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Charismatic Leaders and Spiritual Seekers: A Review of *Jews in the Age of Authenticity*

Yael Unterman

"Aren't these groups actually cults?" "Why are you researching this nonsense?"

It is fortunate for us that anthropologist Rachel Werczberger ignored her naysayers, who lobbed remarks such as the above at her during her PhD research period. Instead, she persevered in documenting the fascinating story of two now-defunct spiritual communities active in mid-2000s Israel. Her resulting doctorate has been printed in English as *Jews in the Age of Authenticity: Jewish Spiritual Renewal in Israel*.

The book is an exploration of charismatic leaders, spiritual seekers, and alternative religious expression in twenty-first century Israel. *Hamakom* ("The Place") was founded by Ohad Ezrahi at Metzoke Dragot, in the Judean Desert near Ein Gedi, while *Bayit Chadash* ("New Home") was set up by Mordechai Marc Gafni in Jaffa. The two movements stand together, though not identically, under the umbrella of "New Age Judaism" or "Jewish Renewal." However, the fact of their sprouting in Israeli soil seems to demand another title, "Hebrew Spiritual Renewal", and Werczberger indeed explores how they differ from their American cousins.

Gafni's name is familiar to many due to the high-profile scandals attached to it. These include dramatic events occurring during the precise period of Werczberger's research. As one who was for a short time pulled into this man's compelling orbit in a professional capacity, for me to read about it through an academic analytical lens was fascinating.

Ezrahi and Gafni, both rabbis, have strong Orthodox elements in their biographies. Yet ultimately their orientation to Judaism came to stand in opposition to the rabbinic establishment, and take a spiritualizing/mythologizing approach as opposed to a halakhic one. Their grand aspiration was to heal Judaism and return it to its original "authentic" state; and only secular Jews could do this, not the rabbinic establishment responsible for the malaise to begin with. Thus, the two leaders espoused a spirituality that, while rooted in Jewish tradition, was open to practices from other cultures such as yoga, meditation, and more; and emphasized individual freedom and authenticity.

This was guaranteed to appeal to the secular devotees who gathered around Ezrahi and Gafni: Jews who rejected observance and halakhic commitment in favor of "authenticity." This word, sitting at the heart of Werczberger's analysis, is one of Western society's ubiquitous buzzwords. Having made the long journey from existential philosophy to popular culture, it's now used to sell anything from therapy to cars, claiming that these will help us to become more fully ourselves. Such advertising successfully plugs into the yearning many feel for this elusive state of being: the authentic life. Hebrew Spiritual Renewal strongly aimed to bring its adherents to that state; and hence its goal was not intellectual stimulation or increased observance, but embarkation on a personal journey of discovery. Everything, including study and ritual, was oriented towards that end.

Hamakom, a commune set in a desert location overlooking the Dead Sea, advocated for a connection with body and nature. Ezrahi's vision can be seen in these words: "The Torah talks about a people dwelling in its land, a nation of farmers and warriors … who are gripped by the spirit of God, male and female prophets, through whom God's word is rejuvenated."

The schedule included classes in Judaism, mind-body techniques, and *kabbalat Shabbat* services based on chanting and dancing, along with various practices pushing social and sexual boundaries in ways very far from traditional Judaism.

More urban and less fringe than *Hamakom*, *Bayit Chadash* focused on Jewish wisdom and skills. Yet it was still a far cry from a the traditional *beit midrash* in its activities—for example, Gafni offered a form of *semichah* (ordination) that required personal growth and journaling as one of its main components.

Although when I met him circa 2002, Gafni had not abandoned *halakhah* altogether and still seemed to consider himself Orthodox, I recall how at that junction he made the intentional choice to play musical instruments on *Shabbat*, as being indispensable to the atmosphere he wished to create. He informed me that today's rabbis were mistaken in not adjusting this prohibition and that he planned to write an article or responsum about it.

This decision, incidentally, gave me the excuse to leave the nascent movement, though, truth be told, the deeper reason was a sense of growing unease in Gafni's leadership style and the sense of travelling at alarming velocity further and further from my comfort zone. I was relieved to part ways, despite his being one of the most intriguing and charismatic people I had ever met, with both profoundly moving insights on Torah and an ability to empower people to act upon their latent talents. I can say that in forcefully propelling me into running a Bibliodrama workshop at a beach festival, he changed my life. Facilitating Bibliodrama has since then been my passion and career, and for this I will forever be grateful to him, though I have refused all contact with him for many years.

While still conducting in-depth interviews and attending meetings at *Hamakom*, Werczberger ran into a snag: the disintegration of the community. She then turned to *Bayit Chadash*, only to see it too collapse some time later. The dissolution of both communities during the period she was researching them elicited quips from colleagues to the effect that she was a "community wrecker" and should come with a warning label! Joking aside, though, it led to her reflect why this occurred, when social cohesion, commitment to the collective, and a deep longing for spiritual community were present in both.

Ultimately it seems that hyper-individualism led to the disputes that precipitated *Hamakom*'s demise; while Gafni's carefully cultivated cult of personality and subsequently betrayal of the community led to the traumatic collapse of *Bayit Chadash* and its founder's hasty departure for a new life in Utah.

Blame has been placed on an obsession by both leaders with eros and sexuality. The centrality of eros has led some to suggest these were simply phony gurus with uncontrolled sexual appetites. For me, having worked closely with Gafni for several months, this is an oversimplification and does a disservice to who these complex figures actually were. Yet it's illuminating to note, by contrast, Jerusalem's Jewish Renewal community, *Nava Tehila*. Its

leader Rabbi Ruth Kagan (perhaps not coincidentally female?) has avoided both the personality cult and the fixation on eros, and *Nava Tehila* is now a decade old and thriving.

I can say that I'd have enjoyed hearing more details about the activities, leaders, participants, and collapse of these communities, and also gaining more of a window on the author's own background and her experiences.

A little slim for my taste, I might wish the book was as thorough as that of anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann's *When God Talks Back*, which documents her two years spent in popular American evangelical communities and their personal spiritual processes. Werczberger's volume could also definitely have benefited from another round of editing—though the English translation is overall excellent, the typos are jarring.

All in all, Werczberger has contributed a valuable body of research whose importance lies not only for those interested in these specific communities, but for all those who understand that these seemingly marginal phenomena are just the tip of the iceberg. For there is a much broader group of secular, traditional, and religious people for whom authenticity and personal journey is key, and who seek a relationship with Jewish tradition extending beyond observance, tradition, social justice, and history … people who yearn for a living, dynamic tradition that touches the heart and worship that feels right and true; who seek a haven from the corruptions or missteps of establishment religion, and a recapturing of the spirit of prophecy and mysticism.

I see the larger "neo-Hasidic" trend, today attracting young people to Breslov, Chabad, Carlebach, and other Hasidic paths in droves, as symptomatic of all this, and it is powerful and not to be ignored. *Hamakom* and *Bayit Chadash* carried with them certain energies that felt almost Sabbatean, and these made them magnetic, but perhaps also led to their inevitable burnout. However, the core of what they represented—the search for authenticity and spirituality—speaks on into the future, and represents an important force with which educators, leaders, parents, and thinkers would do well to reckon.

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Leviticus, Leonard Cohen, and the Paradox of Rest

Sarah Rindner

The final two Torah portions of *Vayikra*/Leviticus, *Behar* and *Behukkotai*, conclude a book largely oriented around rituals relating to the *Mishkan* or Tabernacle of the desert, the template for the future Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Many of *Vayikra's* laws concern purity and impurity as they pertain to sacrificial worship in the *Mishkan*. Yet, the book's final chapters extend this concern outside the precincts of the *Mishkan*, to encompass the sanctity of time and of place more broadly. The beginning of *Parshat Behar* discusses the sanctity of time in regard to the seventh day of each week, the Sabbath, the day of rest. Then, using similar language, the text introduces *Shemitah*, the requirement to allow the land of Israel to rest every seventh year. In fact, the language of "rest" punctuates the entire ending of *Vayikra*. Immediately when the Israelites enter the Land of Israel, God ordains that the land itself will observe a "sabbath of the Lord" (this referring to *Shemitah*).

The commandment to rest, both individually and nationally, does not appear for the first time in *Vayikra*. Both the commandments of Sabbath and of *Shemitah* appear earlier in *Shemot*. A comparison of the respective presentations of these commandments in each book sheds light on the paradox at the heart of what it means for the Jewish nation to rest as a society founded upon God's order.

In *Vayikra*, the commandments of the Sabbath and *Shemitah* are also extended to a third and more comprehensive dimension: the *Yovel* or Jubilee year. Every 50 years, after seven Shemitah cycles of seven years each, the people of Israel are required to sound a Jubilee year. At this time, as in a *Shemitah* year, working the land is prohibited. In addition, sold real property reverts to its original owner, outstanding monetary debts are erased, and slaves are set free. The quote inscribed on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, "And thou shalt proclaim liberty in the Land for all its inhabitants," derives from the *Yovel* as described here in *Vayikra*. This invocation of the Jubilee year might lead one to assume the underpinnings of the *mitzvah* are, at heart, economic or social. In truth, the relevant context in *Vayikra* is almost purely theological. As God declares (25:23): "But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me."

In his haunting final album, *You Want It Darker*, the late musician Leonard Cohen seemed to intuit this loftier dimension of the Jubilee year in the song "Treaty." In the song he laments a love story that went wrong, likely due to the fault of the singer:

> I wish there was a treaty we could sign
> I do not care who takes this bloody hill
> I'm angry and I'm tired all the time
> I wish there was a treaty
> I wish there was a treaty
> Between your love and mine

In a relationship where love went unchecked and then went awry, Cohen imagines what it would have been like to have proper boundaries, some kind of "treaty" where each party

could understand his or her role. The song contrasts his regret over the past with a mildly ironic invocation of *Yovel*, the Jubilee:

> They're dancing in the streets, it's Jubilee
> We sold ourselves for love but now we're free
> I'm sorry for the ghost I made you be
> Only one of us was real and that was me

Even though both parties are now freed from their dysfunctional relationship, freedom doesn't have quite the taste he might have thought it would. For Cohen, the promise of the Jubilee, of a fresh start, is empty when contrasted with a life in which the wrong choices were made and a person was hurt beyond reparation. True rest is imagined less as a break from the past but a crowning achievement of a life well lived. And this ideal conception of Jubilee escapes the singer, even if he is technically free.

A look back to the Book of *Shemot* reveals a rather different framing. When the *Shemitah* year is presented in Exodus 23:11, it is described in the context of laws regarding civil society — the importance of honest testimony in a court and proper treatment of one's fellow men: "Six years you shall show your land and gather in its yield, but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave let the wild beasts eat." Even the Sabbath, here prescribed immediately after *Shemitah*, is presented in a social context: "Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor, in order that your ox and your ass may rest, and that your bondman and the stranger may be refreshed."

In contrast to *Vayikra's*, and even Leonard Cohen's spiritual framing of the various Sabbath institutions, their presentation in *Shemot* assumes that "rest" has primarily a social utility. Letting one's land lie fallow in the seventh year is an opportunity to share one's largesse with the neediest among us. The Sabbath itself is an opportunity for hard working human beings, and even beasts, to rest and be refreshed.

What then is the nature of the *Shemitah* year, and the nature of Sabbath as well? Do these institutions operate within the fabric of society, or are they meant to take us beyond it? Is the Sabbath a welcome break from the real work of living our lives, or is it the ends toward which our lives are directed? It seems likely that the answer must be: a little bit of both. After the ominous warnings at the end of Leviticus, where the Land will make up its Sabbath years absent of the Jews who inhabit it, a portrait of life without "Sabbath rest" follows:

> As for those of you who survive, I will cast a faintness into their hearts in the land of their enemies. The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight. Fleeing as though from the sword, they shall fall though none pursues. With no one pursuing, they shall stumble over one another as before the sword (26:36).

A landscape without Sabbath involves constant weariness and constant pursuit, without any sort of constructive end in sight. What's missing here is not only physical rest, it's also a kind of soul-rest. This is the kind of rest that Cohen longs for in his song "Treaty" and fails to find. The Israelites in this scenario are not pursued by actual enemies, rather they are vexed by their own emptiness and distance from God and one another. The absence of Sabbath is not

only the lack of a break from the vicissitudes of life, it is the lack of purpose and end toward which one's life might be directed.

The juxtaposition of the *Shemot* and *Vayikra* accounts of the Sabbath and *Shemitah* illustrates the manner in which these institutions can function on separate planes, both earthly and transcendent, at the very same time. It also demonstrates that, contrary to two-dimensional economic or political interpretations of the Torah, social policy is not the ultimate concern of our tradition. *Vayikra* revisits the social and economic commandments of *Shemot* and adds a new dimension connecting back to the *kedushah*, holiness, of God's original Sabbath.

The layering of holiness atop socioeconomic reality at the end of Leviticus specifically points toward an even higher endpoint where the pursuit of human advancement and the pursuit of holiness work hand in hand with one another. This state of holistic oneness with God, we could call it *taharah*, is achieved through the optimal structuring of social and economic reality, as well as a consciousness of how that reality fits into a wider context of holiness and a living relationship with God.

It's interesting to consider that the Jubilee is only presented in *Vayikra*. As the American founders intuited, there's a profound social/political message contained within the call to freedom of the Jubilee year, both in regard to human servitude and even the need for the land itself to return to its ancestral owners. Surface level political readings of Biblical concepts like the Jubilee often seek to locate statist or collectivist values in the Biblical text in order to justify modern political policies of a secular state.

Yet, in the *Tanak*h, these expressions of liberty are inextricable from a larger theological framework in which God's dominion over the world is emphasized and human beings are reminded of their temporary and transitory status. It is no coincidence that the most acute expression of human freedom articulated in the Bible, Jubilee, is found in precisely the context where human beings are most reminded of their obligations and responsibility toward God. Without these obligations, concepts like freedom, rest, and the Jubilee, cannot find their full realization:

> The fields are crying out, it's Jubilee
> We sold ourselves for love but now we're free
> I'm sorry for the ghost I made you be
> Only one of us was real and that was me

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