

JUDAISM

How mysticism took us nearer to heaven

Simon Rocker talks angelic chariots and hidden spheres with Professor Rachel Elijor, an authority on mysticism



PHOTO: AP

Israelis celebrating Lag ba'Omer clamber on top of the grave of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai

TODAY'S FESTIVAL of Lag ba'Omer has a special place in the heart of mystics. It is the day when the second-century sage Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is said to have begun illuminating the secrets of the Zohar, the "bible" of Kabbalah, and the day considered the anniversary of his death.

Tens of thousands will have marked the occasion by flocking to his tomb in Meron, Northern Israel.

In recent years, Jewish mysticism has enjoyed an extraordinary surge of interest, thanks partly to the arrival of pop Kabbalah as a branch of the self-help industry. But others have been inspired to look beyond the red-string chic and try to find out more about the authentic tradition. And whether you are an aspiring mystic or not, there is no one better to explain its importance than Rachel Elijor.

The John and Golda Cohen Professor of Jewish philosophy and Jewish mystical thought at the Hebrew University has proved herself a crowd-puller at Limud conferences or Jewish Book Week. Her lucidity and ardour for her subject make her an ideal guide to the most difficult works in the library of Judaism.

The mystical enterprise, she explains, was a response to catastrophe, a creative attempt to construct an alternative reality in dark times. "For me, Jewish history is a chapter in the history of freedom," she says. "It's about the human effort to strive for freedom when freedom was not available in the existential arena."

There are two main streams of mysticism, firstly the "chariot mysticism" originating in the prophecies of Ezekiel more than 2,500 years ago at the time of the destruction of the First Temple. The throne of cherubim from the ruined Temple became the angelic chariot of the prophet's famous vision. "Ezekiel said he had been shown a vision of the heavenly chariot in order to demonstrate the fact that while the earthly Temple was razed to the ground, the heavenly Temple is eternally functioning," she says.

Such mystical writings became a source of hope, bearing the promise of Messianic redemption. "Jewish mysticism is about defying the constraint of reality," she says. "Thus when the Temple was destroyed 2,000 years ago, the Jewish mystics said that its destruction marks the birth of the Messiah. Instead of focusing on the death, the catastrophe and tragedy, immediately they throw an anchor to the future. The Messiah is not only a person, it's like a way of thinking, an alternative reality. The messianic era means retrieving normal life: Jewish sovereignty, having unity of the Jews who were spread all over the world."

The second chapter of Jewish mysticism came later with the Kabbalah, which like most academics she attributes to medieval Europe rather than the early Talmudic period of Shimon bar Yochai.

"The authors of the Kabbalah were working in Spain in the 13th century right at the end of the Crusades," she says. "Spain was the only central Jewish community in Europe that had not been harmed terribly by the Crusades. The French Jewish com-

munity, the German Jewish community were massacred, but the Spanish community was left relatively unharmed. While they were witnessing the demise of the Jewish community in Europe, they [saw] the need to create a new way of thinking that would secure the continuity of Jewish life."

They took a cryptic line from the early mystical text, *Sefer Yetzirah*, the "Book of Creation" (third to sixth century), that the world was created according to "32 paths of wisdom—10 infinite numbers and 22 mysterious letters". For the Kabbalists, the numbers (*sefirot* in Hebrew) meant divine spheres.

"The Kabbalists of Spain adopted this mysterious verse of the *Sefer Yetzirah* suggesting the divine creation is based on language and started to work with it. They claimed that beyond any literal level of understanding of Scriptures there are hidden layers pertaining to the hidden world in heaven.

"They said there are 10 spheres — each one has a name, adjectives pertaining to God. In fact, it only reflects what people are yearning for — Kingdom, Charity, Mercy, Glory... Each one of the words of the Torah is connected to one of the 10 spheres."

More than this, through the very act of writing and study, they believed they could inaugurate the messianic process. The literary creativity of the Kabbalists over the next centuries enabled them to rise above an often grim reality and project a world "illuminated by beauty and hope", she says.

"For them, creative writing was the only arena of freedom open to them. They were not free to dress as they want, or work in what they wanted, or to be equal members in any society. The only place open to them to express their yearnings, their desires, their beliefs, their inner intellectual concerns, was within the mystical literature."

Today, conditions are no longer ripe for mystical writing, with the state of Israel revived and most diaspora Jews living in free societies. But there is one exception: the Lubavitch Chasidim. "If the state of Israel had not been established," she says, "I assure you that there would be volumes and volumes of mystical writing. The one group in Judaism that did not acknowledge the establishment of the state of Israel is Chabad-Lubavitch and they are the only mystically inspired writers and messianic writers in the 20th century in a significant way."

During the Holocaust, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe announced that it was "not what it seemed... He said to his followers, don't despair, those torments of birth-pangs that we see as the Holocaust are going in turn to bring the birth of a new reality."

But in her view: "We're much better to enjoy the messianic era where the Jewish people do have a state, and communities of Jews living all over the world in equal terms and peaceful existence, and not to produce mystical writing — rather than the opposite."

SHABBAT SHALOM שבת שלום

FRIDAY, MAY 23 (Iyar 18), Lag ba'Omer (Scholars' Festival); Shabbat begins in London at 8.43; Bournemouth 8.46; Leeds 8.54; Manchester 9.01; Tyneside 9.05; Glasgow 9.22.

Jeremiah 16:19 to 17:14. Ethics 4.

SHABBAT ends in London at 9.59; Bournemouth 10.08; Leeds 10.22; Manchester 10.27; Tyneside 10.32; Glasgow 10.58.

SATURDAY, MAY 24 (Iyar 19). Portion of the Law (Torah): Bechukkotai, Leviticus 26:3 to end of book. Portion of the Prophets (Haftarah):

FRIDAY, MAY 30 (Iyar 25), Shabbat begins in London at 8.52; Bournemouth 8.54; Leeds 9.03; Manchester 9.11; Tyneside 9.15; Glasgow 9.32.

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

BECHUKKOTAI בחקתי

"I will turn my face towards you and you will be struck down before your enemies" *Leviticus 26:17*

► THE Torah's powerful words warn us of the punishment the Jewish people will receive if we abandon the mitzvot. Saadia Gaon interprets the beginning of this verse to mean that God will turn His anger towards us.

In the portion of Vayelech, the Torah in similar vein warns us of straying from the path of mitzvot but although the straightforward meaning of the verse seems identical, there is a subtle change: "On that day my anger shall be released and I shall turn my face away from them..." (Deuteronomy 31:17). The ensuing consequences are the same. Terrible calamities shall befall us as a people, but why the different terms?

Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner (1906-1980) explained that these are two different stages in Jewish history. There have been times where we faced terrible persecution — the Crusades, pogroms, and Inquisition among them. Yet even though many Jews suffered terrible anguish, loss and devastation, in general there was no claim of abandonment. People did not ask where was God.

Just reading letters from that period can teach us the incredible inner faith with which Jews faced their oppressors. This was when we suffered but still saw God: "I shall turn my face towards you."

Yet during the Holocaust, which Rav Hutner survived, so many did ask the question of where God was. Many accused the Almighty of abandonment, of having turned His face "away". A hidden face, where we just could not see God perhaps, because He did not wish to be found.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, the contemporary yeshiva head, taught that we should bear Rav Hutner's observation in mind, for only three years following the destruction, we arose as a nation: a Jewish state emerged from the ashes of that consuming fire and the face of God was once again there for all to see.

RABBI CHAIM KANTEROVITZ

JEWISH WORDS

MANGAL

► HAVING a *mangal*, a barbecue, is the traditional way to celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut, Independence Day, in Israel. There is much fruitful disagreement in Israel about the significance of the day and hence the proper way to mark it. The *mangal* is a unifying tradition as one of the few Independence Day observances on which most people can agree. The word comes from the Turkish for "small oven" and must have made its way into Hebrew in the Ottoman period.

A few years ago, on Yom Ha'atzmaut, the Academy for Hebrew Language unveiled its annual batch of new words, including an authentically Hebrew word for *mangal* — *matzleh*, deriving from the word *tzli*, which means roast. Well, so far it has not taken off. People still go to a *mangal* on Yom Ha'atzmaut and I have heard of no one attending a *matzleh*; then again, I don't have any friends in the Academy for Hebrew Language.

But is *mangal* so very inauthentic? It does not rate with "Hi" and "Bye" in their shameless intrusion into Hebrew, when there was a perfectly good word to do the job, "Shalom". Rather, *mangal* reminds us of the fact that the Turks used to rule Israel and that their presence, like that of many other former rulers, has left at least a small trace.

BOOK LIST

Recent books by Rachel Elijor:

Jewish Mysticism— the Infinite Expression of Freedom, Littman Library of Civilisation, £24.95

The Mystical Origins of Hasidism, Littman Library, pb, £14.95

Dybbuks and Jewish Women in Social History, Mysticism and Folklore, Urim, \$22

