

## Learning Torah in the Lineage of Reb Zalman

Have you ever experienced an intimate encounter that changed your life, while you were sitting in an auditorium listening to a speaker whom you had never met before? Such was my first encounter with Reb Zalman. The experience was so intimate that I have never written about it and have recounted it only to my wife.

The year is 1972. I am a twenty-four year old high school social studies teacher. I had seen a flier about a speaker that sounded interesting, so I had made my way to the auditorium of the Hillel building at UC Berkeley. I know very little about Judaism and nothing about Jewish mysticism. On the rostrum before me stands a man with a long beard and a wonderful sonorous accented voice. Even from the distance I can see the light dancing in his spectacled eyes.

I don't remember anything Zalman said that night. I only recall the effect that his words had on me. Now, before I describe what happened, please know that I am not one given to mystical experiences. I see myself as a pretty down-to-earth guy. Nevertheless, that night I experienced something like a golden light doing subtle surgery in the region of my heart, as if my chest were being opened and my heart were being touched.

I did not mention that experience to anybody for many years, but I did sign up for the workshop on the Four Worlds Zalman offered that weekend. I had never heard of the Four Worlds, and much of what Zalman said went over my head. But the experiential exercises Zalman offered took me to places I had never been before.

We are sitting in a circle. Zalman is describing one World or another. I strain to relate to what he is saying. Then he directs us to chant a niggun, do a particular

guided meditation or move our bodies with a given intention. I follow his instructions and notice that something shifts in my awareness. I feel like I am on a journey, an inner journey. At one point Zalman says, “Now we have arrived at the gate of the next World, Briyah (Creation/Consciousness)”. He speaks about the qualities of this World and then begins singing another niggun. I join in the singing. In the silence at the conclusion of the niggun I experience that indeed we seem to be in another “World”. I note that I feel more alert and awake and my inner experience has become more spacious.

Zalman seemed to know the pathway among the Four Worlds as clearly as I understood the street map of Berkeley. I was intrigued. I understood myself to be pretty much a flat-lander, living strictly in the physical world of the five external senses. I had intuited the presence of other worlds, but knew nothing about how to think about them, let alone enter them. Clearly I had a lot to learn.

I began to study. I did not initially study Jewish mysticism. I felt like I needed a stronger foundation in basic Jewish thought and practice. In time, my studies led me to rabbinical school. At that point I had no intention of becoming a rabbi. I wanted to understand Jewish texts and be able to read them in the language in which they had been written.

Years later, to my surprise, I did become a rabbi. And I started teaching Torah. As a teacher of Torah, I sought a methodology, a way into the heart of the text. In rabbinical school I had learned that the Rabbis worked with four distinct hermeneutical (interpretative) principles, four distinct ways of reading the text: *pshat* (simple/literal), *remez* (hinted), *drash* (allegorical) and *sod* (mystical). These four levels of rabbinic hermeneutic offer a pathway into the depth of the text. How to

follow this path? I did not know, but I wanted to find out. I sought a method or methods for each hermeneutical principle.

I thought about the modalities Zalman had used that weekend in Berkeley-- chanting, meditation, story telling, physical movement. I also carefully studied rabbinic commentary and midrash. As I began to track what the rabbis were doing, an idea suddenly struck me. Perhaps each of the four hermeneutical principles was actually a gateway to one of the Four Worlds. The straightforward approach of *psbat* was the gateway to *Assiyah* (doing), the physical world. *Remez* (hint) was the way into *Yitzirah*, the world of "formation", the emotional world of feeling. Then *drash* would be the gate for *Briyah*, the world of consciousness and *sod* (mystical) was the gateway into the mystical world of *Atzilut*.

I immediately telephoned Zalman to learn what he thought of this approach. He, of course, was fully aware of the correspondence. In Zalman's warm and wonderful way, ever the mentor, he encouraged me to go forward. So I did. I continued my exploration of methodologies for practicing each of the four hermeneutical principles, but now I was aided by aligning the four principles with the Four Worlds. Each World gave me a strong sense for how to approach each hermeneutic principle.

I have worked with and developed this methodology for twenty-five years now, offering Four Worlds Torah workshops all over the country. The fruits of this study exceed recounting. I have repeatedly experienced the abundant creativity and wisdom that flow into a circle that gathers around a Torah text in this way. A woman speaks from a place of profound knowing; a man writes a stunning haiku; another woman expresses her understanding of a text in gesture and song. In moments like these, I literally feel in the quality of the air that we have entered a

sacred space, a thin place where our hearts and souls touch and together we sense the presence of the great Heart and Soul at the center of it all. In these moments, Torah truly becomes a Teacher that illumines the great themes, challenges, aspirations and fears that move in the depths to shape our lives.

Reflecting back over the years, I see that these many hundreds of sessions of communal Torah study have been a response to the invitation that Zalman offered to me in 1972. Zalman invited me into the depths of Torah and into the depths of my life. While I could not have articulated it at that time, that very depth of connection was what I was searching for when I made my way to the Hillel auditorium over forty years ago. I was hungry for the nourishment that comes from being connected to the depths of life. I saw in Zalman that evening a man who knew something about how to seek that nourishment. And that he certainly was.

When I lead a Torah study, I see myself as Reb Zalman's student, practicing in his lineage. Along with my students, I seek to pass through the gates and to inhabit the Four Worlds. For in these Four Worlds truly dwells the richness, goodness and vitality of life that I caught a glimpse of that day many years ago when I first met Reb Zalman.

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This piece was edited by Elizabeth O'Brien