

SUMMER SERMON SERIES 2016
The Movements of Judaism and their Founders
II. Isaac Luria and the Baal Shem Tov

Shabbat shalom!

This summer I've been offering a series of sermons on the founders of different Jewish movements and denominations – to show just how diverse we really are, but also to learn from and be inspired by some of Judaism's greatest teachings.

Last week we covered the Karaites and their centuries-long opposition to rabbinic Judaism. Tonight's topic presents two great teachers, Isaac Luria and Israel Baal Shem Tov.

To set the scene, we begin with one of Judaism's great catastrophes, the complete expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, and from Portugal just a few years later. Though many were ultimately to find safe haven in other countries – we call them *Sephardic* Jews, after the Hebrew word for "Spain," – many thousands of others perished.

Not surprisingly, this disaster convinced many that the long-awaited messianic era was now at hand. Surely this catastrophe was part of the birth pangs of the Messiah! And the center of this speculation became Safed, a village in northern Palestine, in the Galilee, where a tradition taught the Messiah would arrive.

And so he did, or some say.

Safed was already a center of Jewish mysticism, and many famous mystics lived there. One day, in the early 1530's, one of these was alone in the synagogue when Elijah the prophet came and told him God would be sending him a son, who must be called Yitzchak. He would deliver Israel from the forces of evil, and numerous souls would be saved; he would reveal the hidden mysteries, and be famous throughout the world.

And so it happened. By 8 Isaac was expert in all of rabbinic literature. By 15 he was married, and supported by a rich uncle. At 22 he immersed himself in Zohar, the greatest work of Jewish mysticism, and set himself up in a cottage by himself for 7 years of study. He saw his family only on Shabbat, but never uttered a word – except when absolutely necessary, then only in Hebrew, which his wife didn't understand. His only visitor to his hut was the prophet Elijah, who initiated Isaac into the sublime doctrines of mysticism.

Back in Safed Isaac Luria founded a school, and his mystical doctrines attracted disciples from far and wide; he taught dressed in pure white.

Unfortunately, didn't write anything, except an occasional poem. Fortunately, his students took notes, which have been published in many volumes under the overall title "Etz Chaim," the Tree of Life. Isaac Luria died in an epidemic at age 38, and his grave is to this day a place of pilgrimage for followers of Lurianic Kabbalah.

Though Jewish mysticism goes back to the very origins of Judaism – in the mysteries of our ancestors' encounters with God, such as Moses's theophanies at the burning bush or on Mt. Sinai, or the visions of Ezekiel and Daniel and many other prophets – Lurianic Kabbalah became the quintessential and most famous expression of Jewish mysticism. His teachings resonate with many of us today, including with me – for example that God, whose name means "infinity," [*Ein Sof*] is the totality of the universe; pure energy, and not involved in the day-to-day management of human affairs – for that is left to us. His idea of evil might seem a bit strange – that during the act of creation the vessels of God's energy were so powerful that they shattered, scattering shards of evil in the universe – but the human task of gathering up the shards and fixing the universe – *tikkun olam* – has become the standard term used throughout Judaism as our obligation to do acts of social justice and righteous living. Lurianic Kabbalah requires every human being to "liberate" the sparks of light from the broken husks that had shattered – and only when we humans have done this will Ein Sof – God – become whole again, ushering in the world of perfect peace. It was the Lurianic Kabbalists who taught us, in other words, that the long-awaited Messiah is really...US!

One teaching I find particularly appealing is the concept of "oversoul." Each human soul is made up of fragments of every other human soul; reincarnation – which is a long-standing Jewish belief – doesn't just mean that one's soul enters a new body, but that all of these fragments are constantly being mixed up – in other words, Luria teaches that all humans are of equal value. Again, as with his doctrine of *Tikkun Olam*, when all humans learn to unite in peace, our souls will also unite in a re-creation of Adam, the primordial perfect human being. We don't need to take such doctrines literally in order to find in them great meaning, wisdom and inspiration.

Kabbalah can get very esoteric, but I came across a fabulous one-sentence summary: "Learning Kabbalah will not help one understand Godliness; rather, learning Kabbalah will insert Godliness into one's understanding."

Kabbalah became *the* standard expression of Judaism. One of Luria's students was Joseph Caro, who compiled the standard code of Jewish law followed by Orthodox Jews

throughout the world today. The Kabbalists vision was that immersing oneself in the mitzvot would lead one away from the concerns of the material world and closer to God.

But catastrophe was not yet done with Judaism. One trauma was almost of Holocaust proportions. In 1648 and 1649 the great Cossack warrior, Bogdan Khmelnytsky – he's one of Ukraine's great national heroes – rampaged across a significant part of Eastern Europe; his peasant uprising led to the utter ruination of hundreds of small Jewish villages, and the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Jews. The political, economic, social and religious results were devastating.

And then a Jewish mystic in Smyrna named Shabbatai Zevi became convinced that he was the messiah. As refugees from the Khmelnytsky massacres trickled into the Ottoman realms, Zevi's followers declared ecstatically that he would save Jewry and establish a new Jewish kingdom in Jerusalem. By 1666 the movement had spread all across Europe. With riotous parades and demonstrations, thousands gave up everything they had to make the trip to Jerusalem. It was an amazing movement – Zevi even convinced some very prominent rabbis that the Messiah had finally arrived, and he was the one – until he converted to Islam to avoid having his head cut off by the Sultan. In an instant the world was turned completely upside down. The sense of religious trauma and devastation was probably equal to the physical trauma of Khmelnytsky.

The Jews of Eastern Europe, impoverished and without hope, concluded that God had punished them for their sins. How else could they explain what had happened? More important, how should they respond?

They responded by retreating into themselves. The Jews of Eastern Europe wanted to have nothing to do with the surrounding world. They just wanted to be left alone to study their texts and practice their Judaism. The Judaism they created became dry, arid, and joyless. Meaning and spirituality were lost in the meticulous, ultra-rigid observance of commandments – layers upon layers of all-consuming commandments from the moment the Jews' eyes opened until the last candle was extinguished at night. The Jews kept their Judaism, but Judaism itself lost its soul.

And then came the Besht. His given name was Israel ben Eliezer. Born in 1735 in Galicia, Israel hated the arid scholasticism that Judaism had become. Mountains of law hanging by a thread, he called it. He preferred to encounter God directly, not through commentaries on commentaries. And encounter God he did, through ecstatic song and dance, intoxicated with God's presence wherever he was – in the forests and fields even more than in the house of study.

Israel absorbed the teachings of Lurianic Kabbalah and taught that we can transcend the evil world by making every moment and every act a religious one – with joy, not with theology or dry laws.

Israel became known for his piety as the Master of the Good Name. In Hebrew, that would be rendered as “Baal Shem Tov.”

The Baal Shem Tov – the “Besht,” for short – taught that everything is created out of God’s essence; in reality, there are no barriers between man and God; And so when he came to the verse in Deuteronomy that reads, “Know this day, and lay it to thy heart, that the Lord is God in heaven above and in the earth beneath; there is none else,” he read this as “there is nothing else.” Literally. There is only God, and every encounter in our lives becomes part of a spiritual experience. The Besht and his disciples took another verse, this time in Proverbs, which reads, “In all thy ways shalt thou know God” and taught that this implies that we worship God with all of our natural impulses – including physical acts `such as eating, drinking and sexual relations.

It’s a wonderful concept. Everything we do, if seen through a religious lens, brings us closer to God.

The Besht led a simple life; he tried to shut out the world of madness and focus on the joy of living – again, finding God in every moment. His followers were called “The Pious Ones,” or in Hebrew, “Hassidim.”

We moderns often sneer at Hasidism. We focus on the coats and beards and fur hats and side curls, and for most of us the lifestyle of the Hasid is too foreign for us to consider. I submit that their spiritual insights, as with Lurianic Kabbalah, can retain great meaning in this modern world, and for us personally. For just think: If each person in today’s world would live as if we are one with God, and if each act we do carries for us spiritual significance, the evil in the world that is still with us would disappear. Then our ancient dreams of a messianic kingdom would have truly arrived.