

Paradigm Shift

By Reb Zalman Schachter Shalomi

Paradigm shift is a process. There is a time when the old ways of thinking begin to decay. The once established cosmologies and institutional responses to them begin to weaken and to fall apart. Old answers to old questions do not calm the nagging internal voices that haven't yet found words to the questions of the present.

Our usual response is to add patches to the old answers, but in the long run this doesn't work. They don't correspond to the intuitions rising in us that there are better ways, more integral and less polarizing that are arising as if out of a fog. A whole new way of apprehending our place in the universe emerges. As the pioneers of thought begin to give language to this nascent cosmology, anxious people watching their architecture of reality fall apart object and call it apostasy.

Traditions, religions and lineages all experience the same upheaval. Each has a core of sacred teachings laminated to the reality map in which it emerged. From time to time, as reality maps have shifted, religious thinkers and mystics sought to update the core teachings by delaminating them from the past maps and fitting them as organically as they could into the emerging cosmologies. At times the upheavals were so radical that they even challenged the validity of the core teachings. It is at that point that keepers of the faith became most anxious and wanted to stem the rising of the emerging cosmology by labeling it as heresy. They didn't realize that those who work to transfer the sacred value teachings to the new maps are working for the same team!

After the First World War, Chassidism came out of the shtetl into cosmopolitan settings. Since then we have experienced the Holocaust, the upheaval of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the tensions of the Cold War, the moon-walk, the sixth generation of computers, the internet and corporate globalization. All testify to a radical shift that continues to manifest today, a shift that requires a deeper than surface response. Jewish renewal, coming out of the highest value traditions found in Chassidism and Kabbalah, is one such response. It is a response to the Spirit arising from a living planet met by a descending revelation from regions beyond our everyday ken. Men and women, young and old, we are souls deployed by that spirit.

Reconstructing or restoring what we had before was out of the question. A transformation was needed that would keep the past vital and vibrant and merge it with the best insights from science, transpersonal psychology, a post-dialectical understanding of history and a post-triumphalist dedication to the truth within all religions. And as we opened to the past, Jewish renewal needed to discover how feminine awareness had been stunted. Intentionally supporting an egalitarian collaboration of spiritual seekers opened us to ecological concerns, to a new approach to politics, to revitalized liturgies and to an unprecedented creativity of the Jewish spirit.

As with all living processes, this shift is not a mechanical turn around the corner, but an ongoing metamorphosis. With excitement we anticipate its unfolding, and we fully expect to be surprised by the way in which God, Torah and Israel dance this dance with the faith communities of the world.

ALEPH and the Paradigm Shift By the ALEPH Board and staff

Well before most, Reb Zalman Shachter-Shalomi saw the need for Judaism to respond to a profound paradigm shift in the world. (See article above.) For over 40 years it has been part of ALEPH's mission to advance Jewish renewal by uplifting old but now rarely used Jewish practices and by developing new expressions of engaged Judaism and making them widely known and accessible.

When Reb Zalman started ALEPH as B'nai Or Religious Fellowship in the 1960's, what we know of today as Jewish renewal was unheard of. Now, through the efforts of ALEPH as well as many other institutions and individual leaders, Jewish renewal is manifesting everywhere. Handmade and rainbow talitot on men and women, creative, engaging and gender sensitive liturgy, sacred chant and dance, uniquely Jewish meditation, the serious study of Chassidic text as both a scholarly endeavor and as a spiritual path are seen throughout the Jewish world.

We have reconnected thousands of Jewish spiritual seekers with our tradition, trained and empowered amazing lay and rabbinic leaders, nurtured communities and created many effective practices for helping people enhance their Jewish spiritual path. Yet, participants often don't know from where these practices came.

Some say that since so much of this has entered the mainstream, our work is ended. Whether ALEPH exists or not, renewal will continue with a life of its own. But, far from signaling the end of our work, this new development makes our work more urgent than ever. If we are to successfully adapt to, if not lead, this paradigm shift, random integration of juicy innovation is insufficient. Success requires a slow, careful, informed process of applying time-tested values and pathways to our radically new circumstances.

As wonderful as it is that renewal has become woven into the zeitgeist, there is danger that its heart and soul will be lost in today's freewheeling "spiritual marketplace." We know that others may ransack our sacred tradition for treasures to adorn an endless array of fleeting belief systems or prop up forms that are not connected to Judaism's core values.

It is essential that our core Jewish values, traditions and texts, that

prayer, study, and right action, the foundation upon which renewal is based, not be lost in the clamor for experiential "highs," and a fast buck. That is why ALEPH's work is more important now than ever.

For Jewish renewal to sustain its influence in shaping a more inclusive, more compassionate, more engaged and more spiritually rich Judaism, we must have knowledgeable, mature leaders deeply rooted in the wisdom of the past. We must carefully discern which of our innovations are valuable renewals of our tradition and which are ephemeral. Individuals cannot work in isolation on their own individual trajectories if this shift is to be successful. We must work respectfully and collaboratively within our community and test our ideas against collective wisdom and experience. ALEPH has already done so much to create this chevra through our Professional Development (Semicha) Program, our Rabbinic Association and our lay leadership education programs.

Through this work we grow develop the spine for this emerging body of knowledge and practice. And, as ALEPH highlights our relationship with renewal communities, creates more visibility and press for our work, conducts teachings for those who have not yet met us, we build the arms and the legs which reach out and mobilize us to truly strengthen Judaism and the Jewish people.

Jewish renewal is about a Jewish response to the global paradigm shift. ALEPH's mission is to midwife the transition of Judaism into the 21st century, retaining our connection to the unique history of the Jewish

People, remaining faithful to the core texts, values and ethical tradition that are its voice, heart and soul.