

The Movements of Judaism and their Founders  
V: RABBI ZALMAN SCHACHTER-SHALOMI AND JEWISH RENEWAL

August 12, 2016

Shabbat shalom!

I don't think I've ever offered a sermon so early in a service before – between the “Bar'chu” and the “Sh'ma” – but my thinking on this will become clear in just a bit.

I've been devoting this year's Summer Sermon Series to the various movements and expressions of Judaism and the leaders – usually rabbis – who led Judaism in new directions. Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and Reconstructionist Judaism have all made their contribution to Jewish life, and I believe strongly that it is the very diversity of Judaism – and the creative tension among these different streams – that is our great strength, ensuring our survival and vitality for each new generation.

And yet one could paint a very different picture. Take our community – Temple Beth Or. We have over 160 members – member units. Yet we consider a good Shabbat turnout to be around 20% of that. Many urban Jewish congregations draw even smaller numbers of their members, and we're not even counting that somewhere around half of American Jews aren't affiliated with anything at all. Clearly, American Jewish congregations are only attracting a small minority of American Jews.

Or take the Birthright Israel program, which enables young Jews to visit Israel – for free! Hundreds of thousands of young American Jews have taken advantage of this incredible program, and when they come back – idealistic, loving Israel, proud to be Jewish – they don't join congregations. Brick-and-mortar, dues, denominations, committees and building funds just don't meet their needs.

Just last week one of our members – a member who rarely attends – told me that he or she just doesn't find services to be very inspiring. “Why,” he or she wondered, “do people attend? What is it that attracts people to come to services?”

Now we can learn much from the rational approach of Reform, and Reform Judaism's emphasis on Social Justice; or the Reconstructionist Movement's emphasis on Jewish culture – Judaism as a civilization, they call it – or traditional Judaism's emphasis on the role of ritual. But do these approaches really lift the spirit, touch the soul and bring us closer to God?

Enter Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, until his death a couple of years ago one of the most innovative, influential and creative Jewish spiritual leaders of the last 50 years. I cannot think of anyone who has transformed Judaism more than Reb Zalman has.

His origins were unremarkable. Zalman was born in Poland, and raised in a Hasidic household, studying in a Hasidic yeshiva. But his parents also provided him with a good secular education, which was almost unheard of in the world of Hasidic Judaism. Fleeing the Nazis, he wound up in New York, and was ordained as an Orthodox rabbi in 1947 – and immediately hired by the leading Lubavitch Hasidic Rebbe – Schneerson – to do outreach to young Jews on college campuses. Along the way he picked up an MA in religious studies at Boston University, and a doctorate at the Reform seminary that ordained me, the Hebrew Union College in New York.

And then Reb Zalman went off the deep end.

He became a student of Timothy Leary, the guru of LSD, and immersed himself in transcendental meditation, Jewish and Christian mysticism, the hippie movement and eastern religious philosophies. He soon became a guru in his own right, the leading figure of the Havurah Movement of the '60's and '70's – small counter-cultural gatherings of Jews outside the traditional framework of congregations and denominations. He was even a spiritual consultant to the Dalai Lama.

Do you remember the *Jewish Catalogue* of that era? Hundreds of thousands of copies were sold, sort of a hippie-inspired, spiritual and very non-institutional guide to doing Judaism. That was largely his baby, and he was its guiding light.

More recently Zalman Schachter-Shalomi created a movement he called “Jewish Renewal,” to transform worship and spiritual practices. While the traditional Jewish movements in America are demonstrably in decline, Jewish renewal is attracting legions of young people. If you want to know where the young people are going while our congregations age, take a look at Jewish Renewal.

It was Reb Zalman who formulated the central critique of Jewish life today: “Judaism today is over verbalized and under experienced.” He discovered that Eastern philosophies were better at encouraging people – young people, especially – to experience life and not just think about it. Indeed it was their lack of spiritual satisfaction that was pushing many young people away from Judaism. To meet their yearning for spiritually meaningful worship, Reb Zalman offered services that were ecstatic and contemplative – filled with meditations, chants, periods of silence and often ecstatic

dance and all the body movements of traditional Judaism – but in a modern, egalitarian style. A worship service, he felt, was precisely the place *not* to be intellectual.

Jewish Renewal is the fastest-growing stream of Judaism on the scene today. It is a phenomenon – equivalent to the evangelical churches that are thriving in the Christian world while mainstream churches are often in sharp decline. Addressing young Jews who found their religious education to be incredibly uninspiring – just about everyone, if truth be told – Jewish Renewal provides a religious path that Jews could embrace with their whole hearts. It is a deeply personal quest, in the context of community, for those seeking to escape the stultified Judaism of their youth; Renewal is for seekers of an authentic Judaism to fill the spiritual emptiness and joylessness many of them felt.

One Renewal-style congregation is BJ – B’nai Jeshurun on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. A traditional Conservative congregation with an aging, declining membership and minimal participation, it transformed itself in the mid-1980’s, offering intensely musical, joyful, and spiritual services in the Renewal model. Even English passages were chanted in the traditional modes of chant; their keyboard would sometimes have the place rocking, and at L’cha Dodi the entire congregation would rise and dance through the aisles, singing ecstatically. The result? BJ now exceeds 2,000 members, mostly young, and long lines form at the door before every service. Clearly, they are doing something right, and their influence radiates through all the traditional movements of American Judaism.

Meanwhile, Reb Zalman began ordaining disciples – more than 80 of them so far. Rabbinic training is not through a seminary, but diversified around the country as disciples teach disciples, and ordain them as next-generation rabbis.

The mainstream movements sometimes see these rabbis as unqualified or even fraudulent. I remember one of these Renewal rabbis who applied for membership to my rabbinic body, the Central Conference of American Rabbis – we had a national placement service, after all – and I was present during the interview. We asked one of our standard questions: which Jewish philosopher or theologian over the last 200 years had most influenced the candidate’s own thinking as a rabbi? And he couldn’t think of a single one! The Renewal rabbi was almost completely ignorant of Jewish history. Yet he was fairly conversant with Jewish practices; could *davven* expertly through a Jewish service, and clearly had some spiritual depth. Needless to say he was turned down.

Ironically, Jewish Renewal, the anti-organizational phenomenon, has itself organized – the Alliance for Jewish Renewal, called ALEPH, as an independent transdenominational body with its own publications, website and fund-raising apparatus.

Though I don't think Temple Beth Or will ever become a Renewal congregation – dancing in the aisles just isn't our thing – I would like us to turn now to the Sh'ma and try something a bit different, as first taught by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, to see what it feels like. As we go through this together, let's see if we can experience the Sh'ma in a new way. We turn back to pages 34-35, and I'll ask you, please, to rise...

We are going to recite the Sh'ma four times – just the Sh'ma, not the second line “Baruch shem k'vod” – each time with a different intention. This first time, we will recite Sh'ma as if hearing it directly and personally through the lips of Moses, speaking to the community in a full voice...

Moses spoke to all the people. But now we will recite Sh'ma, slowly, meditatively and very personally, as if God were speaking directly to each of us. Instead of the word “Yisrael,” this time, we will each insert our own personal name, and feel the power of our very personal relationship with God...

This third time, think of a person with whom you've had a fractured relationship. Recite the Sh'ma in order to lay a foundation for healing and wholeness. Meditate on what wholeness means in our relationships...

Finally – and this time we'll continue with the second line, Baruch shem k'vod – meditate on reciting the Sh'ma as if it were your very last time, as the summation of your life, as if preparing yourself for your final transition into the world where clearly all is one...

And now imagine what a service would be like filled with such *kavvanah*, such intentionality, if we were to search each of our prayers for their deepest personal meanings.