



GASHMIUS MAGAZINE

Towards a Progressive neo-Hasidism



Exclusive Interview with Jay Michaelson

Author discusses *The Secret
That Is Not A Secret: Ten Heretical Tales*

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*Jay Michaelson discusses sources and themes in his new book *The Secret That Is Not a Secret: Ten Heretical Tales* published by Ayin Press in 2023. This interview focuses on the fifth story in the collection, “The Ascent of Chana Rivka Kornfeld,” which *Gashmius* readers can access on our website.*

Eva Sturm-Gross: To begin with, who is Chana Rivka Kornfeld?

Jay Michaelson: Chana Rivka Kornfeld is the deceased narrator of this story, and she is based on many people who I knew in my life. In my 20s, I kind of lived as a *ba'al t'shuvah*, including three years living in Israel. In a couple of these stories there are people who grew up, if not secular,

then at least engaged with the modern world, but gave it up for reasons that are profound. I'm very aware that there's a whole literature now of **off-the-derech**, or ex-orthodox, narratives: people leaving a **Haredi** or Hasidic world for the more mainstream one.

But I am also interested in the other direction. I often find there's a mini-trend now of Netflix series on cults and things like that, and I find that they don't give enough airtime to what's so good about the cults for the people who enter them. Obviously, a good cult story always involves abuse and terrible things, but there are reasons why people are attracted to that. So whether it's the *ba'al t'shuvah* or Chabad (the first story in the collection), or here with the Kornfelds, I wanted to capture this sublimated eros, spirituality, meaning, and community that is so real.

And for me, I found it very tempting. Had I been straight, maybe I would have bought into that. I knew that since I was gay, I would never be able to integrate my full self into that world. For me at least— there are some people who do live in that way. And so it's not a path that I took. But certainly when I was spending time in **Sfat** or in Jerusalem, there was an allure because there is an interpenetration of the worlds of myth and experiential reality. There is spiritual consciousness. It may be related to Eros in some way and sexuality in some way that maybe we understand or maybe we don't, but these forces are powerful and real, to the extent that anything is real. And they also operate on a much larger scale.

Certainly in American culture, where the fastest growing forms of religiosity, particularly in Christianity, are the charismatic ones, whether it's Evangelical, Pentecostal, etc. This is the conservative Hasidism of Christianity. It's not mainline rationalist Protestantism that is dictating American politics right now. I don't have first hand experience with that culture, so I don't write about it, but I do have first hand experience with

this one. So, Chana Rivka and her husband Eliezer have left behind their more assimilated relatives in America. And their profound anger and rage is similar to American Evangelicals. I also saw first-hand the blending of this political and religious rage that Eliezer is experiencing. And I don't want to say more about that because these are real people, and while there was not a murder involved in the stories of people who were in this exact situation, there was violence.

I think there is a kind of commonplace teaching that anger is a form of idolatry, of *Avodah Zarah*, and there are many ways of understanding that. What I was interested in here is this tension within that notion. One of the ways it's understood is that when you're angry, you're placing your own interests, *yetzer hara*, or desires ahead of G-d's or ahead of reality. Like you really should submit to the fact that everything is G-d's will. But then there's obviously an angry G-d, the attribute of the sphere of **Gevurah** is associated with G-d's anger and judgment. And sometimes we — the Jews, whoever that “we” is — root for that anger. Like God should destroy our enemies. That's even in a part of the *Shemonah Esrei*, the prayer that's said by religious Jews three times a day. So on the one hand anger is idolatry. On the other hand, this anger is part of God, which for the **Zohar** is also a frequent trope.

The Zohar is also used to incorporating other gods or other entities within the Godhead (Asherah, Allah, etc.) which goes back to the notion of the **sefirot** that includes a polytheistic impulse within something that calls itself monotheism. So that's what I'm curious about with Eliezer. The reality is — and we don't have to speak too much about the current exact moment in Jewish history — but there are large percentages of religious Jews who see anger, vengeance, and judgment as Divine. And again, I've seen that firsthand.

We do live (in American culture, and now I think also increasingly in Israeli culture) in a very angry time. A time in which anger is valorized. This is how demagogues thrive. They stir up anger and use that anger as the basis for their own political power.

ESG: What sources were inspirational for this book?

JM: I've written a lot of nonfiction. So for me, a lot of what's interesting about this book is that I get to engage with concepts that I find problematic or interesting or provocative, but that I don't find personally nourishing, or that I might even reject. There's another story in the book—not the one that you'll be reading here, but the last one—where the protagonist visits a Kabbalist who's modeled directly on [Yitzchak Ginsberg](#), who's a contemporary Chabad-affiliated Kabbalist with very extreme right political views, and in that story the protagonist comes to reject that vision of Kabbalah.

But I, as the author, am still really interested in it. So that was liberating about writing this kind of work. It's not like these are the sources that necessarily impact my spirituality, but these are some of the fascinating conundrums of this mystical and esoteric tradition splintering out in many different directions.

ESG: How do you see this book fitting into the midrashic tradition?

JM: I was wondering if this counts as kabbalistic midrash in a way. I think there are midrashic-like sections of the **Zohar** that are narrative, and that build out conceptual pieces in narrative or in elaboration. I think it's an interesting open question as to how canonical the Zohar seeks to be taken. I think with the Midrash, one of the liberating and fun aspects of it is that it's not saying "this is what really happened," but it's canon in the sense of literary canon, and I think that's true of a lot of the Zoharic material. Obviously it's **pseudepigraphical**, so it's certainly not relaying what the ostensible characters were doing, like the Talmudic sages. But I don't even think it's trying to report what actually happened at some time with **Shimon Bar Yohai**. Like, I think the literary project is more Midrashic, and I think that's where I see a point of contact.

ESG: For our readers who might not be familiar, could you describe the sefirot and why you used them as a structure for this book?

JM: The **Sefirot** as a conceptual framework can be described in many ways: it's the emanations of the divine; it's the stages of manifestation from the One to the Many. I did not intend the stories as commentaries on each of the sefirot although it's fine if someone reads it that way. I wanted it to be a bit more oblique than that. I find the sefirot to be an interesting concept in actual life. When it maps on— OK, well, blue is the Shechina, and red is Gevura or something— it's a little simplistic. It's like a decoder ring or something, which is not so interesting. But certainly in the Zoharic texts themselves, it's much more fertile than that. And it's this constant

dynamic changing: the genders of the sefirot are changing, the associations are changing. They're constantly in interrelationship with one another in ways that are really fascinating, and it's endlessly absorbing. That's the way in which I wanted to bounce off the themes of the book and the narratives of the book, kind of bouncing them off the sefirot rather than necessarily explicating them.

So much of **theosophical Kabbalah** begins from a sort of Everything, **panentheism**. Everything is inside of God but at the same time God is *Ein Sof*, which makes God ineffable. There's nothing you can really say when there's no boundary, there's no action. It's similar to the philosophical conundrum of an Aristotelian God who was perfect and thus can never change. And so if **Maimonides** attempts to resolve that contradiction by explaining away the mythic aspects of Torah, the Kabbalah goes in the opposite direction and reifies the mythical aspects of Torah, and a lot of the action of theosophical Kabbalah takes place in this realm of the sefirot. So it's less interested in a New Age, "all-as-one" mystical dynamic, and it's more interested in the not "all-as-one," in the plurality. It's a kind of incipient polytheism. Obviously within normative Judaism there can't be polytheism for real but it's a little bit like the **Trinity**; it's a way of having the Many that are also One.

ESG: This story, and many of the stories in this book, reveal how complicated heresy is when G-d is a complete unity (everything is G-d! Even the profane, even cruelty or anger). How do you see this truth as in

conflict or in complement to Jewish theology? And how do you try to navigate it in your writing?

JM: My inspiration here is the Yiddish novel Chaim Gravitzer, written by Fishl Schneersohn, a cousin of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. I think it's now finally being translated into English (it's been translated into Hebrew). Chaim Gravitzer starts out as a Hasid and he has a **nephilah**, a fall. But his nephilah is never really a nephilah because it's recognizing that there's divinity in each of these layers; each of the **kelipot**, or each of the things that seem distant from God are actually just forms of God. God is present even among the Goyim, even in what's seen as totally alien and evil from that traditional perspective. And so it's a nephilah that's not a nephilah.

From the writing perspective, I'm more interested in the generative, imaginative aspects of it at this moment than I am in the theological parts, which was in my book many years ago, [*Everything is God*](#). I got more interested in “queer,” in the large sense of queer. Not just in the gender and sexuality sense, but in the wider sense of coming at something askew or inflected in a certain way. The ways in which this tension plays out in different ways, and sometimes plays out in redemptive ways.

ESG: Eleazar sees the conflicts of the Jewish people/land of Israel as a premonition of the Messiah, but the protagonist says that “the true redemption wouldn’t have to do with horsemen and apocalypse. It would be so secret that few would even know it had occurred.” What

is revealed about messianism in this story and what is the “true redemption” that Chanah Rivka talks about?

JM: Here, it's more explicitly drawing on **Sabbateanism**. Sabbatianism had at first a public, more traditional messianism, where **Shabbatai Tzvi** was going to steal the crown of the Sultan and restore historical Jewish sovereignty to the land of Israel. When that failed and Shabbatai Tzvi converted to Islam in 1666, his remaining followers became more devoted to him than ever, and just sort of reinvented what messianism could even be. And the Hasidic conception that the *olam haba* can be experienced in ecstatic prayer is actually a Sabbatian notion taken from heretical Kabbalah—that the *olam haba*, the messianic age, the world to come, is not a historical change in the public world, but it's a change in consciousness that can be enacted by ecstatic prayer. So the redemption takes place, and nobody knows it. It's a little closer to Christianity and other conceptions of ‘the Messiah has been here already’ but this one is like, “no, no, no, actually it's happened.” We’re not even waiting for the rapture or for the second coming, it's messianic consciousness.

I was also influenced a little bit by a Yehudah Amichai poem called “Tourists” in which the **Geulah**, the redemption, will come not from something gigantic and public, but something very quiet. And that might be an act of kindness, or it might be, like in the Amichai poem, a recognition of humanity more than the sort of mythic reality or the mythic status of an object. The geulah comes from seeing the humanism of love more than what Eliezer sees, which is this cosmic battle between good and evil and the tightness of Gevurah. So it's partly that Amichai poem, and it's partly Sabbateanism, and it's partly the redemption that Chana

Rivka herself experiences in her moment of death, where she realizes that her worthiness does not depend on observing a mitzvah or being a certain kind of person, it's just who she is and it's who all of us are.

ESG: In Chanah Rivka's prophetic vision she sees a manta ray (an unkosher animal) that is also the snake of Eden, the demoness/Adam's first wife Lilit and death/womb/mother. In contrast to Eleazar's righteous anger, this entity/symbol cluster is the opposite of judgment, she requires no *t'shuvah* and Chanah does not need to be "worthy" to return to the divine source. What does this vision say about the attribute of Gevurah?

JM: This is one of those where the redemption, or the ascent, of the main character is where the heretical side comes in. It's consciously a rejection of normative Jewish taboos and boundaries. There's an unclean animal that's the snake from **Gan Eden**, that's maybe also the ayahuasca serpent, and that is the gateway to redemption and has this redemptive power. The Kabbalah often says, in the redemption— the messianic age— the left will be included in the right or contained in the right. That which is seen as evil or other or denigrated will be included in. I could go off on a whole thing but I'll just leave it at that.

Chana Rivka sees this or experiences this. There's a moment of hesitation where she's still in this tragedy, where this kind of theology— but that's almost too intellectual a word. Where this *way of being*, where

this worldview, where this tightness in the form of religion leads. And yet there's still, even at her dying moment, a brief flicker of that remaining. It's not totally rejected, she hasn't simply transcended it, but fortunately she's had experience with magical Judaism, with different forms of mystical Judaism, and she's not a captive to that way of being the way that her husband is. And there's the possibility that's planted inside her unconscious that's released at this moment of death that is redemptive. She does not need to be worthy. There's not a covenantal theology. There's a triumph over that notion of Gevurah.

Glossary

Term	Definition
<i>Ba'al T'shuvah</i>	Someone who becomes a religious Jew later in life.
Off-the-derech	Derech= "path" and this term is used to describe people who were raised religious but have left that life, thereby going "off the derech."
Haredi	"The word "haredi" is a catchall term, either an adjective or a noun, which covers a broad array of theologically, politically, and socially conservative <u>Orthodox Jews</u> , sometimes referred to as "ultra-Orthodox." What unites haredim is their absolute reverence for <u>Torah</u> , including both the Written and <u>Oral Law</u> , as the central and determining factor in all aspects of life. Consequently, respect and status are often accorded in proportion to the greatness of one's Torah scholarship, and leadership is linked to learnedness." (https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/haredim-charedim/)
Sfat	A city in the Galilee, and an important historic and contemporary center for Jewish mysticism
<i>Avodah Zarah</i>	"Idol worship": the worship of gods (or natural phenomena) in place of the one true. (https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/idolatry-the-ultimate-betrayal-of-god/)
<i>yetzer hara</i>	"The evil inclination". "Yetzer hara is not a demonic force that pushes a person to do evil, but rather a drive toward pleasure or property or security, which if left unlimited, can lead to evil." (https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-birth-of-the-good-inclination/)
Gevurah	Lit. "might"; the second of the seven Divine middot, or attributes, associated with the holding back of Divine revelation and restricting the dispersion of Divine light to lower levels of existence. (https://www.chabad.org/search/keyword_cdo/kid/3015/jewish/Gevurah-Might-Restraint.htm)

<i>Shemonah Esrei</i>	The central prayer in Jewish liturgy that consists of 18 mini-prayers. Is also referred to as the “amidah,” which means “standing” since it is recited while standing.
sefirot	“The Jewish mystical doctrine known as "Kabbalah" (=“Tradition”) is distinguished by its theory of ten creative forces (known as the Sefirot) that intervene between the infinite, unknowable God (“Ein Sof”) and our created world.” https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-ten-sefirot-of-the-kabbalah
Midrash	A Jewish mode of biblical interpretation, often involving literary storytelling to supplement the canonical biblical text.
Zohar	The central text of Kabbalah, traditionally ascribed to the 2nd century sage Shimon Bar Yochai, considered by many scholars to have originated in medieval Spain.
Pseudepigraphical	the ascription of false names of authors to works. (Merriam Webster)
Shimon Bar Yochai	Shimon bar Yochai was a Talmudic rabbi in the 2nd century CE, who is traditionally understood to be the author of the <i>Zohar</i> . https://www.britannica.com/biography/Shimon-bar-Yochai
Shekhinah	The divine feminine indwelling presence of God
Theosophical Kabbalah	Esoteric Jewish mysticism concerned with understanding the nature of Divinity.
Panentheism	The belief that God both fills and exceeds all of existence
<i>Ein Sof</i>	the infinite, unknowable God
Maimonides	“Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides), also known as the Rambam, was among the greatest Jewish scholars of all time. He made enduring contributions as a philosopher, legal codifier, physician, political adviser and local legal authority ...His most enduring masterworks are the <i>Mishneh Torah</i> and the <i>Guide of</i>

	<i>the Perplexed.</i> " (https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/maimonides-rambam/)
Trinity	<p>"Christians believe that God is a Trinity of Persons, each omnipotent, omniscient and wholly benevolent, co-equal and fully divine. There are not three gods, however, but one God in three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit."</p> <p>(https://iep.utm.edu/trinity/#:~:text=The%20Trinity,Father%2C%20Son%20and%20Holy%20Spirit.)</p>
nephilah	Lit "fall," it denotes a spiritual fall.
Kelipot	"husks"
Shabbatai Tzvi	<p>Shabbetai Zvi was born in Smyrna in 1626 and declared himself to be the messiah in 1665. He amassed millions of followers across the Jewish world and was called the "king of the Jews." In 1666, Shabbetai Zvi was brought before the Sultan and given the choice of death or converting to Islam and he chose the latter.</p> <p>(https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/shabbetai-zvi)</p>
<i>olam haba</i>	<p>(Heb. עוֹלָם הַבָּא). The term <i>olam ha-ba</i> (literally, "the coming world") in contrast to <i>olam ha-zeh</i> (literally "this world") refers to the hereafter, which begins with the termination of man's earthly life.</p> <p>(https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/olam-ha-ba)</p>
Geulah	Lit, "redemption"
<i>T'shuvah</i>	<p>"In the Jewish tradition, repentance is called <i>teshuvah</i>, a Hebrew word translated as "returning." One of the Hebrew words for sin is <i>chet</i>, which in Hebrew means "to go astray." Thus the idea of repentance in Jewish thought is a return to the path of righteousness."</p> <p>(https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/repentance/)</p>
Gan Eden	The Garden of Eden