of sexual polarity both within the Godhead and between humans and the Shekhinah. Indeed, the sexual connotation of the “well” are central for the *Zohar’s* exegesis:

“Spring up, O well, sing you to it.” That is, ascend to your place to unite with your spouse [*Shekhinah*]. This is from below to above. Then from above to below: “The princes dug the well,” for the Father and Mother conceived it... “The nobles of the people excavated:” a place for the King to entwine with her with blessings. (*Zohar* 3:286a.)

In Susan Handelman’s (1982) words, “Freud displaced Rabbinic hermeneutics from the text of the Holy Writ to the text of the dream, that is—the speaking psyche of the person” (p. 202).

Given the central role accorded to accessing the unconscious by most key thinkers in the transpersonal movement (e.g., Jung, Assagioli, Grof), Freud’s contribution should not be underemphasized.

His credentials as a transpersonal psychologist may indeed be challenged in view of his overtly critical approach to religion and mysticism, but, as the above illustrates, the rabbinic and kabbalistic underpinnings of psychoanalysis ensured that his approach to the unconscious sowed seeds which others were able to cultivate.

An instructive parallel to Freud's role in precipitating a shift in mainstream culture in the twentieth century is found in the early Renaissance. Again, an input from Judaism is found to have had an influential role. The transition in thinking that ushered in the Renaissance is generally agreed to originate with Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* of 1486. Tarnas (2006) summed up the radical innovations of the *Oration*:

Thus the brilliant Pico, twenty-three years old, gave the prophecy. A new form of human being announces itself: dynamic, creative, multidimensional, protean, unfinished, self-defining and self-creating, infinitely aspiring, set apart from the whole, overseeing the rest of the world with unique sovereignty, centrally poised in the last moments of the old cosmology to bring forth and enter into the new. (p. 4.)

Pico had learnt Hebrew and received instruction in kabbalistic teachings from several teachers, including the convert Flavius Mithredates and the Italian kabbalist Yohanan Alemanno. The extent to which kabbalistic teachings impacted on Pico's ideas is evident from the *Oration* itself. Pico della Mirandola (1956) wrote,

These are the books of cabalistic wisdom. In these books ... reside the springs of understanding, that is, the ineffable theology of the supersubstantial deity; the fountain of wisdom, that is, the precise metaphysical doctrine concerning intelligible and angelic forms; and the stream of wisdom, that is, the best established philosophy concerning nature. (pp. 63–64)

To capture the significance of these historical events for transpersonal psychology it is necessary to understand the psycho-historical relationship between Christianity and Judaism. For reasons deeply connected with the schism that

generated Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism some two thousand years ago, Jews and Judaism came to represent the *other* in Christian Europe. The two religions articulated opposing world-views: Judaism emphasizing the sacred in *this* world, Christianity eschewing the physical in its quest for the sacred; Judaism entering into the complex details of the "letter of the law," Christianity venerating the "spirit" which it saw as being opposed to the letter ("For the letter kills, but the spirit gives life" [New Testament, *II Cor* 3:6]); Judaism seeking *embodied* spirituality; Christianity sublimating the role of the body (Biale, 2007).<sup>9</sup> The otherness is evident beyond theology in the various accusations against Jews which revolved around powerful, unconscious symbols, and eventuated in riots, pogroms, and mass-murder: The Jews were accused of being in league with the devil, of killing Christian children for their blood, of contaminating the sacramental host with blood, and of bringing the Black Death by poisoning wells. As a degenerative force, the otherness provoked anxiety and its release through violence; as a generative one, the same otherness led to the creative upsurge of new ways of thinking.

In a psychodynamic sense, the historical process mirrors that relating to individuals: Breakthroughs arrive when otherness is no longer rejected but integrated. The path to individuation begins when the shadow is no longer projected onto the other, but instead responsibility is taken for one's own undiscovered psychic territory. Pico would seem to have become the agent through which the encounter of Christianity with Judaism took a generative direction. The parallel with the modern period is striking: Just as it was Pico's openness to the otherness of the Kabbalah that fructified his thought, so Jung was spurred by his encounter with the sublimated form of Rabbinic Judaism and Kabbalah that is psychoanalysis. Just as Pico is harbinger of the modern self (Tarnas, 2006; Yates, 1964), so Jung gives birth to the idea of the Self which transcends the immediate sphere of consciousness, akin to the *transpersonal self* (see also Assagioli, 1993; Firman & Gila, 2002).

The historical cross-currents between Judaism and Christianity were undoubtedly more complex than the above discussion might imply.

In particular, it has been argued that kabbalistic teachings about the Shekhinah arose in the wake of the Christian cult of the Virgin (Green, 2002; Schäfer, 2002). In the twelfth century, popular veneration of Mary was especially strong in those regions of Europe in which the early kabbalistic texts assigning a potent role to the Shekhinah first circulated. It seems reasonable to conclude, with Arthur Green (2002), that the kabbalistic myth of the Shekhinah was a Jewish response to the exaltation of the feminine in the dominant culture. The kabbalistic version, however, deified the feminine in a way that was viewed as heretical at the time in Christianity. Perhaps introducing the feminine as a potent erotic presence in the Godhead was a critical development whereby the Jews were able to explore the implications of intra-divine eroticism to the fullest. The parallel with Freud exploring the ramifications of *intra-psychic* sexuality is instructive, and warrants further consideration.

There can be little doubt that all the major world religions, together with shamanic and other indigenous cultures, have contributed in large measure to the lenses through which transpersonal psychologists view human potential. Judaism, as has been seen, developed specific teachings which bear significantly on contemporary understandings of the mind and the ways in which one might attain states of consciousness more aligned with the divine. In this final section, I have sketched an additional route through which Jewish thought has impacted on transpersonal psychology. On account of the role played by Judaism as a subordinate stream within the dominant European culture over many centuries, it engendered paradigmatic shifts without which transpersonal psychology as it is known today would probably not exist. Had it not been for Pico's encounter with the Kabbalah, or for the rabbinic approaches to exegesis which Freud transformed into the hermeneutic core of psychoanalysis, key developments that undergird transpersonal psychology would not have come about. A full appreciation of transpersonal psychology requires an awareness of these historical antecedents. Whilst transpersonal psychology draws heavily on Eastern traditions, and is certainly strongly associated with America (having important

roots in the transcendentalist movement of the mid-nineteenth century, for example), the European cradle of Western culture holds a distinctive place in its origins (Lancaster, forthcoming).

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### Notes

1. The Torah comprises the Pentateuch, but in Jewish thought is much more than a book, being viewed as an organic, living presence. It is best understood as the World Soul, the vehicle through which divine and mundane realities intersect. The Torah is the sacred center of Judaism.
2. "Reed" is the correct translation of the Hebrew, *suf*, often mistranslated as "red." *Suf* also means "end" or "limit," which intimates its role in the journey—it represents the boundary of our sense of mundane consciousness, or "slavery." The etymologically related *saf* means "threshold," clearly indicating the spiritual import of this "sea."
3. The *Zohar* is universally recognized as the most influential text of Jewish mysticism. It first circulated in the thirteenth century, leading most scholars to date its authorship to this period. Within the Jewish tradition it is generally seen as recording mystical speculations from an earlier period, and is ascribed to a second-century author, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Translations from the *Zohar* are by the author. Where appropriate, I have referred to extracts as presented in Matt (2004–2011) and Tishby (1949/1989).
4. The mystical reading hinges on the Hebrew construction of the biblical verse. If the intention of the verse were, "Is the Lord among us or not?" (as given in the King James' translation), it would typically have used a different term for the negative. The negative term actually used (*ayin*) gives the meaning, "Is the Lord among us [together] with nothingness?" It is this nothingness that the *Zohar* understands to mean "the Transcendent."
5. The term, *Shekhinah* derives from the Hebrew meaning "dwell" and is understood as the feminine presence of God dwelling amongst the people. Although the term is found in the early rabbinic period, it is only with the rise of Kabbalah in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that it comes to the fore as the agency for human-divine encounters. Elaboration of the role of the *Shekhinah*, especially in erotic terms, is a major feature of the *Zohar's* narrative.
6. Hebrew letters function as numbers, meaning that words may be interconnected on the basis of equivalence of numerical value (*gematria*). In Jewish thought these interconnections are not merely random but meaningful on account of the sacred nature of the alphabet. The letters are divine, and *gematria* represents a means of discerning deeper meaning in the divine mind, as it were.
7. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, which gives a total of 231 unique two-letter combinations.
8. Hassidism arose in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century. It was distinctive within the Jewish world for bringing mystical ideas to the general Jewish population. Its psychologization of kabbalistic ideas is seen in the way in which it reworks earlier concerns with the "inner structure and processes of the divine" into its focus on the "inner human constitution" (Idel, 1995, p. 235).
9. These distinctions held sway throughout the period of Christianity's dominance in European history, and were powerfully formative even later, for example, in Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda. This clash of worldviews has considerably attenuated over recent decades.

### **About the Author**

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The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a Scopus listed peer-reviewed academic journal, and the largest and most accessible scholarly periodical in the transpersonal field. IJTS has been in print since 1981, is published by Floragrades Foundation, sponsored in part by Attention Strategies Institute, and serves as the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. The journal is available online at [www.transpersonalstudies.org](http://www.transpersonalstudies.org), and in print through [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) (search for IJTS).