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Theme Essay by Richard Zimler

How a Marxist's Son Became a Mystic



[4]

If you could take a time machine back to the 1960s and talk to the shy little blond-haired boy I was then, you'd never guess that Jewish mythology and mysticism would come to deeply influence my writing.

For one thing, I was often terrified of my self-righteous Marxist father, who made sure that God always found Himself locked out of our home, even on high holy days. The very mention of the Torah—the Old Testament—was enough to set Dad quoting his favorite political theorist on opiates and the masses. Since he was large and powerful, with the temperament of a jerry-rigged time bomb, no one dared disagree with him—not even Mom.

For another thing, like the Beatles, Mia Farrow, and host of other '60s icons, my older brother had discovered Hinduism

and Buddhism, and by 1967—when he was 21, and I was 11—we'd come to regard anything Jewish as hopelessly superficial, especially the unintentionally kitsch bar mitzvahs of our cousins and friends.

Last but not least, although my mom took pleasure in celebrating Jewish holidays like Passover and devoured the works of Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and other Jewish writers, she couldn't bear the condescending attitudes toward women characteristic of the orthodox Judaism she'd known as a girl in Brooklyn. Toward the very end of her life, while telling me about the simple graveside ceremony she wanted after her death, she wagged her finger and said in a stern voice, "And no rabbis!"

I should add that Dad *did* allow books of Greek mythology into our house, since he regarded such stories as harmless, and by the time I was eight or nine, I loved reading about the exploits of Hermes, Aphrodite, and the other gods and goddesses. I desperately wanted the power to transform myself into an eagle or bull, like Zeus, or to be a centaur or to gaze down at mortal men from the top of Mount Olympus.



[5]The Greeks taught me about the power of storytelling and gave me a love for reading. I also quickly realized—with that vague tingling that signals revelation to a young boy—that their myths were about the potential for bravery, solidarity, mischief, and sexual desire inside me. And maybe even about the possibility of a timid son defying his father.

The journey of life doesn't always go the way you'd think, of course, and in the summer of 1989, when I was 33, I came across a book on one of Mom's bedroom shelves that would change my life. Titled *A Sign and a Witness*, it was a guide to Hebrew manuscript illumination. The magnificent reproductions—medieval illustrations of Torah stories, as well as colorful depictions of demons, angels, and bird-headed sphinxes—convinced me that Judaism might be a great deal more interesting and surprising than I'd been led to believe.

While examining the hellish and heavenly beings portrayed in the illuminations, I saw what should have been obvious to me since I first heard the story of Adam and Eve: that Judaism had its own ancient corpus of mythology and that it was possible, in fact, to read all the great Torah stories—from "Noah's Ark" to "Daniel in the Lion's Den"—as myths. Having always been attracted to the intricate strangeness and symbolic power of such stories, I realized that a door had opened and I was stepping inside.

A couple of days later, when I read in *A Sign and a Witness* that a school of illumination had flourished in fifteenth-century Lisbon—a city I'd been in half a dozen times before to visit my Portuguese father-in-law—an idea for a novel about a Jewish manuscript illuminator popped into my head. He later became Master Abraham in my first novel, *The Last Kabbalist of Lisbon*.

It was during my period of research that I found another work on my mom's bookshelves: *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Written in 1941 by Gersholm Scholem, a German-Jewish scholar of singular brilliance, this seminal work introduced modern Jews to kabbalah.

Reading the book, I gained enormous respect for the poetic writings of Jewish mystics. It was as if I had been seeing only the surface of the vast ocean of Judaism, and now I could see a few feet down into its great depths. I learned that Jews throughout the ages have written about meditation, the afterlife, the structure of the soul, reincarnation, the nature of evil, and many other esoteric subjects that have fascinated me since I first heard about Hades, Dionysus, and Athena.

Over the past two decades, I've read all I could about kabbalah. The symbolic reasoning of the Jewish mystics and, in particular, their poetic approach to the Torah have enhanced my understanding not only of Judaism but also of myself and the world.

The mystical idea that *the only hands that God has to work changes on earth are our own* resonated with me immediately, and kabbalah became an essential part of each of the four books of my Sephardic Cycle—a series of independent novels about different branches and generations of a single Portuguese-Jewish family. In the second book, *Hunting Midnight*, I had one character say:

We shall make our own paradise or not have it at all.

Jewish folktales and myths continue to have an enormous influence on my themes and style of writing.



[6]The entire structure of *The Last Kabbalist of Lisbon* is based on the fundamental kabbalistic notion that there is no one fixed meaning to any creative narrative or poetic verse. At its most accessible level, the novel is a locked-door mystery in the tradition of John Dickson Carr. Beneath the twists and turns of the mystery plot, it also details the spiritual journey of its narrator, Berekiah Zarco, a twenty-year-old Jewish mystic and manuscript illuminator living in Lisbon at the start of the sixteenth century. And at a still deeper level, the book can be read as a warning to all European Jews about the continued persecution they are likely to suffer.

As for other levels, in keeping with Jewish tradition, I'll leave those for each reader to discover.

Kabbalists throughout the ages have always held that any text of import must possess such varied levels of meaning. Not surprisingly, they regard the literal interpretations of Torah traditionally insisted upon by Jewish and Christian fundamentalists as superficial and unsatisfactory. When Moses parts the Red Sea, for instance, is the Torah referring only to a single, time-bound historical miracle? Surely the author of these verses might also be alluding to the spiritual journey, from slavery to freedom, that each of us is capable of making.

Kabbalists have always held that we must strive to see beyond the surface level of any religious narrative or commentary to the more insightful and life-altering meanings hidden below. Indeed, they often express contempt for those who ascribe only one fixed meaning to each and every Torah verse.

The most famous kabbalist of all, Moses de Leon, even dared to write something in the thirteenth century that I find astonishingly courageous: If Torah were merely meant to be a series of literal stories, then he, Moses de Leon, could have done much better than God! De Leon added:

Fools see only the garment, the narrative part of the Torah. They fail to see what is underneath. Those who

know more see not only the garment but also the body that is under the garment.

The mystic's flexible and poetic approach to spirituality is precisely what we need in our era of religious intolerance and conflict. I see it, in fact, as an antidote to fundamentalism. Kabbalah leads me to conclude that no one book, religion, clan, political party, group, or individual has a monopoly on the truth. To discover the full power and scope of the great works of sacred literature, whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist, we must all look beneath the obvious meaning to what is written below the surface.

Searching for deeper interpretations of the Torah also motivates me to look for the deeper significance in everything I do—in my work, my relationships with family and friends, and my interactions with the larger world. And as a writer, it reminds me to make intelligent, creative, and poetic use of the varied meanings of every word I use.

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Richard Zimler was born in Roslyn Heights, a suburb of New York City. He now lives in Porto, Portugal.

He has published nine novels, including *The Last Kabbalist of Lisbon* and the other three books of his "Sephardic Cycle." His novels have been translated into 23 languages, appeared on bestseller lists in 12 countries, and won numerous awards.

Richard also recently published his first book of poetry, *Love's Voice: 72 Kabbalistic Haiku*. The opening poem:

Your soul will begin
to sense its depth when you stop
running from silence.

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