

## Academia takes a serious look at modern Kabbalah

Matthew Wagner , THE JERUSALEM POST

May. 22, 2008

Red strings, holy water, talismans and other New Age Kabbalistic paraphernalia may seem like so much spiritual mumbo jumbo to some, but a growing number of university scholars are beginning to acknowledge modern expressions of Kabbalah.

In the past, university scholars in Jewish Thought departments in Israel and abroad scoffed at phenomena such as the Kabbalah Center, Madonna's interest in Kabbalah, and the New Age attraction to Jewish mysticism. If these phenomena were researched, the people doing the research were sociologists, anthropologists and ethnographers, not Judaic studies scholars. The focus was primarily on the sociological phenomenon of learning Kabbalah, not the new works produced by contemporary Kabbalists.

In recent years, however, more and more dissertations and scholarly books are being written on contemporary Kabbalistic and Hassidic thought, and their impact on those who study them.

The latest example of this burgeoning interest in contemporary Kabbalah is a three-day series of lectures and workshops at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Beersheba this week titled *Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival: Historical, Sociological and Cultural Perspectives*. In line with the new approach, the series of lectures, which take place in a classroom, was followed by an experiential field trip.

The scholars wiped the chalk off their hands, rubbed their tired, text-worn eyes, changed into hiking shoes and headed up to Mount Meron near Safed for Lag Ba'omer, a commemoration of the anniversary of the death of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, who, according to Jewish tradition, is the author of the Zohar, the central text of the Kabbalah.

Bar Yochai's grave-site on Mount Meron draws about a quarter of a million people for the Lag Ba'omer ceremonies, which is in itself a testimony to the relevance of Kabbalah today.

I believe the academic world should reflect reality, says Shai Ben-Tal, a doctoral student in Jewish Thought at Ben-Gurion. If the academic world wants to be relevant, it must acknowledge real-life phenomena. And the reality is that modern Kabbalah is growing, he says.

Ben-Tal is doing his doctorate on Bnei Baruch, a group headed by Michael Laitman, which is probably the single largest group devoted to learning Kabbalah in Israel. Like the Kabbalah Center, headed by Philip Berg, Bnei Baruch also teaches Kabbalah to both Jews and gentiles, religious and secular.

Prof. Boaz Huss of Ben-Gurion's department of Jewish Thought, who organized the three-day conference, said he had received requests for help with doctoral dissertations on contemporary Kabbalah from students in the US and Germany.

Huss explained why he thought the field has been neglected for so long.

According to Huss, the disparaging attitude adopted by serious scholars to the study of contemporary forms of Kabbalah began with Gershom Scholem, the founding father of academic Kabbalah.

Huss argued at the conference that Scholem viewed Kabbalah as an expression of Judaism's vitality and revolutionary force, which made possible Jewish existence in exile for nearly two millennia.

Scholem felt that the creative forces of Kabbalah had been channeled into the Jewish Enlightenment (the Haskalah) and Zionism, and was very skeptical about the possibility of having any serious creative energy left for productive

Kabbalistic expression. With the creation of the State of Israel, Kabbalah, essentially a source of vitality which preserved Diaspora Jewry, was now obsolete.

Scholem transferred his prejudices against modern Kabbalah to his students.

Only in the last decade have university scholars begun to take modern Kabbalah seriously.

Many of those scholars were present at this week's conference at Ben-Gurion University.

One of them, Prof. Jody Myers, who teaches Jewish Studies at California State University, Northridge, and recently published a book called *Kabbalah and the Spiritual Quest: The Kabbalah Center in America*, said many of her peers pooh-poohed modern Kabbalah trends.

They thought it was all about money, Myers said. They accepted media reports that accused the center of brainwashing people.

The people who studied at the Kabbalah Center did not find what they were looking for in more conventional Judaism, and were actually helped at the center, Myers said. Understanding how Kabbalah affected people's lives could provide scholars of the Kabbalah with a deeper understanding of the texts they studied, she said.