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## FROM UMBANDA TO THE KABBALAH: A PERSONAL ODYSSEY

Or A Review Essay of

Kabbalah: The Way of the Jewish Mystic by Perle Epstein.  
With a Forward by Edward Hoffman. (Boston: Shambhala),  
1988, 171 pages, illustrations, reference, bibliography,  
glossary. \$9.95 paper.

by

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In 1982, when I made my first scholarly foray into the world of Brazilian spiritual beliefs and practices, I was presented with what at the time seemed to be an embarrassing situation. I was living in the city of Fortaleza where I was teaching anthropology as a visiting professor at the Federal University of the State of Ceará. On the afternoon in question I had gone to the small office of the *União Espírita Cearense de Umbanda* to meet and interview its then president, Sr. Manoel Rogrigues de Oliveira.

I should point out that in 1982, I was a novice to neither anthropological research nor to conducting fieldwork in Brazil. I had almost a quarter of a century of experience as a professional anthropologist, with more than two decades of it devoted to study in Brazil. When I introduced myself to Sr. Manoel that afternoon, however, I found myself almost unable to proceed. The reason was that before I could say anything to him, he asked me a question that I was not sure how to answer. My reply then opened an exchange that caused my embarrassment. Manoel, I should note, was not a sophisticated man; he was poor and without formal education, very representative, I later learned, of the heads of Umbanda centers in Ceara. I am sure that the last thing he wished to do was to upset or embarrass the North American professor he believed was honoring him with a visit.

I greeted him and handed him my card as was customary

practice. Before I could explain the reason for my visit, however, in fact before I had time to say anything, Manoel, with excitement in his voice and a flash of surprise in his eyes, asked me what my religion was. The question, of course, was a fair one. I had come to discuss religion with him. Why shouldn't he ask me my religion. But before we had begun to talk? Before even acknowledging my greeting?

This was not the first time I had been asked my religion in the course of conducting fieldwork. In the past, however, in Brazil and in the West Indies, it had been after I had observed, and my informants and I had discussed, some ceremony or practice of theirs. On those occasions I had a sense of their beliefs and how they would react to my telling them that I was Jewish. What threw me this time was that Manoel had asked before I had any sense of where he stood on the issue of religious pluralism.

I was sure that it was obvious to him that I, as a foreigner, was not an Umbandista. He might have thought that I was a Roman Catholic, or a Protestant, as many Brazilians think all North Americans are, but why should he ask my religion before engaging in any conversation? Since I was just beginning to study Umbanda and other forms of Spiritism,

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I had no idea as to what they thought of Judaism and Jews. I did remember hearing from friends doing fieldwork about Jews being accused by residents of small towns in the Brazilian interior of killing Christ. But certainly, I thought, this would not be how Dr. Manoel would react to my telling him of my Judaism.

It was not that I was ashamed of my own religious beliefs and identity. I just did not want them to get in the way of my research project. So instead of responding to Manoel's question straight out, I mumbled something unrelated and tried to change the subject by making believe that I had not heard him. But Manoel repeated the question with an air of insistence.

Not knowing what else to do, I bit the proverbial bullet and told the *Babalourixá* that I was Jewish. I knew it, he replied with glee, next asking me my name.

I should note for the reader that at the time I wore a beard that I have since shaved when, as I aged, its reddish-brown color turned a splotchy gray. In 1982, however, my face was covered by a reddish-brown beard. This, it turned out, was what had precipitated Manoel's excitement and his brusque question.

The President of the União Espírita Cearense de Umbanda also was the head of his own *terreiro*, or Umbanda cult center. As I blurted out my answer to his question, he took out from a pile of things on his desk a poster with the name of his center: *The Centro Espírita de Umbanda Rei Solomão*. And on it was a picture that claimed to be King Solomon who, it turned out, was the patron and spiritual leader of his center. The figure on the poster was tall and thin, as I was, and also had a reddish-brown beard that I must admit looked very much like my own. The fact was that I bore a striking resemblance to the figure on the poster.

Manoel's face betrayed a slight disappointment when I told him that my name was Sidney; but when I told him that my father's name was Solomon, he treated me with deference and respect that went far beyond what might customarily be accorded by a poor Brazilian to a visiting foreigner scholar. I began to feel as if I were being treated almost as a living representative of the line that went back to the patron and spiritual head of his *terreiro*.

As we spoke, I gradually turned the conversation to King Solomon. I explained that I knew that Umbanda was a mixture, or syncretism, of Roman Catholicism, the West African religious beliefs and practices brought to Brazil by the slaves, reinterpreted Amerindian beliefs, Euro-American Spiritism, and beliefs taken from Buddhism, Hinduism and other sources. But how, I asked, did Judaism enter into the composite? It was then that Manoel really embarrassed me. Almost with disbelief he said, "of course you know about the Kabbalah?" "Well," he went on assuming that I

knew all about the Kabbalah, "it is also basic to our beliefs".

I had been raised as a Jew in New York City. Although my parents were not especially religious, I had learned about "my" religious tradition from uncles and cousins who were both observant and learned. I had heard about the Kabbalah from them, but never had it been discussed, and certainly not explained to me, nor to anyone else in my presence. Until that moment, I must admit, it had not interested me. My intellectual and scholarly pursuits had taken me in other directions. Jewish mysticism, like other aspects of Jewish tradition, had not been a priority item for me. But here I was in the office of Babalourixa Manoel Rodrigues de Oliveira in the city of Fortaleza being told that of course his distinguished visitor, because he was a Jewish professor, knew about the Kabbalah--and by implication how it related to Umbanda.

I bluffed the rest of the interview with Manoel. I am sure, however, that he was not aware of my ignorance and the embarrassment it was causing me. He later invited me to his *terreiro*, showed me--and my beard--off to his followers and to other cult leaders who had come to meet me, and was very helpful to me during the rest of my stay in Fortaleza.

When our meeting ended, I went straight to the nearest bookstore to see if I could find anything that would enlighten me on the Kabbalah. As expected, I found nothing in Fortaleza. I then asked other Umbanda cult leaders, in Fortaleza and other cities I visited later, about the relationship between Umbanda and the Kabbalah. They all responded with vagaries and/or cryptic statements. Bookstores and libraries in other Brazilian cities also provided me with very little help.

When I returned to Milwaukee at the beginning of 1983, I went to the university library where I found an abundance of pages that, unfortunately, added little to my understanding of the Kabbalah, or of its possible relationship to Umbanda (1). When I asked friends, and people they suggested who supposedly were knowledgeable on the subject, I was given vague statements about secret knowledge that only could be learned after years of study under the direction of a master. To get started, I was told, required finding a teacher and first convincing him of my religious fervor and devotion, something that in itself took considerable time and energy. Only after being accepted as a disciple, I was informed, could I hope to start on the path to understanding Kabbalah.

I felt as if I had entered the world of a sacred society carefully guarding its rituals from the scrutiny of outside observers. I had never had any trouble finding out about esoteric beliefs in Brazil, the West Indies, and elsewhere;

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## From The Editor

This issue marks a major change in the AASC as we transition from publishing a *Newsletter* to a *Quarterly*. Over the years the *Newsletter* has increasingly looked less like a newsletter and more like a journal. At the March annual meetings the AASC Board of Directors voted to change the name of this publication to the *AASC Quarterly* to better reflect the journal format which the old newsletter had taken on. Consistent with a journal format, the Board also voted to approve an editorial advisory board to referee articles submitted for publication. I am confident that our members will be pleased by the new *Quarterly* as its quality improves with these changes.

This issue features a review essay by Dr. Greenfield on the syncretic traditions of Brazilian spiritism. Dr. Greenfield's essay serves as an introduction to the next issue, a special double issue, which will feature articles on trance and possession states in Afro-Brazilian and Haitian spiritism.

Finally, I would like to thank Melinda Walker for her kind assistance in designing, laying-out, and typesetting this first issue of the *Quarterly*.

## AASC News

In what must be a marathon the AASC Board of Directors held three separate business meetings at the annual conference in March. A wide range of issues were discussed and voted upon. The board approved a suggestion to change the name of this publication from *AASC Newsletter* to *AASC Quarterly* and approved an editorial board. A decision was made to publish a set of conference proceedings or readings on the anthropology of consciousness. Dr. Jürgen Kremer volunteered to look into and organize the publication of such a book.

Incoming president Geri-Ann Galanti, proposed several goals to be attained in the next two years. Chief among these are a membership drive and affiliation with the American Anthropological Association (AAA). Board members agreed to help compile lists of potential members for special invitations to join or contribute in other ways to the AASC. After considerable debate, the board also approved an executive steering committee to examine, develop, and put into operation (if appropriate) a plan for affiliation with the AAA. Appointed to the committee were Geri-Ann Galanti, Jeff MacDonald, and Joseph K. Long.

The location of future annual meetings was discussed as well. Next year's meeting will again be at the Presbyterian Conference Center in Pacific Palisades, California between the dates of Feb. 28 and March 2, 1990. Deadline for submissions of abstracts and presentation proposals is *AASC Quarterly*

**October 6, 1989.** The board decided to hold the 1991 meeting in northern California if a suitable location can be found. The directors also appointed Geri-Ann Galanti as chairperson and James G. Matlock as conference coordinator for next year's AASC conference. Preliminary details of the conference and a call for papers will appear in the next issue of the *Quarterly*.

A new logo for the AASC was discussed briefly. It was duly noted that logos for anthropologists can be "tricky" insofar as they are borrowed or adopted from indigenous peoples, who, in effect, "hold the copyright". Since uses can prove to be misleading or even insulting, it is well for us as anthropologists who owe so much to such peoples, to consider this carefully. With this in mind, semiologist Carol Patterson will assist in logo design.

Finally, the board of directors elected a new board and officers. Incoming President Geri-Ann Galanti (California State University) was re-elected to a second term to better carry out the AASC's goals for the next two years. The new secretary is Lisa Mertz (Foundation for Shamanic Studies) and the new treasurer is James G. Matlock (Tulane University). The new board of directors is as follows: Dan Hawkmoon Alford (California Institute of Integral Studies), Matthew Bronson (California Institute of Integral Studies), Leslie Conton (Fairhaven College, Western Washington University), Geri-Ann Galanti (California State University), Sidney Greenfield (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee), Stephan Gunn (John F. Kennedy University), Ruth-Inge Heinze (University of California, Berkeley), Jack A. Kapchan (University of Miami), Jürgen Kremer (The Regulus Foundation), Jeffery L. MacDonald (New School for Social Research), James G. Matlock (Tulane University), Lisa Mertz (Foundation for Shamanic Studies), Carol Patterson (Urraca Productions), and Cynthia Siegel (John F. Kennedy University).

## Books Received For Review

Readers interested in reviewing the following books should contact book review editor, **Michael Winkelman** at *AASC Quarterly*, P.O. Box 4032, Irvine, CA 92716-4032.

*Lake Monster Traditions: A Cross-Cultural Analysis*, by Michel Meurger with Claude Gagnon, (London: Fortean Tomes), 320 pages, 1988.

*Shaman's Path: Healing, Personal Growth and Empowerment*, compiled and edited by Gary Doore, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc.), 236 pages, 1988.

## 1989 AASC Conference Report

by **Jeffery L. MacDonald**,  
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This year's conference brought together an exciting number of papers on the anthropology of consciousness. The four day conference was divided into sessions on "The Power of Language", "Healing Methods", "Kundalini", "Theory and Consciousness", "Paranormal Events", "Field Investigations", "Shamanic Awareness", and "Trance and Shamanism". Papers covered methodological, current research, and theoretical issues. As usual there were evening and afternoon experiential sessions to complement the day's academic presentations. The following report discusses the papers which this reviewer was lucky enough to attend. My apologies to those presenters I have overlooked.

There were three sessions on Thursday, the first day of the conference. In the opening session on "The Power of Language," Dan Hawkmoon Alford's paper, "Chin Music: A Mystereality Word World Chatauqua," gave an overview of his ten years of research and teaching on the nature and power of language. Eschewing traditional linguistic theories Alford described telepathy as the functioning of the group mind and the basis for language. He argued that words hypnotize in some fashion to snare another's consciousness into our own stream of meaning from the other's own internal tapes. Alford explained how he involves students in a ritual utilizing sensory overload to jar them out of their linguistic trances and induce a form of linguistic breakdown.

In the next paper, Matthew Bronson, described his use of "Healing Metaphors" in working with people with serious illnesses. He noted the power of words in creating and eradicating illness and the importance of visualization of health for those with severe diseases. He noted, for instance, how a cancer diagnosis is equal to a death sentence for most and how attitudes, personality, and healing are closely connected.

In the second session on "Healing Methods", Ruth-Inge Heinze, in her paper, "The Anatomy of Healing," compared Indian (Ayurvedic), Chinese (five-elements, yin and yang, acupuncture, chi gong), and Japanese (reiki) systems of healing and reported on her research which aims at introducing preventive health training such as self-regulated stress reduction in primary schools as well as the corporate world. Her second project aims at introducing alternate modes of healing into hospitals (for the terminally ill: cancer, AIDS) and convalescent homes.

Debra Carol, an art therapist, did a two part presentation

on "Tonal Dance and Healing". In the first part she discussed the tonal, nagual, tonal dance and healing. She briefly touched on the significance in experiential shamanism of the distinction between that which can be experienced (tonal in Uto-Aztec) and that which is ineffable (the nagual). This led to a short discussion of how that distinction is applied shamanically in sacred dance as a healing modality. In the second part of the presentation she led the group in a short introductory experience of tonal dance, in the form of "dancing" with a power animal.

The next two speakers were a husband/wife team of shamanic healers who described their research in two separate papers. Lena Stevens spoke first on "The Chakras as Gateways to Healing". In "Healing Through the Instinctive Center", Jose Stevens discussed how the instinctive center can be opened to promote healing in what most would consider unusual ways. He suggested for instance that urination and defecation as well as terror can open this center. People are attracted to terror movies, amusement rides, etc. because the induced terror cleans people out by opening their instinctive centers.

In "Shamanism and Performance Art" Jeanette DeBouzek discussed the 1970's trend in modernist theater and art of thinking of the actor/artist as "shaman" in a post-industrial world as well as the way in which performance artists adopted and reworked the healing rites of indigenous cultures. DeBouzek explored the motivations behind and implications of such "intercultural" borrowings. She questioned what political, ethical, and aesthetic issues are being played out when healing "becomes" performance (art) and performance (art) becomes or — is believed to be — an efficacious form of healing. Utilizing slides and videotapes she examined shamanism in the performances of such performance artists as Joseph Beuys and Rachel Rosenthal.

Two papers were given in the "Kundalini" session. The first by Arlene Mazak discussed "Awakening the Divine Energy: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Kundalini". The second paper, "Modern Perspectives - Experiences of Kundalini Awakening," was given by Bonnie Greenwell.

On Friday there were four sessions. The morning session on "Theory and Consciousness" featured two speakers: Helmut Wautisher whose paper was "An Inquiry to Include Trance into Epistemology" and Jeff MacDonald who spoke on "Inventing Traditions for the 'New Age'". MacDonald explored different aspects of the "New Age" which purport to be rediscoveries of ancient traditions of thought and ritual. He argued that such traditions are often relatively modern, eclectic inventions similar to those invented for various ethnic groups in 19th century Europe.

He traced one such invention, the earth energies tradition (re)discovered in the British Isles and showed its links to dowsing, folklore, numerology, and Chinese geomancy. He also linked the earth energies tradition to environmentalism and the concept of Gaia to underscore the political aspects of New Age traditions.

In the second session on Saturday, "Paranormal Events" there were four speakers. In the first paper, "Firewalking, Spoonbending and Psychic Healing", Stuart Rawlings, presented three cases of paranormal experiences. The first was psychic healing in 1981, when his wife's back and neck pains were substantially reduced in Oxford, England by a laying on of hands by Christian faith healer Fred Smith. The second was firewalking in 1985 when Rawlings himself walked on wood coals without getting burned, but he attributed this to a normal foot propensity to withstand direct contact with coals rather than to psychic powers. The third was spoonbending in 1986, when a group of 100 people in San Francisco claimed to have spoonbending powers, but in fact were just bending spoons normally with two hands.

Rawlings' anecdotal account provided the next speaker, Jack Kapchan, with a good introduction to his paper, "Methodology in Investigation of Paranormal Phenomena". Dr. Kapchan presented an historical perspective on the emergence of parapsychology from 19th century spiritualism and mediumship, through the development of scientific methods at Duke University to the present day. Dr. Kapchan focused on the New Age impact, which although it has raised consciousness about consciousness, has also produced an era of 'sensationalism, distortion, and pseudo-scientific notoriety'. He proposed an "Occam's razor" set of guidelines for determining what is paranormal, and discussed methodology for investigation of psychic healing, poltergeists, apparitions, stigmata, reincarnation, and psi.

The next speaker, James G. Matlock took up the theme of reincarnation in his paper, "Cultural Variations on the Spontaneous Past Life Memory Case". Matlock argued that spontaneous past life memory cases, which have been reported by anthropologists and parapsychologists from societies around the world, show great similarities which suggest they describe a similar experience. While some case features vary with beliefs or with social processes (e.g. descent rules), others however are found universally and there are strong beliefs (e.g., rebirth as subhuman animals or karma) that receive little support from the case material. On the whole, the comparison of beliefs to experiences in this instance suggests the occurrence of a natural phenomenon, whose exact expression in any given society will be at least partly a function of the the society's beliefs about what is possible and what is not.

In the last paper, Joseph K. Long explored the strategies, AASC Quarterly

personalities, styles, and humor in dealing with 'psychic anthropology' in his paper "Baptism by Fire". Dr. Long examined the styles of anthropologists interested in psi over the past 100 years. He included the styles of Lang, Swanton, Linton, Hallowell, Honigmann, Eisenbud, and more recent ones, particularly in light of Eisenbud's and Tart's studies of psi resistance (and artifact induction, with humor). Long concluded that humor is the most dominant style among those (including Castaneda) whose work has had substantial impact, whereas those who take themselves and the universe seriously have had little or no impact. "Coyote may be the best conveyer in consciousness studies, (but even those of us researching psi must remember the spectral realities of starvation, global pollution, and war)."

The last two sessions on Friday were experiential workshops. The first in the afternoon was led by Katherine Wersen who returned this year with her Peruvian Whistling Pots. The second was an evening workshop with psychic counselor/healer Antonio Costa de Silva and his assistants. Costa de Silva began with a discussion of Brazilian spiritism and then led the group into drumming and chanting followed by trance dance.

Saturday's two sessions were devoted to "Field Investigations" and "Shamanic Awareness". Carol Patterson spoke first in the morning presenting a symbolic analysis of "Water Jar Boy, A Pueblo Myth". She explored the myth from a psychological and symbolic aspect and illustrated her discussion with slides of a petroglyph of the myth found near the Pueblo of Cochiti. She discussed the levels of meaning represented in the myth not only from a Jungian and Western point of view but more closely from a Keresan Indian world view.

The next paper, "Talking to Spirits: Shamanic Healing Among the Pomo" was given by Lisa Mertz who described her research with the spiritual leaders of the Pomo Indians of California. These leaders are actively maintaining and preserving such cultural traditions and shamanic practices as talking to spirits in order to receive information on performing healing and on conducting ceremonies. Ms. Mertz noted that current spiritual leaders are using shamanically received information on how to renew their culture to institute certain changes in the way ceremonies are conducted in order to keep contact with spirits alive among the people.

The next speaker, Kamran Ahmad, discussed the "Role of Sufism and Sufi Shrines in Pakistan Today". He began with a brief historical and descriptive sketch of Sufism, differentiating it from popular Western views. Ahmad described the persecution and dangers which many Sufis face from forms of Islam which consider Sufism heretical and how such persecution affects Sufi shrines in Pakistan.

### Conference Report (Continued from page 5)

In "Moonstar Coven: An Ethnography of the Magical Training of Radical Witches," sociologists Tanice Foltz and Wendy Lozano discussed the magical training of "radical feminist separatist witches" whose spiritual belief system is built around a goddess-oriented religion. Following a year of participant-observation in the coven, the speakers described some of the essential elements of the group's belief system, the symbolic artifacts used, and the main parts of the rituals. They also noted the significant role the group and training plays in the member's everyday lives.

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"...psychics and shamans recognize that they are in an ASC, control entering into and out of that state and do it in appropriate contexts: psychotics do not."

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The lead paper in the "Shamanic Awareness" session, "Psychics and Psychotics: Psychotics in Control?" by Geri-Ann Galanti examined the relationship between psi and psychosis and concluded that psychics and shamans enter into an ASC characterized by a "loss of ego boundaries", a state shared by some psychotics. The critical differences, however, are that psychics and shamans *recognize* that they are in an ASC, *control* entering into and out of that state and do it in appropriate *contexts*; psychotics do not.

The second paper, "Psychic Awakening or Psychotic Break-down?" by Chantel Barr, continued the discussion of the relationship of psychics and psychotics while Etzel Cardena in the third paper described "The Varieties of Possession Experience" which he has discovered in his field research in Haiti. Dr. Cardena argued that contrary to most Western approaches to possession which identify possession as a discrete event, possession experiences can refer to at least three identifiable phenomenal clusters: transitional, intra-individual, and transcendent events. He suggested that possession is not an extreme form of human multiplicity, but that transcendent possession involves a re-ownership of the usually divided and fractured identity that characterizes human beings.

In "The Shaman's Body and the Shaman's Realities", Jürgen Kremer discussed the relation between shaman's bodily shapes and the realities they create and enter. He suggested that a number of known trance postures which he illustrated with slides, are closely related to ancient shamanic traditions. Dr. Kremer presented preliminary evidence from research in progress that trance postures can effect an altered state in the majority of research participants.

The next paper continued the theme of trance states. In "Levels of Possession Awareness in Afro-Brazilian Religions," Alejandro Frigerio noted that practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions in Argentina distinguish three levels of possession, most of which do not involve loss of awareness. He examined the consequences that such conceptualization has for establishing what can be considered "true" possession, from both an etic and an emic perspective.

The theme of the emic view of spirit possession was continued by Yves Martin who spoke on "Viewing Possession within a Continuum of States of Consciousness". He presented the emic view of spirit possession as he has reconstructed it following five years of research with Yoruba-derived religions among Afro-Cubans and Afro-Brazilians living in Los Angeles. He noted that this view presents possession as a complex phenomenon involving various degrees of participation by specific spirits in the psychological and physiological functioning of a human spirit.

In the final paper on Saturday, Howard Mickel discussed "Visions of the Other World in Near-Death Experiences". Dr. Mickel noted that near-death experiences occur in various historical contexts and cross-culturally. He suggested that the content of near-death experiences appears to be shaped by the experient's background and is not just an interpretation of the content. He concluded that more historical and cross-cultural research must be done to determine the consistency of the experience transculturally.

Saturday evening's experiential session was conducted by Katherine Wersen who again performed a Tibetan bells concert. Unlike last year's session in which she led the audience in a guided meditation, this year Ms. Wersen demonstrated the use of sound for healing purposes.

Sunday's session was devoted to "Trance and Shamanism". The first speaker, Michael Winkelman spoke on "Trance and Shamanism in Cross-Cultural Perspective". He asked the audience to list the ten most important terms which describe different aspects of consciousness. The next speaker, Peggy Ann Wright, spoke on "The Shamanic State of Consciousness". Marlene Dobkin De Rios discussed the "Trance Practices in the Peruvian Amazon" while Harry Senn discussed "Jung as a Shamanic Practitioner". The final paper was given by Gary Bravo and Charles Grob who described the current "Therapeutic Applications of Psychedelics".

The conference ended with remarks by LSD researcher Oscar Janiger and incoming AASC President Geri-Ann Galanti.

## From Umbanda to the Kabbalah (continued from p. 2)

but with what was my own tradition I could not get to first base. It was as if I were a child being held out of a private club with secret rituals, unless or until I were willing to enter into a long period of ritual initiation, and then only if I could convince one of the members to accept me as a devoted disciple. But how could I? I was unable to learn enough to even decide whether I really wanted to devote that much time and energy to doing it. It was a catch-22 situation in which I had to make a decision based on information I could obtain only after having made a commitment.

I put the matter on the shelf, asking about it whenever the opportunity presented itself, but not really pursuing it actively. Then, on returning from another fascinating summer (their winter) studying Spiritism and spiritual healing in Brazil in 1988, I read the invitation of this *Quarterly's* editor to review a number of books, one of which was Perle Epstein's *Kabbalah: The Way of The Jewish Mystic*. My informants and friends in the Brazilian Spiritist movement have been telling me for years that nothing really happens by chance; and when it does, it is only when the time is right. Well, in this case the time was right, and they were right. I thank Dr. Epstein for finally providing me with some small understanding of the Kabbalah and the Kabbalistic tradition.

I should note at the outset that Dr. Epstein's short book is not a scholarly treatise. It was not written for future Kabbalists as were most of her sources. Instead it is a description and analysis of Kabbalistic practice that emphasizes the techniques employed by Jewish mystics to achieve states of ecstasy. Unlike most writers on the subject, Epstein does not assume the reader to be not only an insider, i.e., a Jew, but a devout, practicing Jew with extensive knowledge of Judaism. Her book appears to have been written more for the student of anthropology and comparative religion than of Kabbalistic practice. In this respect it is of special interest to readers of this *Quarterly* since it lends itself to comparison with other cultural and religious traditions and practices.

Since its inception, Epstein tells us, there have been two faces of Judaism that have been in competition with each other. One is the tradition of *halakhah*, the law, with its emphasis on the community of Jews bound together by God's word and commandments as found, for example, in the Torah. Politically this tradition has been dominated by the rabbis who have written extensive commentaries on how God's commandments should be interpreted and put into practice on a day-to-day basis by communities of observant Jews. The second tradition, which may be thought

of as an opposition to *halachic* Judaism, although based on and rooted in it, is the mystical individualism of the Kabbalah. Historically, it appears, the halachic rabbis have attempted to control, if not eliminate, the expression of the mystical tradition, explaining at least in part the secrecy that has become associated with this minority branch of Judaism.

Epstein, unfortunately, does not explore the assumptions as to the nature of God and His presumed relation to His human creation that underlies Kabbalistic practice. Instead she simply states that the goal of all Kabbalists is *devekuth*, "communion" with, or "cleaving" to God, an imagery taken from the author of Deuteronomy who wrote, "*Love the Lord thy God...hearken to His voice, and...cleave unto Him: for that is thy life...*" (p.xiv). The Jewish mystic, she writes, prepares "himself for enlightenment by climbing a spiritual ladder which,...., would inevitably lead him to God" (p.xiv).

The book is divided into three parts. Part I, called "The Mystic Life", begins by presenting the imagery of the garden as a favored metaphor for Kabbalistic thought and practice. As the visitor goes through its several gates s/he is led "deeper into hallucinatory visions, snares that entrap the unwary wanderer..." (p.2).

The author then tells us a little about some of the great Kabbalists who entered the garden in order to achieve "Union with the Absolute" (p.4). We are introduced, for example, to Bahya Ben Joseph Ibn Paquda, a judge in the rabbinical court at Saragossa, Spain, during the first half of the eleventh century who criticized the rabbis for paying attention "only to the outward law and ingor[ing] its spiritual content" (p.5). Influenced by the philosophy and techniques of his contemporaries, the Moslem Sufi mystics, he synthesized their contemplative asceticism with traditional Jewish ethics in steps that would carry him and his followers through ten gates that would lead them to a personal encounter with their creator. Five centuries later, Epstein then shows us how his teaching was implemented by a brotherhood in the town of Safed in the northern Galilee.

We meet some of the leaders of the Chaverim (Comrades) who formed the brotherhood that learned, practiced, taught, and added to the body of mystical beliefs and practices to which the name Kabbalah is given. The group in Safed came to the Holy Land mostly from Spain, but also from other parts of Europe, after the expulsion. We are introduced, for example, to the Spanish-born lawyer Joseph Caro, to Solomon Alkabez, to Moses Cordovero, to Isaac Luria, and to other members of the Chaverim. We are told of the images they developed and the techniques they employed to attain *devekuth*.

### From Umbanda to the Kabbalah:(continued from p.7)

We learn, for example, that Luria's father "was visited by the prophet Elijah, who announced: "Through him shall be revealed the teaching of the Kabbalah to the world" (p.18). Luria, the descendant of a German family, then discovered by accident a copy of the *Zohar*, the Book of Splendor, which he studied, lived, and taught to his disciples.

We then are introduced to the eighteenth-century kabbalist Moses Luzzato and his group at the Yeshiva Beth El practicing in Jerusalem today.

In chapter 2, "Love:The Journey to God", Epstein presents some of the many and diverse techniques by means of which Kabbalists have gone about cleaving to, and experiencing their creator. Rabbi Akiva and the members of his group in the first century of the Common Era we are told "employed visualized 'journeys' through the spheres to induce ecstatic states" (p.34). These exercises designed to enable the mystic to "know" God emphasized "mental excursions through heavenly places and elaborate visualization of God's chariot and throne" (p.34). The chariot and the throne are the places kabbalists focus on for their encounter with their creator.

Using the Psalms as a guide book for their visualizations of God's environs, these early mystics embodied ascending grades of concrete images that eventually lost their form and merged into pure light. ...they now contemplated the world beyond the senses, beyond even the imagination, until they encountered the very precincts of the Absolute (p.35).

Epstein reminds us that this was an elitist tradition. Early kabbalists, she writes, "were usually scholars who,...., were fully conversant with the entire Jewish intellectual and mystical tradition. Moreover, they were perfect adherents of the precepts of the Torah in their daily lives and had attained the levels of saintliness that earned them the right to make such a journey at all" (p.38).

First presenting some of the warnings given the novice by the masters as to the dangers to be found along the path they will ascend (or descend), Epstein summarizes some of the images of the Absolute on His throne reported by diverse Kabbalists.

After passing through seven states of consciousness preceding his first vision of the *hekhalot* (halls of God's palace), the mystic transversed seven further 'heavens' before arriving at the Throne of God. The vision usually culminated here with the projected form of cosmic man poised upon a brilliant seat of glory (p.38).

As she goes deeper into the specific techniques used by kabbalists in Part II, "Kabbalistic Practices", the author tells us that although some of the experiences reported appear like those induced by drugs, "we ought not assume that Rabbi Simeon...[and other kabbalists] were transporting themselves with hallucinogens. All evidence points to a strict pattern of mental concentration in an alert state heightened by nothing more than fasting, perhaps, and isolation" (p.58).

Kabbalists fasted, and in the extreme even mutilated their flesh, as in the case of the medieval German Hasidim who in winter would roll naked in the snow and immerse themselves in subzero water through holes cut in the ice, or in summer expose their honey-smearing bodies to swarms of bees (p.48); but most, we are told, achieved their ecstatic state by means of meditation and extreme concentration that led to sensory deprivation. The most common technique was symbolic manipulation that made possible intense concentration. The Hebrew alphabet, in all of its combinations, was attributed special meaning as were the Torah and all of the traditional prayers. When the kabbalist recited his daily prayers, or read the Torah, he would go through a series of translations of meaning in his thoughts that when carried on over a lengthy period of time enabled him to block out his surroundings and slip gradually into deeper states of hypnotic trance that came to be associated in his mind either with the gates along the garden path or the climbing of the tree of life, two favorite metaphors, or with ascent through the stages of creation from God's original intent to the creation, and then to the fall followed by the restoration and reintegration (*tikkun*) of His Kingdom. The play with numbers, the exercises with the various names of God found in the Torah, and all of the other secret symbolism transmitted from generation to generation contributed to easing the kabbalist into these trance states.

While praying and concentrating intensely on numbers, letters, and/or words and their secret meanings, the kabbalist also learned to employ special deep breathing techniques that also became part of the tradition of the Kabbalah. King Solomon, Epstein (pp.59 and 60) writes, devised a special breathing technique that enabled him, and others who learned it, to achieve higher and higher (or deeper and deeper) states. "By learning and practicing the secrets inherent in breath," Rabbi Simeon, purported author of the *Zohar* tells us, "Solomon could lift nature's physical veil from created things and see the spirit within" (p.59).

What we have here, the reader should by now be aware, is a shamanic journey. Although wrapped completely in the distinctive beliefs, practices, and traditions of Judaism, the kabbalist is doing what mystics and shamans in other cultural settings have been doing since time immemorial. He is going on a journey into an altered state of consciousness that enables him to have experiences to which neither he nor his fellows are privy in their ordinary state of



consciousness. Like other shamans as far away in time and place as the Siberian tundra, the Australian outback, the Kalahari desert, and the American southwest, he

experiences an ineffable joy in what he sees, an awe of the beautiful and mysterious worlds that open before him. His experiences are like dreams, but waking ones that feel real and in which he can control his actions and direct his adventures. While in the SSC [Shamanic State of Consciousness], he is often amazed by the reality of that which is presented. He gains access to a whole new, and yet familiarly ancient universe that provides him with profound information about the meaning of his own life and death and his place within the totality of all existence (Harner 1982:27).

It is not surprising, therefore, that kabbalists report "seeing" the past, meeting the prophets, the great rabbis of antiquity, and also learning of the future. Like other shamans they report having guardian spirits, not animals like American Indians, but famous rabbis in the kabbalistic tradition who guide them along the path to the chariot and the throne of the almighty. Also, like shamans elsewhere, kabbalists are reported to be able to cure the sick.

What Epstein's book on the Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism provides us with, then, is one more example of a set of practices that, though they incorporate in each case the specifics of a distinctive culture, appear to be widespread amongst much of humanity. What is most interesting about this case, however, is that it is not from one more small-scale, marginal society, but instead from one of the most sophisticated cultures known.

To learn that the segment of my own religious and cultural heritage of which I was ignorant was a form of shamanism was exhilarating for me. I am now able to fantasize, for example, going on a future shamanic journey, comparable to the ones I have gone on under Michael Harner's guidance, or at meetings of the AASC, but this time dressed in a prayer shawl, wearing *tzizith*, and reading the Torah. Before I can start, however, I must complete the circle. I must return to Sr. Manoel and the relationship between the Kabbalah and Umbanda.

In contrast to the shamanic tradition, Umbanda is based on spirit possession. That is, whereas the shaman leaves his (or her) body to go out to the other world, or worlds--as it or they are conceived in his particular culture--the Umbandista, in the African tradition, receives from the other world the being or entity who enlightens, teaches, helps, tells the future, and/or cures the sick. Certainly trance states, induced by meditation, concentration, and special breathing techniques are common to both. But the tradition of spirit possession derived from Africa seemed to differ in form from the shamanic journey of the kabbalist; and I was not

sure how significant that difference would be.

Umbanda, however, as I have stated, is a syncretic religion. It is a mixing, or blending of African beliefs and cultural elements, medieval Roman Catholicism, Amerindian elements, and, significantly, since it was the tradition out of which Umbanda actually was created, Spiritism brought to Brazil from France where it was codified in the nineteenth century by Allan Kardec. Since Umbanda is a deliberate and intentional syncretic creation (Brown 1986:Ch.3) Umbandistas have always felt free to incorporate almost anything in the way of new and diverse beliefs and practices and seek their origins almost anywhere. They are fascinated, for example, by the mystical traditions of Egypt and other historical cultures that Western European intellectuals often turn to as sources of their "civilization". Esoteric Judaism, as a building block on which the Christianity they see as the umbrella for their beliefs and practices is built, is especially appealing to them. They read both the New and the Old Testaments, and just as they have found within the former the sources of Christian mysticism, they also have found in the latter many of the specifics on which kabbalistic practice is based.

Umbanda, however, is a decentralized religion. There is no centralized authority structure such as in the Roman Catholic Church. The head of each terreiro is free to adopt and incorporate almost any belief or ritual he chooses. Whether it survives, and is copied by other cult leaders, depends on the practical success of each new element. That is, the test is whether or not clients who come to the cult leader are helped with the problems they bring and whether or not they return to become adepts, *filhos* and *filhas-de-santo* of the head of the center, and/or continuing clients. The more *filhos* and *filhas* and clients the leader has, the more successful the center is considered to be. Since his center has survived for some years, and Sr. Manoel not only is a *babalourixá*, but also its head, and also the President of the União Espírita Cearense de Umbanda, King Solomon and the kabbalistic practices he has adopted and incorporated into the running of his terreiro must be working.

Although there appear to be classificatory and perhaps theoretical differences between the shamanic journey and being possessed by a spirit, there may not be significant differences at the practical level. In the case of Umbanda, in which practical success--curing the client's illness, getting him (or her) a job, keeping a mate, etc.--is the standard used to judge the efficacy of adoptions and innovations, kabbalistic techniques and practices may (or may not) be as effective as any other. They enable the cult leader, his (or her) adepts, and many clients to enter trance states that then enable them to experience the conception of the supernatural in which they believe and respond positively to suggestions made to them while in trance. Kabbalistic techniques for entering into trance may be as effective for Sr. Manoel and his followers as any other.

### From Umbanda to the Kabbalah:(continued from p.9)

It is at the level of philosophy, however, (something Epstein does not explicitly examine) that I believe the interest in and incorporation of the Kabbalah by Umbanda may be found. The second major building block besides the African heritage that went into the creation of Umbanda, as I have said, was European Spiritism as codified by Allan Kardec. Applying the idea of reincarnation, which is basic to Kardecian Spiritism, Umbanda has created a new set of spirit entities, the *Pretos Velhos* (wise old men and women from the Brazilian slave past), the *Caboclos* (the free-spirited Brazilian Indians), the *Exus* (the assortment of colorful characters such as bums, prostitutes, and others from Brazil's historical past), and the *Crianças* (children, who come down and incorporate in cult leaders and other mediums to do most of the practical work of helping the living with their problems.

It is often assumed, both by Umbandistas and those who study them, that the idea of reincarnation was introduced into Spiritism by Kardec from Buddhist and Hindu writings with which he was familiar. The kabbalistic tradition of Judaism, however, also believes in the transmigration of souls, or reincarnation. As Epstein recounts, for example, when Isaac Luria spent five days a week for a two year period retreating to a cottage on the banks of the Nile fasting, praying, reading the Zohar--and going into trance--he not only encountered the prophet Elijah, who became his guide, and "great departed sages like Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai..., Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eleazar the Great," he also had revealed to him "All of the secrets of reincarnation...(Epstein p.19).

In the course of the development of the Kabbalah the idea of transmigration was radically expanded from that of a punishment restricted to certain sins to that of a general law encompassing all of the souls of Israel, and, in a later stage, the souls of all human beings... Thus, transmigration ceased to be considered merely a punishment and came also to be viewed as an opportunity for the soul to fulfill its mission and make up for its failures in previous transmigrations (Scholem 1974:161).

This is a basic principle of Spiritism that has been incorporated as a part of Umbanda belief. But there is more.

From the Zohar and through the works of the disciples of Isaac Luria mention is made of an aspect of man that is referred to in the Kabbalah as the *zelem* (the "image", on the basis of Gen. 1:26, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness") and which is not identical with any parts of the soul referred to above. The *zelem* is the principle of individuality with which every single human being is endowed, the spiritual configura-

tion or essence that is unique to him and to him alone. Two notions are combined in this concept, (subtle) body which serves as an intermediary between his material body and his soul (Scholem 1974:158).

This is what Spiritists refer to as the perispirit, the ethereal (subtle) covering that provides the equivalent of the personality of the spirit and through which it is able to attach itself to the material body it will use for a particular incarnation. But note what Scholem says as he continues in the same paragraph.

Because of their spiritual nature, the *neshamah* and *nefesh* are unable to form a direct bond with the body, and it is the *zelem* which serves as the "catalyst" between them. It is also the garment with which the souls clothe themselves in the celestial paradise before descending to the lower world and which they don once again after their reascent following physical death; during their sojourn on earth it is hidden within man's psychophysical system and is discernable only to the intellectual eye of the kabbalist (Scholem *ibid.*)

If we change soul to spirit, celestial paradise to spiritual or astral plane, lower to material world, physical death to disincarnation, reascent to reincarnation, *zelem* to perispirit, and substitute aura for the final clause, we have the basic tenets of Spiritism (Kardec n.d., 1975; see also Greenfield 1987). Although I would not think of arguing that Kardec found the Spiritist view of creation and the universe in the Kabbalah, it certainly may have been one of the sources on which he drew.

Thanks to Epstein, as supplemented by Scholem then, I finally have been able to comprehend what Sr. Manoel assumed I knew some six years ago.

Before ending this essay, there is one more piece to be added to my personal redemption. While reading Dr. Epstein's book, I happened upon a review of Moshe Idel's new book, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, by Arthur Green which began as follows.

The history of Judaism is being rewritten in the latter half of the 20th century. The rewriting is in large measure because of the "rediscovery" of Kabbalah--Jewish esoteric and mystical lore dating back to the 12th century. This work of historians and theologians is having a major effect on Jewish self-understanding in our times (Green 1988).

I should like to conclude, therefore, with an hypothesis that may explain why, in spite of being raised as a Jew, I was personally uninformed as to the kabbalistic tradition, at

least until now, and account for the need for its "rediscovery" by Jewish scholars. In the past two centuries the center of Jewish intellectualism has moved from other parts of the diaspora to Western Europe and the United States, to nations whose dominant religions are Protestant. During that time, however, these national societies have industrialized and "modernized", which is to say that they have become more secular and "rational", downplaying the spiritual and mystical aspects of their religious and cultural heritages. In their desire to assimilate and be accepted by the dominant national cultural segments of these rationalist, secular national societies, Jews, especially the leaders and intellectuals, first stressed the rational themes in their tradition, which they later secularized. In so doing they hid from the "goyim" their kabbalistic mysticism, since they felt that it might make those they wished to impress think less of them. This, of course, enabled the proponents of the halachic tradition to assume leadership and silently expunge kabbalism from the mainstream of Western Jewish thought. Kabbalistic practice was not taught, as was its rival, to the average Jew such as myself. It was driven underground, not to be discussed in public, to survive if at all as a secret sect in the hands of masters teaching hand-picked disciples.

In Brazil, even with industrialization and modernization, secular rationalism has not suppressed traditional mysticism to anywhere near the degree it has, for example, in the United States. While some representatives of the government, intellectuals, and occasional elites often express a secular, rationalist view of the world, especially when interacting with North Americans and Western Europeans, larger numbers have participated in the creation, acceptance, and rapid growth of syncretic Umbanda and other forms of Spiritism that have been interpreted by some as reaction to the forces of secular rationalism and modernization. I find it interesting that Kabbalistic Judaism, driven underground elsewhere in the West, has resurfaced as part of the syncretic potpourri so vital in Brazil today. In any event, it helps to explain how this North American Jewish anthropologist studying popular religion in Brazil was able to find his mystical kabbalistic roots.

### Footnote

1. I must admit that my reading was selective and not exhaustive. I know now that I missed several major works from which I now am gaining considerable insight. I am not sure, however, that had I read them then that I would have learned very much.

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### CONFERENCES

**The VIth International Conference on the Study of Shamanism and Alternate Modes of Healing** will be held September 2-4, 1989, at the St. Sabina Center, San Rafael, California. Conference fees are \$120 (including two nights accommodation and all meals) or \$80 (no accommodations but all meals). Because participation is limited, it is advisable to preregister by sending a check of \$50 to **Ruth-Inge Heinze, Ph.D.**, 2321 Russell #3, Berkeley, CA 94705, (415)849-3791. Please indicate whether you need accommodations.

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