In their influential book *The Jew Within* (2000), the sociologist Steven M. Cohen and the scholar of religion Arnold M. Eisen took the pulse of American Jewry at the turn of the millennium. On the basis of poll data, supplemented and enriched by 50 in-depth interviews, the authors concluded that an important shift had occurred within the mainstream Jewish community:
American Jews at century’s end, we believe, have come to view their Jewishness in a very different way than either their parents or they themselves did only two or three decades ago. Today’s Jews, like their peers in other religious traditions, have turned inward in the search for meaning. They have moved away from the organizations, institutions, and causes that used to anchor identity and shape behavior.

That search for meaning, observed Cohen and Eisen, is manifest in a “shift of passion from the public domain to the private sphere, from what postmodern theorists call the ‘grand narrative’ (in this case, the exalted story of Jewish peoplehood and destiny) to the ‘local narratives’ and ‘personal stories’ of family and self.”

In an effort to better understand this phenomenon, Havruta asked six American Jewish scholars and spiritual leaders to contribute their own personal stories and intuitions. How can one explain the increased focus on spirituality? What need does it fill? What pitfalls may it entail? What does it augur for the future of Judaism? Their various responses, thoughtful and well-informed, inevitably inspire new questions.
Evidence for the growth of spirituality in American Jewish life can be seen in the Jewish Healing movement, the Kabbalah centers, the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, and books sold by the likes of Jewish Lights Publishing. Its precursors lie in the Jewish Renewal movement of the 1980s and the havurot of the 1960s. Leaders of Jewish spirituality endeavors today could readily claim that Jewish spirituality has been with us since the day God tapped Abraham on the shoulder, and in a certain sense they’d be right.

The recent phenomenon has a lot to do with the shift toward the search for personal meaning as a central way of being Jewish, something that Arnie Eisen and I investigated in our book, The Jew Within. For what we called “the Sovereign Jewish Self,” personal meaning becomes the arbiter of if, when, how and why one will be Jewish.

That sounds very fine and logical. But we have to remember that there are, indeed, other ways to ground one’s Jewish identity. Alternatives include obeying God’s commands, loyalty to the Jewish people, or nostalgia. But American society and American Judaism undertook a shift to the personal, certainly by the mid-’80s. Since then, we find Jewish educators and rabbis, even the Orthodox, increasingly marketing Judaism as a vehicle to find personal meaning. I find it indicative that when the Orthodox publisher Artscroll and the OU marketed their Yom Kippur mahzor (prayerbook), they spoke of how it was “designed to make prayer accessible and meaningful.” This emphasis on meaning contrasts with the traditional approach, whose sensibility is contained in the Pesach greeting, “Hag kasher vesameah” – as if to say, “I wish you the best in fulfilling the mitzvot of Pesach, have a kosher Pesach, and, oh, you should have a happy Pesach.”

Since the 1980s we find Jewish educators and rabbis, even the Orthodox, increasingly marketing Judaism as a vehicle to find personal meaning.

The emphasis on meaning and personal journeys is a very American, Protestant phenomenon. Thus, for Jews, the move to a focus on meaning is an act of acculturation and assimilation into American society and culture. Classically, Protestant Christianity places more of an emphasis on individual faith, and Judaism places more emphasis on collective action. Protestant ministers spend a lot of time teaching what to think about God. Rabbis spend a lot of time on matters of religious practice – how you do Jewish, as opposed to how you feel Jewish.

The way I see it, some Jews are spiritual and religious and believe in God. But many committed and engaged Jews are just two of those three, and maybe as many Jews are only one of those. And committed Jews can be non-
believers, non-religious, and non-spiritual – I hear we have a few of those as well.

We contemporary Jews have come to believe that a big part of being Jewish is the skeptical, dialogic relationship with God that runs from Abraham to *Fiddler on the Roof*.

None of these terms is very well understood or widely agreed-upon. Take God, for example. What does it mean for a Jew to believe in God? We contemporary Jews have come to believe that a big part of being Jewish is the skeptical, dialogic relationship with God that runs from Abraham to *Fiddler on the Roof*: You can talk to God, you can yell at God, you can go Communist, you can go atheist, and you still belong to the Jewish family, the Jewish people.

Together with Rabbi Larry Hoffman and Synagogue 3000, I conducted a comparative survey in the U.S., and found that Christians are far more spiritual than Jews, but that Jews are catching up. Younger Jews are more spiritually minded than older Jews, in part...
because of growth in Orthodoxy, in mixed married couples and in their children, and in part because of a growing resonance with spiritual language. These results point to the possibilities of a smart Jewish spirituality policy, an approach that would appeal to a growing number of Jews, giving them a way to broaden and deepen their Jewish experience.

But, at the same time, I have to say that certain directions spirituality can take can be a bad thing, because in America, Jews need to continue to fight to maintain their distinctions with the non-Jewish world. In general, too few rabbis and other Jewish leaders are asking: How can we retain, sustain, and even create boundaries separating Jews from non-Jews, and Judaism from other cultures?

To be sure, the situation in Israel differs from that in the United States or anywhere else in the Diaspora, for that matter. In Israel, Jews typically presume that gentiles want to hurt them; in contrast, Jews in America can presume that most gentiles would want to marry them. In Israel, the often-contentious boundaries between Jews and others are too high, such that Israel needs to build better bonds and relations with non-Jews. Thus, spirituality in Israel has absolutely no downside and may even provide a common basis to build more shared experiences with non-Jews.

But in the Diaspora, Jewish continuity entails a strategic need to maintain a distinction between being Jewish and not being Jewish. A spirituality that is not readjusted to a specific and particularistic way of thinking has the potential for lowering the boundaries between Jews and non-Jews even further than they have been, and thus furthering the dissolution of the Jewish group in America.

Spirituality, as partially an import from Christianity, is often expressed with little distinctively Jewish quality. It can appear as a pale, weak knockoff of that found in certain Protestant churches. You can go to synagogues in the U.S. and watch people physically express their spiritual ecstasy in ways that make them look like Christians. They raise their hands towards the sky, they sway, but, to say the least, they’re not exactly shuckling like their grandparents (or grandfathers) did.

Of course, change is inevitable and even desirable. We can accept and embrace change, as we wear clothes that our grandparents would never consider, that hardly distinguish us from non-Jews (as far as I know, they also wear T-shirts with a Ralph Lauren insignia). But for the good of Judaism, there has to be some concern with the type of change we promote and the very subtle cultural messages that it sends out.

When I was younger, I perceived myself as a loyal maverick – part of the radical Zionist generation, social democrats, liberals, feminists, Soviet Jewry activists, and Havurah movement Jews who were intensifying Judaism and Yiddishkeit as opposed to the assimilationists running the organized Jewish community at the time. Today, I look at certain changes in ways that might make me seem like a conservative. Now I’m concerned about preserving, restoring and creating the cultural elements that can unite Jews, keep us together, give us a common cause and a common cultural matrix.

In this regard, there are certainly great potential benefits to the upsurge in spirituality. If you care about Jewish cohesiveness, and you care about the loss of a common language, spirituality presents a great opportunity for Israelis and Diaspora Jews to build a common platform for the 21st century.

Today’s spiritual innovators are very much akin to the Zionists in the early Yiḥshuv, in that both invent an authentic experience that has roots in the past. That said, we need to carefully nurture forms of spirituality that can lay plausible claim to a Jewish authenticity (as invented as that may be) in order to promote Jewish distinctiveness rather than weaken it and blur it.
even further. The question is not whether Jews should be spiritual but what kinds of spirituality should they practice, specifically how they can develop a spiritual culture notably and visibly different from the Christian spirituality that is so widespread in American religion and American society.

To be clear, I’m not looking to preserve any one form of being Jewish – I find a lot to love in Jewish secularism and religiosity, in American and Israeli Judaism, and in all denominational streams and even in post-denominationalism, the most recent American Jewish denomination. But I think that the system requires the convincing claim to authenticity, which requires elements of uniformity and resistance to change, and rejection of some aspects of Judaic diversity. If you live in a system where everyone can make up their own Judaism, then Judaism loses its appearance of authenticity and its obligatory nature. It’s not a compelling moral and religious system. So we need to resist some change, even as we promote adaptation.

If you care about Jewish cohesiveness, and you care about the loss of a common language, spirituality presents a great opportunity for Israelis and Diaspora Jews to build a common platform for the 21st century.

How you balance adaptation and resistance is the ongoing struggle that we’re all engaged with. The only way to do that is to maintain discourse. So the more people talk about being Jewish, the better it is for Judaism.
Well-founded speculation has it that 30 percent of American Buddhists are Jewish. When informed of this rumor, Reb Zalman Shachter-Shalomi, the Colorado-based leader of the Jewish Renewal movement, remarked, “Jews are clearly a very spiritual people; the only problem is that they can’t find it in Judaism.”

Why not? What is it about Jewish life that has made it inhospitable to spiritual experience despite the rich spiritual heritage that it embodies?

As a working definition, I would characterize the spiritual pursuit as the search for transcendence; as the quest for that which is beyond material existence; and as an attempt to cultivate mindfulness and be intimate with God.

Why, then, has it been missing from Jewish life?

First and foremost, it is because we have been obsessed with politics, with the struggle for survival, with the defeat of anti-Semitism and with the defense of Israel. The most powerful Jewish organizations today are survivalist in orientation. They raise the most money and enjoy the largest memberships, and are regarded by many people as the main voice of American Jewry. But the politics of survival is a project that leaves little room for nurturing the soul. As a traumatized, post-Holocaust community, we have sacrificed our inner lives on the altar of survival of our outer beings and our national enterprise.

Furthermore, the distinctive absence of spirituality is a direct consequence of the Jewish community’s preoccupation with material achievement. Indeed, there is a perception that we are the most materialistically oriented religious group in America.

Two years ago, former Wisconsin governor and Republican presidential hopeful Tommy Thompson told Jewish activists that making money was “part of the Jewish tradition,” and something that he applauded. You may recall the Barbra Streisand character in the film The Mirror Has Two Faces, who declares that the one Jewish lesson that her mother taught her was not to miss a sale at Bergdorf’s on Saturday. Too many Jews have substituted shopping for shul, and commerce for Shabbes.

Finally, our lack of spirituality is manifest in the rampant secularity of American Jews. In every sociological study, Jews emerge, far and away, as the champions of disbelief. In a survey from 2001, only 16% of all Americans identified themselves as secular or somewhat secular, but for Jews it was a whopping 44%.

As a traumatized, post-Holocaust community, we have sacrificed our inner lives on the altar of the survival of our outer beings and our national enterprise.

A personal story: While on sabbatical leave in Israel in 1980, I made a pilgrimage to Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of the Kabbalah. During our conversation, he averred...
that the central objective of his work was to establish the legitimacy of the study of Jewish mysticism. When I naively responded that it appeared that he had achieved his aim, he shot back, "You really think so? Well, last year, when my friend Salo Baron [who had already published 17 volumes of his Social and Religious History of the Jews] was visiting, I asked him, 'When will you get to the Kabbalah?' Baron answered, 'In volume 21.'” And, continued Scholem sardonically, "You know, he’s already 84 years old.” What’s more, Scholem added, in none of the major rabbinical schools is there a class in Kabbalah. And Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was listed as Professor of Philosophy and Jewish Mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary, was never permitted to offer a course on the Zohar, the foundational text of medieval Kabbalah.

What an indictment! Scholem’s critical observations reveal the startling fact that three generations of rabbis were trained without being exposed to the mystical and Hasidic texts that form the basis of Jewish spiritual teachings. When you consider how few of the instructors in rabbinical seminaries were willing to open their hearts to their students, and share the account of their own spiritual journeys and of their relationship to God, we begin to understand that America’s Jews were educated by rabbis who were spiritually impaired and constitutionally unable to transmit the essential aspects of our religious heritage that could engage our souls.

Currently, the picture is much brighter. Thanks, in large measure, to Reb Zalman and the Renewal movement; to teachers such as Larry Kushner, Arthur Green and Daniel Matt; to the music of Shlomo Carlebach, we
are experiencing an awakening. No longer do “Ju-Bus” dominate the Jewish spiritual network. Elat Chayyim, in upstate New York, is but one of the Jewish spiritual retreat centers founded in recent years. Borders Books has a Jewish Spirituality section. The Jewish Lights publishing house specializes in books reflecting the new wave of spirituality. Stanford University Press is involved in a multi-year commitment to publish Danny Matt’s elegant translation of the Zohar. Every major rabbinical program employs a scholar of Kabbalah and Hasidism on its faculty, and spirituality is a recognized component of the curriculum. The Institute for Jewish Spirituality trains rabbis, cantors, educators and lay people who yearn to find a deeper, more meaningful connection with God. There is a flowering of new independent minyanim that incorporate chanting, dancing and meditative prayer. The Internet abounds with online study programs and other resources for Jewish spiritual seekers. And then, of course, there is the ubiquitous, if outrageous, Kabbalah Center.

Jewish spirituality has become widely accessible, and not only to Jews.

My recent experience has confirmed that spiritual seeking is in fact the one religious element common to all streams of Judaism. At Congregation B’nai Jeshurun (Conservative) on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, I have been privileged to savor true moments of tefillah (prayer) and kavannah (inwardness). So, too, at Shira Hadasha (Orthodox) in Jerusalem and Darchei Noam (Orthodox) in New York. When I taught at the Westchester Reform Temple, the conversation focused on searching for God in Judaism, the God within. And at my own Hillel community, the students, clamoring for a more personal spiritual encounter, have initiated a musical service that is inspired and inspiring, attracting heretofore, disinterested peers and transforming prayer into an intensely meaningful act.

Reb Chaim of Volozhin, the principal student of the Gaon of Vilna, wrote in his Nefesh Ha-Chayyim (1:4) about God’s biblical commandment to build the Mishkan, the Sanctuary:

Do not think that My intention is the construction of an external Sanctuary. But, you should know that the ultimate purpose of the plan of the tabernacle and its vessels is to hint to you that you should see in it a pattern that will be a model for fashioning yourselves. The goal is that your desirable actions resemble the plan of the tabernacle and its vessels, all of them holy, worthy and prepared for My Shekhinah to dwell within them, substantially. This is the significance of, “And you shall make for me a Sanctuary and I will dwell therein” (Exodus 25:8).

Indeed, the spiritual seekers in contemporary Jewish life are struggling to realize the vision of Reb Chaim so that the Shekhinah, the Presence of God, will become an inner reality available to us all.
In recent years, many American rabbis have recognized an urgent need to deepen the inner life of the Jewish community. We saw that Jews were wilting from lack of spiritual wisdom and energy. Many synagogues were suffering from a lack of vitality, and were not inspiring to most of their members. We are living in stressful times and most Jews have not found Jewish spiritual resources that can help them address the realities of a world challenged by climate change, war, religious strife, economic danger and injustice.

Stress is harder for people to endure when they feel isolated and helpless. American individualism leads to loneliness, which fosters sadness and depression. The normal definers of meaning for many Jews have lost their power to link us to a larger sense of purpose. Jewish survival and the anxieties of assimilation are important issues, but people feel a need to connect with a community that has at its center higher values that can sustain them through all the emotional ups and downs, joys and traumas of daily life.

Normative synagogue Judaism is only beginning to tune into the search. Rabbinic schools have not educated rabbis, cantors and educators to value and cultivate their own inner spirit, let alone to work with those on a spiritual search. Jews who attend synagogue infrequently are unlikely to look to congregations to provide an address for struggling with the meaning of loss, grief, disappointment, tragedy and gratitude. This is why places like Chabad and the Kabbalah Center become attractive to many Jews. Younger Jews are turning to service, volunteerism and social action for a sense of larger purpose. Many others turn to Orthodox Judaism for clear direction and community.

Women rabbis have read old texts with new eyes, and created new ones.

The picture is not all gloomy – there are new sources of wisdom and energy to address this spiritual crisis. Synagogue change and renewal projects have helped a significant number of congregations to transform themselves. They do offer warmth, passion, caring, learning and community.

Women rabbis have changed public Judaism profoundly. Coming in from the margins, they have brought increased sensitivity to the unmet needs of the ill, the grieving, the marginalized, the ritually bereft, and have responded with new liturgies, language, metaphors, poetry, prayers and rituals that have provided a rich variety of spiritual foci for community life. They have read old texts with new eyes, and created new ones. From feminist Seders to healing services, to simhat bat ceremonies for newborn girls, aging ceremonies, and spiritual direction and yoga, women are finding and teaching new meaning in Judaism. Women have been brave enough to bring the heart into the service of Judaism, as well as the head.

The growing interest in spirituality can also be attributed to increased rates of intermarriage. Often in interfaith couples the...
non-Jewish spouse challenges the Jewish partner to turn his or her Jewish identity into a religious practice – being “a cultural Jew” is not sufficient to create a framework for family life for an interfaith family. Hence, if the non-Jew is to raise Jewish children, both partners need to become involved, and have to explore the underlying values and spirit of Shabbat and holidays. They need to understand the master story of which their children will be part, to find a community with which to observe and celebrate and educate. They can’t simply “be” Jewish.

A major obstacle to the spiritual growth of the Jewish community is the challenge that Jews have with God and prayer. In the popular mind, Jewish theology and prayer were paralyzed by the Holocaust. The Shoah decimated important European centers, resources and lineages of Jewish spirituality, leaving an enormous void in thought and teaching. Most Jews decided they could not relate to the God who had failed the Jewish people in the Holocaust, and they did not want to sing praises to Him or affirm unacceptable beliefs – the core of synagogue prayer. So Jews grew up with a paucity of God images and God language, from which their rabbis also suffered. Synagogues were often meaningful social communities for many of their members, but few people could identify spiritual moments in synagogue, though they found them in nature, family and art.

The rediscovery and translation of the thought of the Hasidic masters and the Zohar have opened new images, vocabulary and ideas about God’s immanence, God’s presence in each moment, that have enabled many Jews to imagine a relationship with God who is both awesome and compassionate, in-dwelling and yet transcendent. Their theology can speak of both ladders to God, and God as deep within. The new approach to mussar – the cultivation of spiritual middot, qualities such as humility, truthfulness, awe, compassion, love and equanimity, provides a rich and important spiritual path. Theology of immanence enables people to have access to God and to imagine a relationship – not the absent transcendent, nor the puppeteer in history – but a God/Shekhinah who dwells within, who comforts the broken-hearted, who is present in brokenness and imperfection, who always calls us to teshuvah.

Some people are made uneasy by the recent popularization of Jewish mysticism, but I believe that mysticism is a marvelous resource for Jewish spirituality that has been neglected for too many years. Lurianic theology, which has brokenness at its core, can give strength to those who suffer. The kabbalistic concept of tikkun olam contains a profoundly spiritual message – one that speaks of God as immanent, and calls on us to be in partnership with God, finding and gathering sparks of God’s light in individuals and in the world. It is an empowering idea. Through faith-based, congregational community organizing projects, and through the emergence of engaged spirituality – which is actually the heart of Judaism – more and more activists, particularly younger ones, are recognizing that activism and spirituality are partners, not antitheses.

I don’t think that oversimplification and guruism – annoying as they are, and sometimes harmful – will persist as important aspects of American Jewish spirituality. As Jews become increasingly conversant with the authentic teachings of Hasidism and Kabbalah, they will acquire a rich base for interfaith study and dialogue. In addition, the enterprise to restore a more deeply spiritual essence to Judaism could powerfully bond Jews in Israel and the United States. Jews in both communities need a relevant, serious pluralist Jewish practice. We can share innovations – bringing the Israeli knowledge of language and of lived Judaism together with the creativity that flows from American Jews’ need to find meaning in their identity. For example, the Jewish Healing movement has now made serious inroads in Israel, creating a new profession of spiritual caregivers.
Another serious challenge to and opportunity for a renewed Jewish spirituality is the pace and commercialism of American life – it is too fast, busy, noisy, confusing, and full of conflicting messages. Meditation and yoga provide practices that serve well as a response and guide for thoughtful, wise action and identification of deeper values. They are a helpful way to deal with the proliferation of superficial and unsatisfying distractions. Jews are disproportionately represented in Buddhist, Hindu and new age centers that teach these practices: they are drawn by the accessibility, helpfulness and compassion found in both the practices and the centers that teach them. They can learn to do them without having to make sense of the Hebrew liturgy, which is full of phrases and ideas with which they find it hard to connect. Synagogues and Jewish community centers are only now beginning to create Jewish space and teachers for the integration of these practices into Jewish life.

At the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, we have worked with 200 rabbis from all liberal denominations, as well as 60 cantors, 30 educators and hundreds of lay people to introduce them to new insights into Jewish wisdom through study of classic Hassidic and Zoharic texts, prayer that inspires their lives and experience. We teach meditation as a Jewish spiritual practice, embedded in Jewish texts, prayers and language, to help people see their lives and each other more truthfully and compassionately, and we teach the practice of yoga as a form of prayer and cultivation of spiritual values. This work is not theoretical, nor is it abstract. We have found that deep insights emerge when people have an opportunity to listen to each other, and to themselves, in a safe environment, and explore the truth of their own experience in relationship to inherited texts.

The result is that the participants have new resources to mitigate the burnout that affects and cripples clergy in particular, to listen and counsel more effectively, to open Torah study to new people, and to find a deeper, revitalized relationship with God. They are more effective in their professional lives, more balanced and open in their personal lives, and have tools to enable them to continue their spiritual growth. Synagogue life is enriched – and becomes attractive to a wider array of Jews – by having rabbis, cantors and educators and members who lead from their soul and not just from their head, who can speak authentically of hope, courage and love.
Where should we look to find spirituality in the American Modern Orthodox community in the 21st century? Sadly, this is a difficult question to answer. The success of our community – both financially and in terms of affiliation – has led to a sense of triumphalism, complacency and insularity. A true spiritual seeker is a person who is looking for change in his or her life. The challenge that we face is convincing people that they are lacking something that can be found in Jewish living and Jewish learning.

As the rabbi of a small but vibrant and growing Orthodox community I see people, too many people, who have become numbed into a perfunctory fulfillment of rituals that have lost their meaning. Waking people up from their slumber is not an easy task. These are people who have been given the great gift of the full gamut of Jewish education, from kindergarten through high school, and have often spent a year or two learning in yeshivot in Israel. For them, that same level of Jewish education is taken for granted as a necessity for their children, regardless of the cost.

In order for the community to maintain itself, a heavy financial burden is placed on families. Orthodox day school tuition costs, say, $15,000 per child, for at least three children. Synagogue dues run about $2,000, not counting the building fund. Then there’s summer camp, $7,000 per child, not to mention dance lessons, tennis mini-camp, Pesach in a hotel, perhaps a ski vacation, and of course tutoring for high school students to ensure entry into a prestigious college (and eventually a lucrative profession), which costs an arm and a leg . . . In short, Jewish life is priceless!

What this creates is the following dynamic: A couple, once they start having children, must earn an enormous amount of money to give their children those elements of their Jewish lives that have become necessities in our culture. As a result, many people between the ages of 28 and 48 fall off the spiritual map. The only possible time to experience something meaningful is Shabbat morning from nine to noon. If we are lucky, something can also happen early Sunday morning. Thus, the only members of the community who can really continue to grow spiritually are people (typically, women) who spend most of their time at home with their families and have school-age children and, ideally, full-time help. In addition, empty nesters and retirees are again poised to continue their own spiritual search.

It is simply unacceptable for people to relegate their spirituality for the better part of 20 years to three hours on Shabbat morning.
No matter how uplifting, intense and exciting the tefillot on Shabbat may be; the sad reality is that this is simply not sufficient. Even the niggunim of Shlomo Carlebach cannot rouse people from their slumber. In some ways, the phenomenon of the Carlebach davening has become a crutch. People are able to convince themselves of the following lie: “If only I can have a great davening, dance a little after Lecha Dodi and clap during the kedushah of Musaf, then I will have filled my soul.” This status quo cannot maintain itself for more than one more generation.

How can this reality be changed? Over the course of the current economic downturn, people have begun the process of an internal evaluation regarding their financial portfolio. This also presents those of us in counseling situations with the opportunity to engage in an evaluation of spiritual portfolios as well. Our community needs to change its value system in a fundamental way.

I believe that the key to changing these patterns can be found in three areas of creativity – social service, social justice and environmentalism. These provide opportunities for spiritual growth that have the ability to put a young person in his or her college or immediate post-college years onto a different path.

These three areas may often overlap. For example, students who spend a summer trying to help a small village in the developing world by digging irrigation trenches learn to see the world in a different light. They are taught a type of understanding, appreciation and love for non-Jewish human beings who were also created in the image of God. When people are involved with social justice projects within and outside of the Jewish community, they are deeply touched and learn a responsibility to think about the world beyond themselves. Giving a Jewish and halachic language to the environmental agenda has the potential to alter the way that people view the world.

These avenues of avodat hakodesh – holy work – have the ability to infuse people with openness to people and ideas that are different. The challenge that a vibrant modern Orthodoxy must face is not to become complacent simply by virtue of the synagogue membership metric. While it is true that in many shuls we are overcrowded on Shabbat morning, this is only one part of the spiritual journey in which we must all participate. Each of us must strive to be like Avraham Avinu, a person on the move, a seeker.
For most of his career as an itinerant performer and preacher, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach made his living composing and performing original Jewish music. He is arguably the most influential composer of Jewish music in the second half of the 20th century. Now, 15 years after his death, it may be time to begin assessing his contribution to contemporary Judaism. Doing so is not easy. He wrote almost nothing, much of what we know about him is hopelessly hagiographic, and it is not at all clear if there is a consistent thread in his thought. In these aspects, he resembles such charismatic figures as the Baal Shem Tov, whom he emulated, consciously and unconsciously, in many ways.

Reb Shlomo changed the way Jews relate to their tradition and the world, something that only an itinerant can accomplish. He was a fleeting source of inspiration, lost as easily as discovered. He was a defender of tradition who was also iconoclastic, someone who took two seemingly disparate worlds, Eastern European Hasidism and the American counter-culture, and made them one, so that today we unconsciously view one through the lens of the other. He created a virtual reality through storytelling. His accent, charming manner, rebellious persona, ungrammatical turn of phrase, and broad knowledge of the Talmudic tradition and the yeshiva world made him distinctly situated to be the consummate Jewish cultural translator in the late 20th century.

Reb Shlomo constructed a Hasidism that was simultaneously unapologetic yet inoffensive, a Hasidism that could not stand the test of historical scrutiny (about which he cared very little), a fantastical world reconstructed through his powerful imagination.

For Reb Shlomo, Hasidism is about the notion of relation - to God, to other humans, to oneself.

Born in pre-war Berlin to an aristocratic rabbinic family, he was not fully at home in either old-world Orthodoxy or American Judaism. He therefore constructed a new spiritual home, in which at least two generations of Jews have found a comforting, and comfortable, residence. He contributed to the building of a post-denominational Judaism liberated from the confines of ideology and religious institutions. Reb Shlomo brought many souls back to “traditional” Judaism by making it un-traditional. He let the counter-culture serve as the frame and his idiosyncratic vision of Hasidism as the substance. In short, he turned Judaism inside out.

The Holocaust plays a central role in Reb Shlomo’s teaching. It is not that he talked about it very much, or that he had any coherent rendering of its meaning. Rather, the
Holocaust was for him a divine sign of a seismic change in Jewish history that required a paradigmatic shift in Judaism’s relationship to the world. For Reb Shlomo, the evil of the Shoah was not a sign that the world hates the Jews, but a sign that human hatred can only be conquered by human compassion, not by revenge or retribution. Thus his desire for Jews to become more a part of the world, and not more insular; he readily performed for non-Jewish audiences, at ashrams and ecumenical conferences, preaching Jewish love for humanity. This also translated into his view of gender equality: his decision to play music to mixed audiences met with sharp consternation from the Orthodox community in the 1960s. He spoke with deep concern about Jewish families damaged by a “generation gap” in which children could not understand their parents’ experiences in Europe.

A classic example of Reb Shlomo’s post-Shoah humanism is the story he often told about the 20th-century Hasidic master Rabbi Hayyim Shapira of Munkatch, who gave his disciple a blank piece of paper soaked in his tears. When the Munkatcher disciple hands a Nazi border guard this blank piece of paper, the guard salutes him and sends for a car to escort him to his destination in Germany. Fantasy? Insanity? Certainly. But what would it take to do such a thing? To stare hatred in the face with the belief that hatred can (always) be erased, even the hatred of a Nazi border guard. It is this audacity that Rav Kook called “messianic chutzpah (chutzpah de’meshikhei).”

The Munkatcher story is about traversing borders, about how we create borders, between peoples, between communities, inside families, and in doing so foment hatred and alienation. National hatred is an extension of the hatred of the ones closest to you. Human history is refracted through the sibling and family hatred that stands at the center of the Hebrew Bible: from Cain and Abel, to Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Moses and Korah. And in some way, this hatred, different in degree but not in kind, is the hatred that surfaced in the Holocaust.
Reb Shlomo sought to get past the complex vicissitudes of Hasidic writing and make his case that Hasidism is ultimately about the notion of relation – to God, to other humans, to oneself. It would be interesting to compare his rendering to that of Martin Buber, who also focused on Polish Hasidism as an expression of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s message of “meeting” as ultimate meaning. For Reb Shlomo, Hasidism is mostly about how we misunderstand our fellow human beings. It is about human doubt and compassion, recognizing the brokenness of all human experience – very much including his own.

He led a checkered life, much of it on the road. Allegations of misbehavior abound. They should not be denied nor reflexively confirmed. They are part of the complex fabric of who he was – inspiring, charismatic, broken, lonely. He landed in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco in the 1960s as a Chabad emissary, but soon realized it was Hasidism, and not the hippies, that was in need of repair. Though his favorite Hasidic masters, Rabbi Mordecai Joseph of Izbica, known for his unorthodox and perhaps even antinomian views, and R. Nahman of Bratslav, the enigmatic and tortured Hasidic genius, greatly pre-dated his encounter with the American counterculture, these iconoclastic figures affirmed the hippies’ intuitive distaste for convention and normativity. Reb Shlomo’s counter-cultural Hasidism was reconstructed through the prism of the Izbica and Bratslav traditions, freed of the apologetic readings of mainstream Hasidic society. Later on, he extended his romantic view of the hippies’ redemptive role to Israeli soldiers and settlers.

In the final years before his untimely death at age 69, Reb Shlomo used to come every few months to Waban, a suburb of Boston, to teach Torah to a small group of us at the home of a gracious host. A good friend and I used to tape all these sessions. In the autumn of 1994, just a few weeks before his death, Reb Shlomo was strapping on his guitar and taking his seat, while I was kneeling next to him, taping our microphone to the microphone that was being used for amplification. As he was sitting down, characteristically tired yet uncharacteristically weak, he said to no one in particular, “Okay, hevre, let’s pretend we’re happy.” I may have been the only one who heard it. It struck me as the quintessence of his life, the narrows between utter brokenness and the unwillingness to give in to despair.

My sense is that while Reb Shlomo lived a life in accordance with halachah, he did not believe that Jewish law was ultimately the glue needed to heal a broken people. After all, for him it was not only the Jews who were broken after the Holocaust; humanity was broken. Law
may keep a people together but it will not heal them and it will certainly not heal the world. What mattered to him was human relation, the ability of one human being to see the other, the recognition of the other’s humanity. For Plato, evil was largely a product of ignorance. For Reb Shlomo, hatred was largely a consequence of certainty. The more we think we know (about ourselves, about others), the more opaque the borders become between us. Law too creates boundaries, as the Sages say, “Make a fence around the Torah.” After the Holocaust, fences will just not do, we need to tear down as many fences as we can, subvert false certainties wherever they are found. He bequeathed a “Judaism of uncertainty” (“What do we know?” was his catchphrase) so that everything could be reviewed and revised according to its essence. And for him, the essence of any religion (and he felt that most religions contain truth) was the sacred nature of human existence.

Today, Reb Shlomo is interpreted in many ways. The Orthodox give one reading, the neo-Hasidim another, Diaspora Jews another, Israeli Jews another; leftists read him one way, Kahanists another. The point is that none of them really know, for the simple reason that Reb Shlomo himself didn’t know. He lived from meeting to meeting. All he knew was the pain of each life he encountered. And joining it to his own pain, he understood that to really know another person one must know oneself. And knowing oneself was simply impossible. As a result, everything is possible.
When the history of Judaism in the early 21st century is written (and you may be sure that the historians are already collecting documents and taking notes!), one of the major claims about this period will be that it was the time when Jews struggled to reclaim the mystical tradition as part of the Jewish mainstream. That tradition had been forcefully cast aside by German Jews of the early 19th century who were anxious over their recent acceptance into the polite company of liberal Protestants and Deists. Jews felt a need to show gentiles that we had a religion much like their own, strong on the messages of universalism and ethical monotheism, differing only in ceremonies (as Moses Mendelssohn had argued) but not in essential content. Kabbalah was built around an essentialist difference between Jews and non-Jews and a body of esoteric lore, totally unacceptable in those circumstances. The new term “mainstream Judaism” (having no equivalent in traditional parlance), was eventually coined precisely in order to exclude Kabbalah, Hasidism and certain forms of popular piety from the new Jewish respectability.

Two hundred years later, Jews are clamoring to learn about this aspect of our tradition. A very wide range of seekers, from readers of Gershom Scholem, to habitués of the Kabbalah Centers, to followers of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and my own students, are all represented in this movement.

Why has it come about? First of all, there is the failure of modernity. Despite all claims and facades to the contrary, the real religion of the West from 1750 to 1950 was progressivism. Its chief banner was science. “We are learning ever more,” the thinking goes, “rolling away the medieval darkness to gain ‘real’ (i.e., scientific) understanding of various phenomena of nature, including evolution, biochemistry, social psychology, and even the brain wave patterns that lie behind altered states of consciousness. Once we can explain all these, there will be no more need for recourse to the old superstitions.” Modernity hit a major snag in the mid 20th century. It may be designated by the twin tagline, “Auschwitz and Hiroshima.” Modernity has not led us to become better human beings; it has only given ever-wider scope to our vicious instincts.

What can we do? How will we survive the nuclear age, and now, too, the age of threatened environmental catastrophe?

Listening to those inner voices, going down into the depths in order to uplift sparks, seeking the true inner core of one’s soul, and of Being itself – each of these offers constant possibilities of being led astray.

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Since the 1960s, seekers have been avidly combing through the old pre-modern libraries of the deepest human wisdom – Zen, Vedanta, Tibetan Buddhism, and now Kabbalah – seeking to find some wise counsel that was overlooked in the rush to modernity, something that will inspire us to change the way we live (especially the pace!) and thus help save us from ourselves. This is a piece of true postmodernity, humanity seeking an alternative to the moral indifference and spiritual insecurity wrought by the modern revolution. The reclamation of Kabbalah must be seen within this very broad civilizational perspective.

Moreover, as American Jews move into their fourth and fifth generations, with Eastern Europe, Yiddish accents and pogroms all mostly forgotten, we think ever more like Americans. The U.S. has always seen itself as a religious country, “one nation under God,” from the “shining city on a hill” of 17th-century Boston to the great Southern revival tents through the megachurches of today’s evangelicals. While Western Europe still remains secular in orientation, vast majorities of Americans either do or want to believe in God, in one form or another. We want to be able to talk about God, to feel His presence in our lives, even to say, “God loves me” without blushing.

Neither the Judaism of the Lithuanian yeshiva nor that of the “normative” American synagogue has much room for that. But Hasidism does; its central message is the life of religious intimacy. All the rest of religion, for the mystic, including mitzvot and halachah, are there to bring one to this feeling of God’s presence and God’s love. There is an old (and unfair!) Hasidic quip about the difference between a hasid and a mitnagged. “The mitnagged does the mitzvah because ‘the Shulhan Aruch says I have to’; the hasid does it because ‘God loves me and gave me His Torah and wants me to do it.’” Franz Rosenzweig would have understood it well. It is the (neo)-Hasidic reading that helps the Jew fit into this American paradigm of seekerhood. Ironically, then, the new interest in spirituality is part of our assimilation.

Distance from the Shoah has helped enable that interest. The body politic of Jewry was devastatingly wounded by the Holocaust: the deaths of a third of us, the betrayal by Germany and the West, but worst of all, the feeling of abandonment by God.

The best Jewish theology of the postwar years was written by poets: Uri Zvi Greenberg, Aaron Zeitlin, Yankev Glatstein, a theology of outcry. We were both furious and deeply wounded. We wanted to scream at God, to curse Him, not to love Him but to drag Him down from heaven and bring Him to justice. But time heals all wounds. Three generations have been born since 1945; whole families have come and gone. Each year fewer of the survivors are found in our midst.

As new generations come forth, we find we want to sing to God again. We want to raise our children with love, not with memories of bitterness and fear. As we turn more toward love of nature and become world travelers, we find ourselves ready to proclaim divinity in sunsets and on mountaintops. Where is the Judaism that will give us permission to open our hearts and love again? Who will let us express gratitude and fullness of heart without bringing up all the old baggage (“Yes, but where was God when…”)? Reb Shlomo Carlebach is the man of the hour. It’s the Ba’al Shem Tov’s Judaism that speaks to this healing process. “Yes, it’s all right. Let the chip slide off your shoulder. It’s okay to let yourself love God.”

Let us remember that neo-Hasidism – the claim that key ideas, teachings and tales of early Hasidism might speak to Jews (and others) who had no interest in adopting the Hasidic way of life – was created in Europe in the early 20th century. Its chief spokesmen were Martin Buber (in German,
for Western Jews) and Hillel Zeitlin (Yiddish and Hebrew, for Polish Jews), but there were many others who saw with them that the Hasidic spirit could be universalized and updated. That notion was buried in the ashes of the Holocaust, along with Zeitlin. For half a century we were too busy surviving – building the State of Israel, saving Soviet Jewry, and so on – to pay attention to such high-minded universalistic teachings. Then Reb Zalman and Reb Shlomo, daring to step outside Chabad, made it happen in an all-American form. It’s all a fascinating process to watch, even more fascinating to help build.

Spiritual seeking is a high-risk enterprise. Listening to those inner voices, going down into the depths in order to uplift sparks, seeking the true inner core of one’s soul, and of Being itself – each of these offers constant possibilities of being led astray. There are indeed charlatans, both intentional deceivers and well-meaning would-be guides who do not appreciate the variety of souls and their different needs. The seeker understands the religious life as an ongoing spiritual adventure. Even if its goal is peace, the way there may lead across some stormy seas. It will not speak to everyone, nor should it.

Therefore, we still need to cultivate “normative” Judaisms (both Orthodox and liberal) for the many who feel no need to lift the veil and seek out a deeper truth. But for those who do – and their number is surely increased in this generation – we need to offer a seeker-friendly Judaism, one that can embrace Jews who are filled with questions that do not readily accept answers, who understand that bakshu fanav tamid (“seek His face always” – Psalms 105:4) means that there is no end to seeking. Ultimately (as Gershom Scholem has taught us), such people will bring new creative insights into the tent of tradition, enriching and deepening the Judaism that we pass on to future generations.