

Stalking Elijah

Adventures with Today's Jewish Mystical Masters

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HarperSanFrancisco
A Division of HarperCollinsPublishers

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi: Four Worlds, Ten Sefirot

PHILADELPHIA

SUMMER 1991

After a year of spiritual shuttling, I wanted to integrate. My inner and my outer. My spiritual practice and my worldly identity as a Jew. The pieces didn't fit: I had a Buddhist piece for the inside and a Jewish face on the outside. Based on Buddhist practice, cultivation of equanimity seemed a key spiritual aspiration. But as a Jew in Louisiana opposing David Duke, struggle and even anger also felt very genuine and real. Reb Zalman gave me a mission: to find God in reality. But which real was more real?

I have worlds within me, we all do, and at first it sounded confusing when Rabbi Zalman Schachter offered four more. In a JFK Airport lounge on the way back from Dharamsala in 1990, we were waiting for planes to take us home—Reb Zalman to Philadelphia, where he then served as spiritual leader of P'nai Or, and I to Louisiana. I'd picked up some mala beads in the Tibetan market—meditation beads carved from human skull and embedded with Himalayan turquoise and coral. The beads were old and smooth and smelled of salt: some Tibetan Buddhist monk might have used them to count one hundred thousand recitations of *om mani padme hum*, "the jewel in the lotus," a preliminary for further instruction. Now as I nervously fingered the beads, Reb Zalman took them and showed me a "four-worlds mantra."

I am holy.
All is clear.
You are loved.
It is perfect.

I gave the mantra a few cycles, clicking my beads like a mad jet-lagged monk, and then Reb Zalman took them back and explained that each line is a letter: *Yod. Heh. Vov. Heh*. So I was in effect praying God's nameless name. But what about these "four worlds"—interplanetary travel?

No, he explained patiently, each letter is an *olam*, a world or realm. Of awareness. Going in backward order, the lower *heh*, ם ("It is perfect"), corresponds to *assiyah*, the world of action. In *assiyah* our bodies sat in the airport lounge, blue industrial carpet, fluorescent lights overhead, tan nubby cushions. It didn't look perfect to me. But that was from my limited view as a body that had just logged twenty hours flying from Delhi to New York. From the divine perspective, it is perfect.

In general, the meditation searches out spaciousness. The *vov*, ן, gives the view from *yetzirah* ["formation"], or feeling, where the divine dial tone is "You are loved." The upper *heh*, ם, is *beriyah*, which is creation, but also knowledge. All is clear. And *yod*, ך, opens the realm of spirit, or pure intuitional knowledge, known as *atzilut* [literally, "nearness"]. I am holy.

FOUR WORLDS

I am holy.	ך	<i>yod</i>	<i>atzilut</i>	"nearness"	spirit
All is clear.	ם	<i>heh</i>	<i>beriyah</i>	"creation"	knowledge
You are loved.	ן	<i>vov</i>	<i>yetzirah</i>	"formation"	feeling
It is perfect.	ם	<i>heh</i>	<i>assiyah</i>	"doing"	action

Reb Zalman explained this in about ten minutes and then caught a plane, leaving me and the beads sitting in *assiyah*. But now I know what he was up to: he wanted to plant a Jewish seed.

The four-worlds mantra follows a declension immediately appealing to my nervous system. After a time, I thought of the phrases as continuous broadcasts on the divine frequency of the true state of things, broadcasts on four channels: soul intuition, mind knowledge, heart feeling, and body sense. At a completely deep level, that I'd understand better after studying with Rabbi

Jonathan Omer-Man, the four worlds represent the great cosmic moments of creation and creativity, the slide show of God's inwardness that mystics describe as beginning in an emptiness—the *Ein Sof*—beyond all descriptors, and then extending through the four events of spirit, thought, feeling, and doing that bring an action from on high into this world. Here. Now. And every here and now from now on and ever. During the following year, I cycled the mantra through my nervous system, calm germ of a tiny practice in Jewish meditation.

The next opening came in summer 1991, when Reb Zalman invited me to teach a poetry workshop at the biannual P'nai Or national gathering. He plucked me up and plunged me into his postmodern feminist rock'n'roll kabbalistic neo-hasidic quadruple worlds of Jewish renewal. These worlds brimmed with interesting energies and contradictions that also mirror Reb Zalman's personal history.



Rabbi Zalman Meshullam Schachter-Shalomi was born in Poland in 1924 and raised in Vienna. (Shalomi [peace] he added in later years to take the edge off Schachter—Yiddish for butcher.) He comes, indeed, from a family of hasidic butchers; his grandfather shected meat for the Belzer rebbe. His father straddled secular and religious worlds, but greatly loved davening. Zalman remembers his father crying during prayer. "Does it hurt to talk to God?" the young boy asked him.

Young Zalman straddled, too: he studied in Orthodox yeshivot and a secular high school and joined both socialist and religious Zionist groups. As a teenager, he crossed the narrow—burning—bridge of the Holocaust with his family and escaped via a French internment camp, where he first encountered Lubavitch hasidism in the person of Menahem Mendel Schneerson, who later became the well-known seventh Lubavitcher rebbe. Zalman's family made its way to the United States a week before