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Rutgers gets into the mystic with its first course on Kabala

by Marilyn Silverstein
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It was an irresistible April afternoon outside of Campbell Hall at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, but even so, close to 50 students were huddled over their books inside, temporarily ignoring the beauty of the physical world to explore the mysteries of the spiritual one.

“When the most secret of secrets sought to be revealed, He made, first of all, a single point, and this became thought,” said Azzan Yadin, reciting from the first chapter of the 13th-century text of the Zohar (the Book of Splendor), the central expression of Kabala, or Jewish mystical thought.

“We’re starting at the point that is the most inner, the most hidden, the most unknowable part,” Yadin told his students. “If you believe the world was created, you have to ask: What brought God to create the world? The Zohar gives an explanation: ‘when the most secret of secrets sought to be revealed.’

“There was a kind of almost loneliness, a kind of isolation in the Divinity. It wanted to be revealed. And now you have a clear road map to go from step to step,” he said. “It’s the passage of the absolutely hidden to the beginning of manifestation. This is the most delicate moment theologically... the beginning of revelation.”

For Yadin, an associate professor of Jewish studies at Rutgers, teaching his course in Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah this year has also marked a moment of revelation: the first time the university has ever offered its students the opportunity to study Kabala.

“I think it’s an exciting field, and it’s something we didn’t have on the books,” said Yadin, who lives in East Brunswick with his wife, Nirit, a food writer for Israeli journals, and their three young children. “It’s part of what happens when you build a department. You take inventory on what’s there and what can be provided to students.

“The class is reaching its apex now with the Zohar. I come in, we read the Zohar together, and I get paid to do it,” he said with a smile. “Don’t tell anyone.”

It seems, however, that the word is already out. Close to 60 students have signed up for the new course.

“The student response has been wonderful,” said Gary Rendsburg, chair of Rutgers’ Department of Jewish Studies. “It’s no secret that Kabala has become a very popular

subject worldwide in Jewish studies. Obviously, there's the publicity attracted to the subject through Madonna and others," he said, referring to the pop singer's much ballyhooed dabbling in the version of Jewish mysticism taught by the cultish Kabbalah Centre. "We also need to note that it's a very serious subject, very abstruse material, and we're thrilled that Azzan is able to step forward and teach such a course."

In a very real way, the 37-year-old Yadin has spent half his life preparing to do so. He began his study of Kabala at the age of 18, as an undergraduate at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where he later received a bachelor's degree in Jewish philosophy. He holds a doctorate in rabbinic literature from the University of California at Berkeley.

"What it opened up for me was that Judaism could be really interesting — and 17 or 18 is the time for that to happen anyway," he said.

"Jewish education in general can be usually seen as not particularly exciting. People don't come out and say, 'Wow!'" he said. But when he sat down to the study of Kabala, he said, it broke that mold. "I came out and said 'Wow!' — even louder.

"First of all, the Zohar is a brilliant, brilliant midrash," or rabbinic interpretation, he said. "It is a bold text — sexually bold, theologically bold — and it is a sanctified text. This kind of synthesis of being a sacred, venerable text, but if you actually open it, you see that it's an exciting, mythic view of what Judaism is — it's just a brilliant way of conceptualizing the whole system of Judaism. It's just very exciting."

Exciting — and, in a way, subversive, Yadin observed. "It is powerfully anthropomorphic," he said. "Human beings are theomorphic. We're made in God's image. That has all kinds of ramifications for issues of sexuality and issues of what it means to be observant.

"Why do you perform the mitzvot? What does it mean religiously that you lay tefillin or separate milk from meat or don't wear clothing made from a mixture of fabrics? There is a longstanding history of trying to answer those questions in human terms," he said. "The Zohar provides this really exciting, mystical worldview... in which the borders between the human and the divine are blurred."

And yet for all of his talk of the divine, Yadin brings to these spiritual subjects the perspective of a secular Jew.

"I, myself, am not observant," he said, quickly adding with a smile. "I've heard of other secular Jews studying Kabala. I've heard of some people who aren't even Jewish studying Kabala. I've heard of one who's even a Madonna.

"Aside from my family, it's the love of my life," he said. "I wake up in the morning and say a little prayer to no one: I'm so lucky that I'm working on these texts."

His students feel lucky, too. “It’s been very challenging, but challenging in a good way,” said senior Amy Weiss, 22, a Jewish studies and sociology major from New Providence, NJ, near Short Hills.

“It’s taking ideas you already knew about and transforming them to something larger,” said Weiss, who plans to pursue her studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America next year. “I want to take more and go even more in depth,” she said. “It’s fascinating.”

Celine Greaves, a 30-year-old senior from Freehold, said she has found the study of Kabala very interesting. Raised as a Jew, Greaves now identifies herself as a Unitarian Universalist. But the new course has opened up for her some new ways of looking at Judaism, she said.

“It’s changed my perspective on historically what has been Judaism,” Greaves said. “It hasn’t been the same thing to everybody all the time. To sort of see the different perspectives historically has been very engaging.

“The fact that there is that desire to have a really close personal relationship with God — it’s lovely,” she said, referring to the Kabbalists. “These are people who have been searching for something very personal and intimate in their faith. It’s been a wonderful thing to come across,” she said. “I think it’s really, on a certain level, reconnected me to certain things.”

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