

## **Saga of Modern Judaism: Jewish Renewal**

## **Or Shalom**

*God is afoot, Magic is alive.*

*Alive is afoot, Magic never died.*

*God never sickened*

*Many poor men lied*

*Many sick men lied*

*Magic never weakened*

*Magic never hid*

*Magic always ruled*

*God is afoot*

*God never died.*

*God was ruler*

*Though his funeral lengthened*

*Though his mourners thickened*

*Magic never fled*

*Though his shrouds were hoisted*

*The naked God did live*

*Though his words were twisted*

*The naked Magic thrived*

*Though his death was published*

*Round and round the world*

*The heart did not believe*  
*Many hurt men wondered*  
*Many struck men bled*  
*Magic never faltered*  
*Magic always led.*  
*Many stones were rolled*  
*But God would not lie down*  
*Many wild men lied*  
*Many fat men listened*  
*Though they offered stones*  
*Magic still was fed*  
*Though they locked their coffers*  
*God was always served.*  
*Magic is afoot. God rules.*  
*Alive is afoot. Alive is in command.*  
*Many weak men hungered*  
*Many strong men thrived*  
*Though they boasted solitude*  
*God was at their side*  
*Nor the dreamer in his cell*  
*Nor the captain on the hill*

*Magic is alive*

*Though his death was pardoned*

*Round and round the world*

*The heart did not believe.*

*Though laws were carved in marble*

*They could not shelter men*

*Though altars built in parliaments*

*They could not order men*

*Police arrested Magic*

*And Magic went with them,*

*For Magic loves the hungry.*

*But Magic would not tarry*

*It moves from arm to arm*

*It would not stay with them*

*Magic is afoot*

*It cannot come to harm*

*It rests in an empty palm*

*It spawns in an empty mind*

*But Magic is no instrument*

*Magic is the end.*

*Many men drove Magic*

*But Magic stayed behind*

*Many strong men lied*

*They only passed through Magic*

*And out the other side*

*Many weak men lied*

*They came to God in secret*

*And though they left him nourished*

*They would not say who healed*

*Though mountains danced before them*

*They said that God was dead*

*Though his shrouds were hoisted*

*The naked God did live*

*This I mean to whisper to my mind*

*This I mean to laugh with in my mind*

*This I mean my mind to serve 'til*

*Service is but Magic*

*Moving through the world*

*And mind itself is Magic*

*Coursing through the flesh*

*And flesh itself is Magic*

*Dancing on a clock*

*And time itself the magic length of God.*

-Leonard Cohen, from “Beautiful Losers”

The Jewish Renewal Movement started in the 1960s with the aim of revitalizing Jewish spirituality through contemplative and social justice practice, as well as through “deep ecumenicism” and the integration of the best of modern and postmodern thought. According to some tellings of the story, it started when a Chabad Hasid took LSD. Not a denomination but rather a movement aiming to renew all denominations of Judaism, it was officially founded by Reb Zalman Shachter-Shalomi, the rogue Chabad Hasid mentioned above, and was given shape and served by several other people in the decades since.

When talking about the history of the movement for Jewish Renewal, one could either start with its founding in the United States and Canada in the 1960s, or one could start with its roots in Germany in the early 20th century. I’m going to do the latter, since Jews are a people who believe in the importance of honouring, and being nourished by, our roots.

The first wave of Jewish Renewal starts with Hillel Zeitlin, Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel. Hillel Zeitlin (1872-1942) was born in Kovno, Lithuania but left the religious milieu to

work as a journalist, political agitator, and early Zionist. Eventually he would return, however, and attempt to rescue Hasidic mystical doctrines from their Ultra-Orthodox encasement. He attempted to start a mystical renewal group called Yavneh, named after the famed Palestinian Yeshiva that had preserved Mishnaic learning after the destruction of the Temple, and wrote long, brilliant essays like “Hasidism Then and Now” and “Judaism and Universal Religion.” Perhaps the first Neo-Hasid, he would eventually inspire Abraham Joshua Heschel, Reb Zalman Shachter-Shalomi, and Arthur Green.

Martin Buber (1878-1965) was many things, but with regards to Renewal what is most relevant is his commitment to a renewed, contemplative Jewish spirituality grounded in the Hasidic tradition which expressed itself in communal and political engagement. In that sense he was Jewish Renewal before Jewish Renewal, acting so as to renew the spirit of Judaism both for Jews and for the world. The Jewish Renewal movement would generally part from Buber in his rejection of law and ritual, instead favoring their evolution, though Jewish Renewal, as a pluralist movement, does not have an official position.

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) at first dedicated himself to finding an intellectually authentic Judaism while renewing the ethical-political spirit of the ancient Jewish prophets. After moving to the US he dedicated himself to preserving and making available Hasidic spirituality as Buber had before him, but took this further by developing an intense, poetic presentation of Jewish spirituality. This included theology and an embrace of Halakha, prayer and ritual as key to Judaism. Heschel argued that “Prayer is either exceedingly urgent, exceedingly relevant, or

inane and useless. Our first task is to learn to comprehend why prayer is an ontological necessity [something required by our very being- M]. God is hiding, and man is defying. Every moment God is creating and self-concealing. Prayer is disclosing or at least preventing irreversible concealing. God is ensconced in mystery, hidden in the depths. Prayer is pleading with God to come out of the depths. “Out of the depths have I called Thee, O Lord” (Psalms 130:1).”

Heschel was a staunch defender of Halakha, and argued that it existed to sanctify all of life and to teach us that, in a sense, God is in the details. “Judaism is not another word for legalism. The rules of observance are law in form and love in substance,” he wrote.

Heschel’s emphasis on Judaism as a living spiritual path, his affirmation of tradition, and his call to prophetic social justice activism would all have an impact on Jewish Renewal.

The next key precursor for Jewish Renewal was likely Aryeh Kaplan (1934-1983). Kaplan, an American Orthodox Rabbi, had a first career as a physicist but switched to the pulpit when 31. In the late 60s he began translating works of Jewish mysticism which were unknown to the non-Orthodox, English speaking world, and teaching Jewish mystical techniques which had been secret or known only among Hasidic and Ultra-Orthodox circles. Kaplan would eventually complete a translation of the Chumash into english (The Living Torah, which we use at Orsh) as well as writing a series of groundbreaking english books on advanced Kabbalah. These books would not only spark a renewed interest in Jewish mysticism among Jews, but also become standard sources of information around the world for non-Jews. Kaplan’s work would spark a

wave of Jewish mystical practice and curiosity in the US and Canada which helped set the stage for the Jewish Renewal movement, as well as inspiring many in the counterculture to re-engage with Jewish practices in general.

Another key background to Renewal is found in the 20th century Chabad and Breslov movements. After WW2 a number of American and Israeli Breslov teachers began spreading Rebbe Nachman's teachings throughout the Jewish world with a renewed urgency, including Aryeh Kaplan, who though not a Breslover wrote books on Breslov teachings. Rebbe Nachman's teachings, with their mystical and psychological emphasis, their use of mind-bending hermeneutics and fairy tales, and their joy, appealed to many younger and counter-cultural Jews from the 60s onwards. Both the sixth and seventh Lubavitcher Rebbes, the leaders of Chabad, also played key roles the Jewish Renewal Movement.

Yitzhak Yosef Schneerson (the Rebbe Raya) was the Rebbe of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. Reb Zalman first encountered Chabad while fleeing from the Nazis, when he came across a small, idealistic community of Chabadniks who worked and live together. In September 1941, when he and his family were waiting in a French internment camp for visas to America, he met a young Rabbi Schneerson, who would later become the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe. Schneerson was invited to give a guest class at the makeshift yeshiva where Schachter-Shalomi studied. Taken by the power and charisma of this young Hasidic yet modern-looking rabbi, Schachter-Shalomi vowed that he would seek out Schneerson's father-in-law, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, when he arrived in America. When he got to the US, he became a talmid- close disciple, of the Rebbe

Raya, who remained his “heart-Rebbe” for the rest of his life. When the Rebbe Raya died, his son-in-law succeeded him and became Reb Zalman’s Rebbe, though they were never as close. The son-in-law was Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh and last Lubavitcher Rebbe.

Born in Russia, the Rebbe was a very intellectual young man who quickly got a reputation for Torah knowledge and Kabbalistic acumen. He went to the University of Berlin, where he studied mathematics, physics and philosophy, including the lectures of Erwin Shrodinger, the Quantum Physics theorist, which he particularly enjoyed. The Rebbe’s trajectory was similar to that of Heschel’s, yet different in that Shneerson’s studies were accepted by his family and he remained tightly knit to Chabad even while engaged in secular studies. While studying in European academia he carried on correspondence with leading Talmudists and Kabbalists across the Jewish world and began writing records of his own explorations in Kabbalah and Torah interpretation. Although famous due to his father-in-law, he consistently downplayed this connection and was an introvert that stayed out of the public eye.

Shneerson went on to study at the Sorbonne, but his studies were interrupted by the rise of the Nazis, after which he fled to the United States. When his father-in-law died he resisted becoming the new Rebbe as the hasidim wanted, but after a year of requests he accepted. Once he had taken the helm he fulfilled his responsibilities as Rebbe eighteen hours a day, except for two days a week when he met with people for one-on-one counselling (*yechidus*) all night as well. Although he retained a strict observance of ultra-Orthodox Hasidic tradition for himself and his followers, he broke with Hasidic (and wider Orthodox) custom by turning his Hasids outwards to

spread the Torah among both Jews and non-Jews. In many ways he was progressive, focusing on improving the situation of Hasidic women, children's education, and care for those with special needs in the Jewish community. The Rebbes model, which combines strict observance of halakha with a non-judgmental attitude to individual Jews and a "some mitzvot are better than none" attitude, has been widely influential in the North American Orthodox community.

In 1992, Gabriel Erem, the editor of *Lifestyles Magazine* told Schneerson that on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday they would be publishing a special issue and wanted to know what his message to the world was. Schneerson replied that "'Ninety', in Hebrew, is 'tzaddik'; which means 'righteous.' And that is a direct indication for every person to become a real tzaddik - a righteous person, and to do so for many years, until 120. This message", Schneerson added, "applies equally to Jews and non-Jews."

During his lifetime the Rebbe came to be seen by some followers as the Messiah, and after his death fervent Messianism broke out. Mainstream Chabad repudiated the Messianism, but it still continues in pockets. With regards to our story, the most relevant fact is that the Rebbe was the second major teacher of Reb Zalman and also the Rebbe of Shlomo Carlebach, another rogue Chabadmik with a major influence on Jewish Renewal. Carlebach would have a massive influence on Jewish life in North America through the introduction of Hasidic teachings and stories in a form that fascinated younger Jews and his composition of haunting and infectious sacred melodies and liturgical songs. His inclusiveness and willingness to part with some of the rigidities of Orthodox practice allowed him to become something very much like a Jewish guru

to the young from the 60s through the 90s. Sadly after his death his legacy would be marred by intensely controversial allegations of sexual misconduct. Although his melodies, teachings, and ways of devanning have now been integrated throughout the Jewish world, his personal role as teacher and exemplar has now been lost due to the widespread acceptance of claims that he harmed women with his sexual and personal behaviour.

### **Reb Zalman**

Reb Zalman, while teaching in Winnipeg, (the Rebbe sent him there) went his own way guided by a relentless internal guide and famously experimented with hallucinogens and ecumenicism. He went more and more outside of the box until he was doing something unrecognizable to Orthodox Jews. He became a tireless organizer and spiritual architect, along the way being recognized as a Sufi Sheikh as well as the Rebbe of many people in his own right. He argued that a renewal of Judaism would require integrating deep ecology, feminism, “deep ecumenicism” (his phrase) and embracing evolutionary paradigm shifts and Hasidic non-duality.

Schachter-Shalomi believed in adopting and sharing spiritual traditions in order to create a world where distinct religions remain but are integrated with one another. Adopting Buddhist meditation, Gregorian chants and Sufi *zikher* to Jewish prayer, Schachter-Shalomi sought to broaden the possibilities of Jewish spiritual life. He was committed to the Gaia hypothesis, to feminism, and to full inclusion of LGBT people within Judaism. His innovations in Jewish worship include chanting prayers in English while retaining the traditional Hebrew structures and melodies, engaging davenners (worshippers) in theological dialogue, leading meditation during

services and the introduction of spontaneous movement and dance. Many of these techniques have also found their way into the more mainstream Jewish community. Reb Zalman met with spiritual leaders from across the world- including the Dalai Lama, as chronicled in “The Jew In The Lotus.”

Schachter-Shalomi moved between academic and more inspirational posts until the mid-1970s when his attention turned almost exclusively to the development of what would become known as Jewish Renewal. In many ways he was fulfilling the vision of Zeitlin and Buber but in a way more radical than they could have envisioned. In 1975 he assumed the position of Professor of Jewish Mysticism and Psychology at Temple University in Philadelphia where he taught until he took early retirement in 1987. While in Philadelphia he also founded Bnei Or (Children of Light), later changed to Pnei Or (Faces of Light), a Jewish spiritual society of experimentation that was the germ-cell of what later became Jewish Renewal. He was also instrumental in the founding of the neo-Hasidic Havurah Movement centered in Somerville, Massachusetts, and the Aquarian Minyan in Berkeley, California. In 1995 he moved to Boulder, Colorado, to assume the World Wisdom Chair at Naropa University where he taught until his retirement in 2004.

The popularization of his thought through the 1990s and 2000s extended his influence far beyond the relatively small Renewal communities in North America and Israel. Ritual experimentation, meditation, yoga, liturgical innovation, ecologically-conscious kashrut, and new contemplative and liturgical music have become more common in Jewish communities outside Renewal.

Participants do not always know the extent to which their practices have been shaped by Reb Zalman's innovations.

Reb Zalman espoused what he called a "post-triumphalist" vision of Judaism that viewed divine election as a concept necessary for the "old paradigm" but no longer necessary after the paradigm shift. His call to universalize Jerusalem soon after the Six-Day War in 1967 is one example of how he put his post-triumphalist Judaism into practice. In the years following the Six-Day War, Reb Zalman visited and prayed with Sufi sheikhs in Jerusalem and Hebron at a time when that was unheard of.

Reb Zalman left behind Aleph: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, which includes a rabbinical school, cantorial school, lay leadership programs, young adult training programs and many series of seminars and retreats in spiritual development. As Jewish scholar Shaul Magid has written, "Historians of Judaism are likely to view Jewish Renewal as one of the most important developments in postwar Judaism in the Diaspora."

### **The Two Arthurs**

Two other important architects of Jewish Renewal are Arthur Green and Arthur Waskow. Arthur Green has been a scholar of Jewish mysticism who is important for his contributions to the study of Hasidism, his development of a post-modern, nondual Jewish theology, and his important role

in creating the Chavura movement in the 70s. After Kaplan, Green was also a major force in making Jewish mystic teachings available in English as well as beginning a conversation about how to evolve Kabbalistic theology in light of ethical and theological shifts in the Jewish world. He also founded Hebrew College, a transdenominational Rabbinic College. Green was a disciple of Heschel's and a co-conspirator with Reb Zalman.

Arthur Waskow is a leftist anti-war and pro-civil rights activist who in the late 60s began articulating how to do all of that Jewishly- often for the first time, and in ways that have been massively influential. 1969 saw the publication of his "Freedom Seder", the first "social justice" Passover Haggadah (since then thousands have come out). His book "Godwrestling" (his translation of "Israel") introduced the term to the broader Jewish community and set out a paradigm for open-ended, nondogmatic wrestling with the Torah and God from within the tradition. Since then Waskow has continued to be a leader in radical Jewish activism, interfaith solidarity, and liturgical and ritual innovations. His wife, Rabbi Phyllis Berman, is a teacher and leader in her own right, and the two continue to work together, most recently on addressing what they call the "border atrocities" of the Trump administration.

In Waskow published a book called "Dancing In God's Earthquake" where he outlined the transformations of Judaism he believes are needed in our time: feminism, eco-centredness, moving beyond religious idolatry, embrace of LGBTQ folk, renewing how we pray, addressing economic injustice, healing Israel-Palestine, and renouncing militarism and nationalism.

## **Marcia Prager**

Prager, who plays a leading role in Aleph, has made major contributions by reinvigorating the spiritual study of the Hebrew alphabet and language and the meditative practice of blessings.

Prager has had a huge influence through renewing the practice of blessing as spiritual contemplation and mindfulness practice and suggesting innovations in terms of new blessings and blessings-language.

Other teachers who have contributed to Jewish Renewal are too many to mention. Rabbis Jeff Roth, Joanna Katz and David Cooper all contributed to the rebirth of Jewish meditation; Jay Michaelson contributes to Jewish theologies of the body and of nonduality, as well as LGBTQ rights; Rabbi Shefa Gold contributes to the spirituality of chant in Jewish practice, and the list goes on and on. The current executive director of Aleph is SooJi Min-Maranda, a Korean-American Jewish woman who is one of the few Jewish women of colour in visible leadership positions in North America.

## **Rabbi Daniel Siegel and Hannah Tiferet Siegel**

Of particular importance to Or Shalom is Daniel Siegel, who founded Or Shalom with his wife Hannah Tiferet Siegel as a small home minyan in 1979 which eventually grew into the synagogue we have today. Reb Daniel continues to play a major role in the Jewish Renewal Movement and Aleph as a teacher and guide, and Hannah has been a teacher, community innovator, and creator of songs and liturgy for decades. I decided not to try to include a history of Or Shalom here because to do it justice would require its own class, because there are so many people in the community who know more than I do, and because I was afraid of leaving out people, of which there are so many, who have served this community for years. So that story will have to be told in full another time, hopefully by one of the many elders among us.

Reb Zalman died on July 3, 2014 in Boulder, Colorado. According to his friend and student Sara Davidson, “Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi wanted no casket, no plain pine box. For his funeral, held on the Fourth of July, he wanted to be clothed in his white kittel (prayer robe), enfolded in his father’s tallis (prayer shawl), sprinkled with ashes brought from Auschwitz, then shrouded in white linen and lowered directly into the earth near his home in Boulder, Colorado.”

At his funeral there were three Rabbis: a Chabad rebbe, Yossi Serebryanski, wearing a black wool coat and hat in the heat, a Conservative rabbi, Marc Soloway, and a Jewish Renewal rabbi, Tirzah Firestone, who was ordained by Reb Zalman in 1992 and has been a pioneer in Jewish feminism and the renewal of Jewish mysticism.

Reb Tirzah said: “Reb Zalman told me that in the early days, Jewish Renewal was “wild and wooly.” He would darken the prayer room, set strobe lights flashing, and ask people to start “dancing in the dark with God.” He held Shabbat dinners where people didn’t feed themselves but fed each other, as, according to legend, it’s done in heaven. He conducted a seder where people took four puffs of marijuana instead of drinking four cups of wine. He was one of the first to count women in the minyan — the quorum required to pray, and welcomed gays and lesbians as full participants.”

“Despite the pushback and condemnation that Reb Zalman received,” Reb Tirzah said, “he always moved forward.” This was possible because “his love outsized his fear,” she said. “He had remarkably little fear of social pressure and disapproval, because his commitment to the Living God was simply greater than any other force around.”

The “commitment to the Living God” is the heart of Jewish Renewal, which sees that commitment in the evolution of halakha and Torah study, and universalist, ecumenical manifestations of the life of mitzvot.

### Further Reading

Buber, Martin.

*Tales of The Hasidim.*

Green, Arthur. *Radical Judaism.*

*-Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow*

*-Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology.*

Heschel, Abraham Joshua.

*Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity.*

Jacobs, Jill. *There Shall Be No Needy.*

Michaelson, Jay. *Everything is God: The Path of Nondual Judaism.*

Prager, Marcia. *The Path of Blessing.*

Shachter-Shalomi, Reb Zalman. *The December Project.*

*-Credo of A Modern Kabbalist.*

*-The Rebbe: Geologist of The Soul*

*-Gate To The Heart: A Manual of Contemplative Jewish Practice*