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**Pragmatic Kabbalists:
Bnei Baruch and the Globalization of Kabbalah**

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Abstract

Bnei Baruch is the most successful Israeli new religious movement, with some 50,000 participants in its meetings in Israel and some 150,000 worldwide. It is part of the current known as “Ashlagian Kabbalah,” which includes more than twenty movements claiming the heritage of the prominent 20th century kabbalist Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag. Michael Laitman, a prominent disciple of Yehuda Ashlag’s son Baruch, founded Bnei Baruch (“Sons of Baruch”) in 1991. It proposes a pragmatic approach to Kabbalah, opening its teaching to non-Jews and presenting Kabbalah as part of a universal wisdom rather than of a specific religion. Bnei Baruch’s approach to Kabbalah has been contested in Israel by ultra-Orthodox Jews, who regard Kabbalah as a Jewish form of mysticism that should be taught to Jews only, by some academics, who criticize Laitman’s interpretation of Kabbalistic texts as at odds with prevailing scholarship, and by the local anti-cult movement. This article draws on participant observation and interviews of members of Bnei Baruch in different countries. It explores life in Bnei Baruch and processes of affiliation to the movement, in an endeavor to explain why what was in 1981 a tiny band of ten disciples of Baruch Ashlag was able to transform itself in a comparatively short time into a global movements with tens of thousands of followers.

With some 50,000 participants in its meetings in its home country Israel, and some 150,000 worldwide, Bnei Baruch has been described as “by far the most successful new religious movement in Israel,” although, strictly speaking, it does not regard itself as religious (Persico, 2014: 43). It is the Israeli-born movement with the largest presence abroad, with groups meeting regularly in a number of countries, from Japan to Brazil. Bnei Baruch, however, has rarely been studied, with the exception of a few articles by Israeli scholars (see, e.g., Ben Tal 2010; Meir 2007a; Meir 2007b; Persico 2014). In this article, after a short history of Bnei Baruch within the framework of the revival of Kabbalah in 20th century Israel and a description of its core doctrines, I will explore the experiences of members (whom Bnei Baruch prefer to identify as “students”) in various countries and their different affiliation processes in an endeavor to explain why the movement was able to achieve an international success within a comparatively short period of time and what makes it attractive to different categories of prospective students. Bnei Baruch has also received a certain amount of media criticism in Israel, and the article will try to elucidate the causes of the opposition and controversies.

In addition to Bnei Baruch’s publications, the article is based on interviews with students in Italy, Israel, and the United States, and on the participant observation of their meetings. In January 2016, I first interviewed for three hours a male student of the Italian branch of the group, asking him to tell me the story of his involvement with the group. The dialogue was also aimed at testing the template I planned to use for future interviews. Then, during the month of March, I traveled to Israel, where I spent a week in the movement’s headquarters in Petah Tikva, attending a number of meetings, taking my meals with the students in the communal canteen, and interviewing the founder and leader, Michael Laitman, for a total of three hours. I also interviewed individually thirty-one students, all adults between thirty and fifty-seven years of age, of which sixteen were women and fifteen men. Twenty-five of them were Israelis, and six were foreigners visiting the headquarters: two from Australia, two from Italy, one from Turkey, and one from Lebanon. The selection was based on the availability each day of students willing to spend time with me, but I tried to keep a reasonable proportion between men and women and between students with different national and religious backgrounds. Each interview lasted roughly one hour, although some were extended up to one hour and a half, and followed a template I had designed for the research:

1. Student’s religious (or non-religious) background before meeting Bnei Baruch, including religious affiliation of parents, if any
2. How the student met the movement (Internet, lectures, TV programs, etc.)
3. After how much time after first meeting the movement the student joined it, and what were the main reasons for joining

4. What the student does in/for the movement
5. How many hours per week the student devotes to the movement
6. Whether spouse, children, and other live-in relatives are also students in the movement (If they are not, does this cause any problem?)
7. What benefits the student believes he or she derives from being in the movement
8. What is his or her personal relationship with the founder of Bnei Baruch, Michael Laitman, and what Laitman exactly represents for him or her
9. Whether membership offers guidelines to read current political events, in Israel and internationally
10. What are the relations with non-members, and did the student experience any discrimination or problem because of the membership
11. What are the relations, if any, with ex-members who left the movement

The interviews indicated that although in Israel the majority of students have Jewish parents, Bnei Baruch also has students with a non-Jewish background, including Christian and Muslim. Interviews were recorded after each member had consented and later transcribed. Coding was used only for some basic categories, as the template was not followed rigidly and students were encouraged to digress and add anything they would regard as relevant or significant.

On April 20–22, 2016, I attended the national convention of the U.S.—Canada branch of Bnei Baruch in Newark, New Jersey. I attended the various meetings and functions of the convention, which left less time to participants for individual interviews. With the permission of the movement, however, I set aside a room for interviewing students who volunteered to participate in group interviews. Forty-five students participated in the exercise, from both the U.S. and Canada (and one woman from New Zealand), divided in four groups of eleven, ten, twelve, and twelve respectively, for a total of twenty-four men and twenty-one women, all adults, age twenty-three to sixty-four. Each round of interviews lasted approximately two hours. Basically the same questions as in Israel were used, going around the table and asking for short answers as time was limited. Because of privacy concerns connected with American law, there was no tape recording, although I took extensive notes. Again, only the most basic coding categories were used.

In total, between Italy, Israel, and the U.S., I interviewed seventy-seven students of the movement (plus the leader). Forty-nine of them had a Jewish background and twenty-eight a non-Jewish one, ranging from Eastern Orthodox Christianity to something simply described as “New Age.” Most of those with a Jewish background, however, came from “secular” Jewish families, with little or no religious practice. The sample had the limitation of being somewhat self-selected, as it obviously included only those who accepted or (in the U.S. case) volunteered to be interviewed. I was able to interview students of different

backgrounds and ages, however, and also with different ways of meeting and experiencing life in Bnei Baruch.

Table 1 shows the demography of the interviewees, and adds the religious background.

Table 1: Interviews

	Italy	Israel	USA	Total
Interviewees	1	31	45	77
Women	-	16	21	37
Men	1	15	24	40
Israeli	-	25	-	25
Age 18-30	-	5	9	14
Age 30-55	-	22	31	53
Age 55+	1	4	5	10
American	-	-	31	31
Canadian	-	-	13	13
Italian	1	2	-	3
Australian	-	2	-	2
Other nationality	-	2	1	3
Family Background: Religious Jews	1	5	10	16
Family Background: Secular Jews	-	20	15	35
Family Background: Non-Jewish	-	6	20	26

Before looking at their experiences, a short historical introduction to Kabbalah, Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag, and the origins of Bnei Baruch is necessary. In particular, the continuous references by students to the person and teachings of Yehuda Ashlag and Michael Laitman makes a discussion of their core ideas indispensable. In its first part, this article places Bnei Baruch within the context of the current to which it belongs, Ashlagian Kabbalah, of which other movements are also a part, including the Kabbalah Center founded by Rabbi Philip S. Berg (1927–2013). In its second part, it describes Bnei Baruch’s main doctrines and activities and focuses on how students joined the movement and how this affiliation changed their daily lives. In the third part, I discuss criticism of Bnei Baruch within the context of present controversies on “cults” in Israel, emphasizing that competing definitions of the Kabbalah are not less important than the usual anti-cult rhetoric in this debate.

ASHLAGIAN KABBALAH: RABBI YEHUDA ASHLAG AND HIS LINEAGE

In the early 13th century, a corpus of texts transmitting a body of “ancient wisdom,” both theoretical and practical, came to be known generally as the

Kabbalah throughout the Jewish world. In that same century, the most authoritative statement of Kabbalah, a group of books called *Zohar*, first appeared in Spain, although it was attributed to a second century Jewish rabbi, Shimon Bar Yochai. In the 16th century, Isaac Luria (1534–1572), a rabbi from Safed, then part of Ottoman Syria, also known as “the Ari” (the Lion), emerged as the most prominent interpreter of Kabbalah.

In the meantime, Christian scholars who believed that the wisdom of Kabbalah was not specifically Jewish but universal had challenged that Kabbalah was purely a form of Jewish mysticism (Secret 1985). The Christian Kabbalists of the Renaissance were influential on a subsequent Western esoteric tradition, which insisted on the Eastern origin of Kabbalah, further separating it from Judaism. Esoteric interpretations read Kabbalah through the lenses of a pre-existing esoteric system, through a process of appropriation. Each esoteric system appropriated Kabbalah in order to be confirmed or validated.

Within the Jewish world, modernists who followed the Jewish version of the Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) vigorously challenged Kabbalah. They regarded Kabbalah as hardly compatible with what they perceived as the necessary modernization of Judaism. That tradition influenced the cultural establishment of the newly founded State of Israel, which had in turn an ambiguous attitude towards the Kabbalah. The foremost academic scholar of Kabbalah, Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), had moved from Germany to Jerusalem in 1923 and was widely revered.¹ Scholem, however, interpreted the Kabbalah as a thing of the past, an important current in Jewish thought well worth historical studies in the universities but with very little to contribute to contemporary Jewish culture. Scholem created the category of “Jewish mysticism” as something that nurtured and kept united the Jewish community in the Diaspora but was eventually superseded by Enlightened Judaism and Zionism (Huss 2007). This position was shared in Israel by many who believed that, as important as Kabbalah might have been in the past, its contemporary incarnations were obsolete, reactionary, and superstitious, and incompatible with Zionism and socialism. Prominent masters of Kabbalah did emigrate to Israel from Eastern Europe, Northern Africa, and Yemen, but their fame was long confined to the ultra-Orthodox subculture (Garb 2009; Huss 2015a).

Two prominent rabbis, however, promoted different views and prepared what would later become a revival of Kabbalah in the late 20th century. Abraham Yizchak Kook (1865–1935), who became the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, integrated Kabbalah into his Jewish nationalist system and insisted that Kabbalah was compatible with Zionism. Yehuda Halevy Ashlag (1884–1954) came to Palestine from Poland and in turn offered a version of Kabbalah compatible with

¹ See, among his many works, Scholem 1987.

socialism through his theory of “altruistic communism” (Bick 1980; Hansel 2002; Huss 2006).

Ashlag was born in Warsaw in an Hasidic family. He prophesied that most Jews who remained in Poland would die and moved to Palestine in 1921. Ashlag proposed a new interpretation of Luria’s Kabbalah, “combining—in the words of Israeli scholar Tomer Persico—a Hegelian historical perception, a Marxist vision, and psychological insights” (Persico 2013a). Altruistic communism meant for him that Kabbalah will ultimately persuade humans of the need to move from egoism to altruism, thus building an egalitarian society. This model society will be reached through human transformation rather than political revolution.

Ashlag was very much committed to the social and economical consequences of the dissemination of Kabbalah. “In his diary, Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion [1886–1973], describes meeting Ashlag ‘numerous times,’ and being struck by the fact that ‘while I wanted to talk to him about Kabbalah, he wanted to talk to me about socialism and communism’” (Odenheimer 2004). Ben-Gurion also wrote in a letter, “I had the privilege of meeting many times with R. Ashlag of blessed memory, a few years ago, in Tel Aviv. I had long conversations with him, about Kabbalah, as well as about Socialism. I was amazed that he adhered especially to Communism. He asked me several times if we will establish a communist regime after the foundation of the Jewish state” (Huss, 2005: 616).² The fact was, however, that for Ashlag “socialism and communism” had become part of the Kabbalah as he interpreted it.

Ashlag was known as Baal HaSulam, “Owner of the Ladder,” because he was the author of *Sulam*, “The Ladder,” a commentary on the *Zohar*. In this magnum opus, Ashlag interpreted the *Zohar* according to his understanding of Lurianic Kabbalah. Academic scholars of Kabbalah either ignored or criticized his interpretation (Odenheimer 2004). Their dismissal or criticism of Ashlag should also be read within the larger context of the emerging conflict between academic and “pragmatic” definitions of Kabbalah.³

In particular, Scholem’s historical and textual criticism had little patience with attempts to present Kabbalah as a pragmatic system relevant for modern life and society. His correspondence shows how strongly and sarcastically he reacted when confronted with such interpretations (Meir, 2013: 260). As for the appropriation of Kabbalah by non-Jewish Western esotericists, Scholem dismissed it as “supreme charlatanism” (Scholem, 1984: 20). This dismissal was more than an academic’s impatience with what he regarded as historical mistakes.

² Huss refers to Bick, 1980: 174.

³ I prefer to call these definitions “pragmatic” rather than “practical,” because “practical Kabbalah” has traditionally been used with reference to the part of Kabbalah dealing with talismans and other magical artifacts. Comments by Boaz Huss on an earlier draft of this article helped me to clarify this point.

Scholem, in fact, was affirming the exclusive right of academics to define what Kabbalah was, inaugurating a controversy that still continues today.

Ashlag also believed that the time for disclosure of the Kabbalah, kept secret for long centuries, had finally come. At first sight, this view may seem counter-intuitive, as Ashlag recognized that his time, i.e. the 20th century, was not more spiritually advanced than previous centuries but in fact more materialistic. In order to understand why Ashlag believed that, precisely in this materialistic world, Kabbalah should be taken out of secrecy, we should examine his worldview, including his theory of will.⁴ At the core of Ashlag's doctrine lies the dialectic tension between the will to bestow (identified as the Creator) and the will to receive (identified as the creation), which is rooted in the process of creation itself. As summarized by Boaz Huss (2005: 16), the Creator,

who is defined as the infinite "will to bestow," created through a complex and dialectical process of emanation a "will to receive" the benefits bestowed by him. Human beings stand at the end of the emanation process, yet, recognizing their situation (and being ashamed of it), human beings are able to change their nature and try to transform their egoistic will to receive into a divine-like will to bestow. Because human beings cannot change their nature completely, transformation is not accomplished by negating one's will to receive but by learning to receive in order to give satisfaction to the Creator.

This learning process requires the knowledge and dissemination of the wisdom of Kabbalah and is also the key to both happiness for individuals and peace for society through "altruistic communism."

Altruistic communism should not be confused with Soviet-style communism. Ashlag harbored no illusions about the Soviet Union. He wrote that Russia was blessed with "more land than the whole of Europe, second to none in raw material." It "agreed to lead communal life and practically abolished private property altogether." Yet, "go and see what has become of them: instead of rising and exceeding the achievement of the capitalist countries, they have sunk ever lower. Now, they not only fail to benefit the lives of the workers a little more than in capitalist countries, they cannot even secure their daily bread and clothes on their flesh." At first sight, Ashlag noted, "it seems unreasonable that it would come to that." Soviet Russia, however, "sinned the one sin which the Creator will not forgive: that all this precious and exalted work, namely bestowal upon others, which they have begun to perform, needs to be for the Creator and not for

⁴ Several important texts of Yehuda Ashlag are collected in the anthology, published by Bnei Baruch, *Kabbalah for the Student* (Toronto, Ontario and Brooklyn, New York: Laitman Kabbalah Publishers, 2008). Translating Ashlag is not an easy task, and, since it also involves adapting his language in order to make it more understandable, translations are in turn politically negotiated, and a matter of controversy between competing Ashlagian groups.

humanity. And because they do their work not for His name, from nature's point of view they have no right to exist" (Y. Ashlag, 2008: 266–67). Soviet communism eliminated and persecuted spirituality, which could have been the only basis for establishing a successful communist society.

When he mentioned "the Creator," did Ashlag refer to Jewish religion? He was a respected Orthodox rabbi, and his audience was made of Orthodox Jews, to whom he recommended to follow the Jewish precepts. Early Kabbalistic teachers maintained that the souls of Jews and non-Jews are intrinsically different. In contrast, "compared to his predecessors, Ashlag greatly diminishes the distinctions between Jew and non-Jew. Ashlag uses the terms 'Israel' and 'Nations of the World,' but he uses these terms in a metaphysical as well as a historical sense" (Myers, 2011: 185). As for the secrecy, Huss (2005: 616) argues that "in contrast to most traditional kabbalistic movements, Ashlag did not regard the Kabbalah as an esoteric doctrine. He claimed that a new era, in which the revelation of kabbalistic secrets was allowed, began in his day, and he attempted to disperse the Kabbalah to the contemporary Israeli secular public."

On the other hand, although in Ashlag's thought there are "hints" (Meir, 2013: 242), and more, of the universalist idea of spreading the wisdom of Kabbalah beyond the borders of Orthodox Judaism, he remained very much part of the ultra-Orthodox Israeli world, and the wider dissemination of Kabbalah was rather achieved by some of his disciples after his death.

Yehuda Ashlag passed away on Yom Kippur Day in 1954. As often happens in spiritual organizations, the unity of his group did not survive his death. Ashlag left four sons, and two of them established Kabbalistic schools and became involved in a legal dispute about the copyright on their father's work. They were Baruch Shalom Halevy Ashlag (1907–1991) and Benjamin Shlomo Ashlag (1910–1984). Other disciples of Ashlag followed one of their teacher's closest associates, Yehuda Tzvi Brandwein (1904–1969), who became Ashlag's brother-in-law through his second marriage and established a separate branch. It in turn divided into rival groups with subsequent schisms, originating inter alia Rabbi Berg's Kabbalah Center, well-known in the United States for the participation of Hollywood celebrities in his activities.⁵ There were other students of Ashlag who tried to establish independent organizations, but they met with very limited success.

Yehuda's eldest son, Baruch Ashlag, was known as the Rabash and was regarded by many as his father's true successor. Baruch lived for a time in Manchester, England, while he was engaged in the legal dispute with his brother Benjamin Shlomo for the copyright on his father's works, and where he was one

⁵ On the Kabbalah Center, see Myers 2007 and Huss 2005.

of the tutors of the famous Jewish philanthropist Rabbi Solomon David Sassoon (1915–1985) (Rabinowicz, 2000: 203).

Upon his return back to Israel, Baruch led a humble life, teaching a group of selected disciples in Bnei Brak. Eventually, by studying and commenting on his father's works, he came to believe that Kabbalah should be spread to larger circles and started teaching in several cities as well as expanding his work and synagogue in Bnei Brak. He also emphasized that the environment heavily influences the spiritual evolution of individuals and tried to adapt his father's teachings on "altruistic communism" to a new social climate.

As it happened in other branches, after his death his disciples divided into various groups. The ultra-Orthodox members of Baruch's community separated from those who did not have an ultra-Orthodox background. Michael Laitman had brought many of the latter to Baruch, whose widow, Feiga, endorsed Laitman's claim to be the designated successor of the Rabash (F. Ashlag 2005).⁶ Laitman is at the origins of Bnei Baruch. Feiga had married Baruch in 1990, shortly before the old master died. It is often reported that Laitman "introduced" Feiga to Baruch (Meir, 2007a: 158). According to the recollections of Laitman's daughter Rachel when I interviewed her, Feiga was one of the persons who took care of the sick first wife of Baruch, Yocheved (1901–1990):

She was one of the people who helped take care of her, because (...) Yocheved, Rabash's first wife, was very ill, and she couldn't get out of bed for years. I remember her forever lying in bed. She couldn't move. My mom cooked for her, she did everything for her. She used to sit with her. They had shifts. She came for two hours every other day, and it was like, you have shifts for someone to sit with her, and then you have Feiga, and Feiga treated her and took care of her. After she died, Rabash had to get married, because a Kabbalist has to be married, it's a given thing. So I remember, we flew to Canada to see my brother, and me, my mom and my sister, and when we came back, this month and a half was like a mission to find Rabash a wife. So my dad spent this month and a half in meetings, with women, and a lot of women didn't want to be with someone so old. Then, they met him with Feiga, and then it happened. The rest is history.

More than twenty different groups are part of the constellation of Ashlagian Kabbalah.⁷ They do not differ only about who were and are the legitimate successors of Yehuda Ashlag. The main controversy is whether the Kabbalah is reserved for Jews or should be disseminated to all those who can benefit from its wisdom, irrespective of their religion. As his father had, Baruch hinted at these

⁶ During my visit at Bnei Baruch headquarters, I was also shown press cuttings from Israeli Orthodox newspapers reporting Baruch Ashlag's death and mentioning Laitman as his "loyal student."

⁷ For a map of these different groups, see Introvigne 2016.

future developments but kept living in an ultra-Orthodox setting. Rachel Laitman, however, recalls an incident she witnessed as a young girl:

It was before Yom Kippur, and there is a custom, where you need to go and clean your soul in a natural resource of water, you know, you go to the sea or some lake, you say a prayer, and you cleanse yourself before Yom Kippur, because it's the Day of Atonement. And then we're standing before the entrance of the Rabash's synagogue [in Bnei Brak]. I was sitting on the stairs, and he was standing right next to me with my dad, and some Hasidic guy came along and said, "When are you doing *Tashlich*?" [the ceremony on the first day of Rosh Hashanah where sins are symbolically cast into the water]. And [Rabash] says, "You see this?" And he pointed to a sewer, dirty water flowing down the street. And he said, "You can do it here." I was shocked because I was a Jewish girl, raised religiously. And I thought, "How could he say that?" It's like, "God forbid!"

We should, of course, distinguish here between Rachel's strong perception of the incident and its real scope (*Tashlich* being a custom rather than a law), and it is also true that Baruch remained an Orthodox rabbi to the end of his life.

MICHAEL LAITMAN AND BNEI BARUCH

Michael Laitman was born in Vitebsk, in present-day Belarus, on August 31, 1946. His disciples refer to him as Rav or Rabbi as an honorific title, although he is not an ordained rabbi and in fact does not act as one by leading religious services. Interestingly, Israeli public opinion sometimes perceives Bnei Baruch as more "Jewish" than the Kabbalah Center because of its lack of the Hollywood commercialism typical of Berg's group and of the centrality of the quintessential Jewish practice of meeting to study difficult texts. On the other hand, notwithstanding the introduction of eclectic New Age and even Christian references, Berg's group in fact maintains more Jewish rituals and customs than Bnei Baruch, where students who are Jews and like to pray do so on Shabbat, but separately from the main meeting.

Laitman's background is not in religion but in science. He studied Bio-Cybernetics in Russia and worked at the Blood Research Institute in Saint Petersburg. He grew increasingly dissatisfied, however, with the answers contemporary science has to offer to the deepest questions about the meaning of life. He managed to move to Israel in 1974. He reports he "started my Ph.D. there [in Russia] but didn't finish it [before moving to Israel]" (Laitman 2016).⁸ He is referred to as Dr. Laitman on the basis of the Ph.D. degree he earned in Russia in

⁸ All the following quotes in this section come from the same interview, unless otherwise indicated.

2004 from the prestigious Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Science, with a dissertation on Kabbalah.

In Russia, Laitman claims, “I had nothing to do with religion. I was completely secular.” In Israel, it was suggested to him that he look into Kabbalah, and at first he did not find it very attractive because he believed it was part of religion. He studied with Rabbi Philip Berg for a short time.⁹ In 1979 he found Baruch Ashlag, who at that time “had six or seven students” only. However, “when I started talking to him I immediately felt: I found the right person. He spoke to the point simply, reasonably, logically. I didn’t have to believe. I didn’t have to bow to anything. I didn’t have to do stuff. There were no rituals, no religion. It was science, a philosophy that had to do with man’s reason.”

During the subsequent twelve years, Laitman remained with Baruch, eventually learning how to deal with the ultra-Orthodox environment of Bnei Brak. Rachel Laitman recalls that her family had to live in “the most religious town in Israel.... The environment was very religious” (R. Laitman 2016). Laitman remained adamant, however, that Kabbalah “has nothing to do with religion.” Religion, he claims, “has no role [in Bnei Baruch]. We observe several customs because they are popular customs, along the traditional things that people do, but that’s it.” If anything, he believes Kabbalah is more similar to science. Laitman keeps an interest in science and maintains a cooperation with the leading Hungarian philosopher of science Ervin László.¹⁰ To Laitman, Kabbalah and science are not separate fields, and in fact Kabbalah is the ultimate level of science for our time.

He comments on the traditional attribution of the origins of the Kabbalah to Abraham that he “wasn’t a Jew. He was a Babylonian, and the rest of the Babylonians connected to him.” Laitman also maintains, against different interpretations of Yehuda Ashlag, that the founder of Ashlagian Kabbalah taught that “we have to circulate this wisdom to everyone,” including non-Jews. “He writes about it explicitly and very determinably.” References to Israel and to the Jews in the elder Ashlag’s writings, Laitman insists, should be interpreted. He maintains that “Israel” is a word connected to the concept of walking in the right direction towards God and refers to humanity as a whole. As for the Jews, after Abraham they

⁹ According to a letter of Berg’s former aide Shaoul Youdkevitch dated January 3, 2008, whose content Boaz Huss has kindly shared with me, Laitman studied very actively with Berg for “one or two years.” I interviewed two former teachers at the Kabbalah Center, who later joined Bnei Baruch. They maintain that Laitman visited the Kabbalah Center’s premises in Israel only once and studied Berg’s doctrines privately with a handful of other students for a few months.

¹⁰ See the special issue, “Disclosing the Science of Kabbalah,” of László’s *The World Futures: The Journal of General Evolution*, vol. 62, no. 4, June 2006.

started calling themselves *Yehudim*, Jews, from the word *Yichud*—unity, unification. A Jew is not a nationality. Previously it meant only a relation to a method, two thousand years ago. It meant a relation to an attitude of building a human society in which love should reign over hate. And this is why the biggest rule of Torah is “Love your neighbor as yourself.” It says that it’s for everyone.

Laitman’s grounds his universalistic position on the dissemination of Kabbalah in a very specific vision of history. Abraham, Laitman teaches, discovered the basic principles of Kabbalah in Babylon. In Laitman’s thought, as summarized by Jody Myers (2011: 203), “Abraham and his cohort became the core group ‘Israel.’ This is a spiritual designation, in that their souls had been perfected and were at the level of the Will to Share. It is also a corporeal designation, because those Israelites bequeathed to their ancestors souls which are at a higher level than the rest of humanity.” With Abraham and his original “Israel” begins a cyclical process of descent and ascent. Soon “the original Israel becomes corrupted, is dispersed among other peoples at lower levels of correction, immerses itself in materialism and degradation, and then bonds with others, not of the original Israel, to rise above the force of egoism” (Myers, 2011: 203).

The cycle repeats several times, although “each subsequent fall is lower and more expansive” and “later ascents do not reach the earlier heights” (Myers, 2011: 204). The fall after the destruction of the Second Temple was the most extreme, and as a result Shimon Bar Yochai ordered to keep the Kabbalah secret. Luria, however, who opened the study of Kabbalah to all Jews, inaugurated a new ascent and a time of final cleansing, which culminated with Yehuda Ashlag, who opened it also to non-Jews. This reading is at least how Laitman interprets the elder Ashlag’s teachings, as among the different groups of Ashlagian Kabbalah there are also different interpretations. Myers argues that “while Ashlag taught that ‘Israel’ and ‘the Nations of the World’ are elements within every human soul, Laitman has applied this concept systematically and in a manner probably not imagined by his master. ...In short, what for Ashlag was primarily a theoretical possibility at the end of time, is for Laitman an unfolding reality” (Myers, 2011: 207).

On the other hand, the distinction between Jews and non-Jews is so important in the historical tradition of Kabbalah that Laitman himself, Myers (2011: 210) adds,

cannot help but teach, following Ashlag, that Jews acquire Kabbalah differently than non-Jews. Jews, identified with “internality,” must engage in Kabbalah study throughout their many life cycles, whereas the Nations, identified with “externality,” may acquire it instantaneously. And...the dynamics of correction must start with Israel [in this case intended as “the Jews”]. “Everyone must come

to adhesion, but Israel must show the way!” and become “a light unto the nations” in disseminating the core teaching of the Kabbalah.

What, then, is this core teaching of the Kabbalah? Laitman refers to Yehuda Ashlag’s theory of will, that he prefers to call “desire”: “the desire is the root of the mind and not the mind the root of desire” (Y. Ashlag, 2008: 95). Desire governs a good part of human activities, yet there are different levels of desire. The first level includes the primary, physical desires, starting from the basic desires for food and sex. The second level concerns money and riches. The third, power and fame. The fourth, knowledge. Humans elaborated different strategies to cope with desires, either by systematically satisfying them or by trying to reduce the level of desire.

As it becomes increasingly materialistic, the world is less and less satisfied with the fulfillment of the four levels of desire. Desires no longer satisfy. Some escape in alcohol and drugs; others fall into depression or even commit suicide. It is precisely from disillusion and crisis that a fifth level of desire arises, the desire for spirituality. It should not be confused with a religious experience. It is rather the desire to find an answer to the most fundamental human question: what is the purpose of our life?

Each desire comes with its own method of fulfillment. The specific method for fulfilling the fifth level of desire is Kabbalah. When the fifth level of desire was not widespread, it made sense to teach Kabbalah only to a select few. Since we live now in a time when spiritual desire has largely surfaced throughout humanity as a whole, Kabbalah should be disclosed and taught to all those willing to learn it.

Thus, there is no contradiction between a time of crisis when, as Yehuda Ashlag (2008: 141) wrote, “the essence of the souls is the worst,” and the emergence of the fifth level of desire. The crisis itself generates the widespread emergence of spiritual desire. In order to be fulfilled, however, this desire should undergo two processes. The first is reaching its maximum degree, a process that the universal crisis itself and its resulting general desperation fuel. The second is called “correction,” a key concept in Kabbalah in general and in Bnei Baruch’s teaching in particular. All parts of our life should be “corrected” by moving from egoism and selfishness to altruism. This journey is long and complicated and also includes a social dimension. Throughout the centuries, new opportunities of correction have arisen. Moving from egoism to altruism is at the heart of Bnei Baruch’s pragmatic Kabbalah. Not only does it ensure that knowledge, the fourth desire, is used for the best but it makes fulfillment of spirituality, the fifth desire, possible.

Another key Bnei Baruch teaching deals with the idea of “connection.” On the surface, our world is not dominated by connection but by conflict, not by love but

by hate. Even if “we cannot erase the ego,” however, we can always “connect above it.”¹¹ We cannot eliminate conflict, explains Laitman: “This will happen. It’s our ego. What we can do is create a bridge above it, build another level, a level of relationships. Below we are conflicting; above we are connected. Despite our disagreements, our conflicts, and our natural negative attitude toward one another.”

Laitman’s Ashlagian Kabbalah is by no means atheistic: “If we connect correctly, we discover in the connections among us a special force, a special flow and circulation of a force, which is called the upper force.” We can also call it the force of God:

God is the Force that humanity discovers through the right connections among people. If the mutual connections between people are in order to complement one another and connect into a single system, then they discover the force. It is the force of the light, or upper world force. It is called *Boreh*, Creator, from the words *Bo Reh*, come and see, meaning that when we connect, we discover it and see it.

It is, however, possible that in this life “maybe I haven’t even found Kabbalah, I haven’t started learning how to connect to people correctly.” So “the informative bit” that is the core of the person “dresses again in a human body that’s born in this world, and again is given a chance to achieve the right connection.”

Reincarnation, in Laitman’s thought, is also connected with altruistic communism:

We incarnate time and time again until we come to a point where that “communist” society comes to a state where it is implemented through us on earth. This means we build a balanced society where the upper force, which is the force of connection and love, is among us and connects us, and then by this we will achieve the complete correction.

Laitman insists that Yehuda Ashlag’s communism should not be confused with Soviet communism. As a young man, Laitman was indoctrinated in communism in Soviet Russia:

What I learned afterwards about Baal HaSulam’s communism is that it’s a completely different system, that what happened in Russia is not communism, and not socialism. It’s crude and crass ruling of a party that by chance and by force came to power, through a struggle, killing along the way loads of people, millions of people.

¹¹ This quote and those that follow through the end of this section come from Laitman 2016, unless noted otherwise.

BNEI BARUCH

Although media mention more often Berg's Kabbalah Center, because it both emerged later (thus being perceived as more "new") and involved Hollywood celebrities, in fact Laitman's Bnei Baruch is the largest group of pragmatic Kabbalah in Israel and perhaps also internationally. It is also the most active group in spreading Yehuda Ashlag's original writings and teachings and proposing his doctrinal system.

Bnei Baruch ("Sons of Baruch," with reference to Baruch Ashlag) started in 1991, after the younger Ashlag's death, as a modest study group in Laitman's apartment in the very Orthodox town of Bnei Brak. In fact, as mentioned earlier, most of Laitman's followers were not Orthodox Jews. Many were Israeli Jews of Russian origin, a population where the percentage of Orthodox is historically low. Nonetheless, they tried to adapt to life in Bnei Brak. Their number grew as more expressed the desire to learn about the elder Ashlag and his son through such a close disciple of the latter as Laitman. The breakthrough came in 1997 with the Internet first and live radio broadcasts later. The systematic use of new technologies transformed a local group into an international movement. Headquarters were moved from Bnei Brak to Petah Tikva, northeast of Tel Aviv. Expansion through the use of technology continued in 2007, with a TV program by Bnei Baruch broadcast through Israeli television. In 2008, Bnei Baruch acquired its own channel, Channel 66, popularly known as "the Kabbalah channel." Two Internet television channels called Kab.tv (which broadcasts the TV channel) and Open TV, a television production company known as Kabbalah Television, and the Web sites www.kabbalah.info and www.kabbalahmedia.info, the latter a mammoth archive of video and audio recordings and texts, remain to this day essential tools for Bnei Baruch's dissemination of Kabbalistic teachings.

The systematic use of technology notwithstanding, Bnei Baruch still relies primarily on the personal interaction of Laitman with his followers. He teaches daily, except when he travels, at 3 A.M. in the Petah Tikva international center. The unusual schedule has raised eyebrows among critics, who insist on its inconvenience for those who have to work the next morning. Bnei Baruch answers that teaching at night is not unprecedented in Kabbalistic schools and was practiced by Baruch Ashlag himself. In fact, the practice also exists in monastic traditions of different religions.

During my participant observation of Bnei Baruch in Israel, I had the opportunity to attend one of the night lectures. It was held in a large room during a common weekday, with some 250 people in attendance (more usually attend on Shabbat), sitting at different tables. They were all males, although some women followed the lecture in a separate room. An impressive feature of the room was the presence of a large number of monitors showing groups and some individual

practitioners connected via Internet from many cities and countries of the world, from New York to Kaunas, Lithuania, and from Colombia to Kazakhstan. These groups participated actively in the lecture and joined in the powerful moment of male bonding when all stood up and sang the movement's versions of popular Israeli songs. The 3-hour lesson alternated readings from the *Zohar* and from the writings of Yehuda Ashlag, comments by Laitman—with a liberal use of diagrams—and group discussions around the tables.

Most of the audience seemed accustomed to the practice of staying awake at night for the lesson. None fell asleep in the room, although the monitors showed that some connected through the Internet appeared somewhat sleepier. Although the arguments discussed were not easy, the climate was cheerful. Most people, coming from very different backgrounds—I had at my table a naturopath and a businessman, and was offered a lift by a tenured professor of chemistry at Tel Aviv University—knew each other and had attended lessons for years, which explained the camaraderie.

An annual convention in Israel gathers in the Tel Aviv Convention Center some 6,000 followers. In addition, there are local study groups in 107 countries, with approximately 50,000 regular participants in Israel and some 150,000 worldwide, participating either physically or through streaming (the figure of two million is often quoted and refers to visitors of the website). Local conventions have been organized in such diverse places as Mexico, Turkey, the United States, and Russia. Conventions and courses are organized through a non-profit association known as Kabbalah Laam (Kabbalah for the People). Israeli media often use the name Kabbalah Laam as a synonym for Bnei Baruch.

While the general scheme of human history and the emergence of the fifth level of desire develops ideas of the elder Ashlag, Bnei Baruch goes on to explain that we are in the middle of an especially serious international crisis, which included the 2008 financial troubles and entered into a new phase in 2011. The crisis affected the Middle East through the so-called Arab Springs, as well as Israel. It requires, Laitman believes, a sustained effort to offer Kabbalah not only to individuals but also to society. Thus, a social activist branch of Bnei Baruch called Arvut (Mutual Responsibility) was established in 2011. Arvut is not a political party but operates through a number of community projects aimed at defusing tension in Israeli society, promoting the values of mutual responsibility, assisting the elderly and the poor, and supporting gifted youths to achieve success in school and university. Several students of Laitman are active in politics as members of the Likud party. Students of Bnei Baruch have also formed an autonomous local political party called Beyachad (Together) that participated in the 2013 local elections in Petah Tikva.¹² Beyachad was the most voted political

¹² See Beyachad's English Web site at <http://www.pt2013.co.il/en/about-beyachad/>.

party in the city and elected four representatives to the city council. They are currently part of the opposition against a majority that includes representatives of different parties.

LIVING IN BNEI BARUCH

“Shared stories” are an important part of human experience. Studying a community implies, in the words of sociologist Arthur Frank (2010: 4), a “socio-narratology,” examining “the sense of self that stories impart, the relationships constructed around shared stories, and the sense of purpose that stories both propose and foreclose.” Sociologists have long recognized that it is ultimately impossible to distinguish completely between a spiritual experience and the account of it. In fact, in the words of Courtney Bender (2007: 206), “communally prescribed narratives...shape religious experiences.” Rather than pursue an elusive “real” experience supposedly existing before its socially constructed narrative, a community is better studied by soberly acknowledging that experiences and narratives are often impossible to disentangle.

This acknowledgement does not mean that qualitative methods and interviews do not offer a valid perspective into the life of a spiritual community. Quite to the contrary, it is by recognizing their nature of communal constructions that shared stories become uniquely meaningful. Most students of Bnei Baruch I interviewed are regulars in the night lessons and daily activities of the group and know each other. They know and enjoy each others’ narratives, and it is this continuous exchange of retelling and elaborating that makes their stories central to understanding the community.

Who Joins Bnei Baruch?

Many of those I interviewed came from secular backgrounds. A good number of those who described their background as “Jewish” were in fact typical Israeli secular Jews. Nitza came from a Jewish family but “never actually felt any connection with Judaism. I felt a connection to everything besides Judaism.”¹³ Others were nominal Christians. Marty, who started Bnei Baruch in Turkey, defines himself as “a secular Muslim. My family background is Muslim. We are a traditional family. We keep our traditions. But in terms of ‘religious religious,’ no.”

Some interviewees, on the other hand, grew up in Jewish religious families. Oren, the grandson of a rabbi who came to Israel from Yemen, “was born in a

¹³ Most interviewees accepted to be indicated in this article by their real first name, except “Janet,” “Judith,” “Gina,” and “Marcel.” In the case of comparatively well-known public figures such as Rachel Laitman and Shay Rokach, I also mention the last name.

religious family, ...grew up in a settlement [and] studied in a *yeshiva* [i.e. a religious school] like my father and brothers.” Judith “became very religious under the age of 16, 17.” These experiences, on the other hand, do not appear to be typical.

A large subgroup of my sample included seekers, who experienced various alternative religions before joining Bnei Baruch. When working in Australia, Marty “found [himself] going around bookshops and looking for spiritual books. I did some Buddhism, meditation. I even went to listen to the Dalai Lama.” Nitza “tried everything ... Buddhism, Sufism, Shamanism.” Oren, although raised in an Orthodox milieu, “like all Israelis, traveled to Far East,” a reference to the practice of spending some years in India seeking cultural and spiritual experiences that became common among young Israelis in the 1970s and 1980s. Moshe, who lived in Italy and started the first organized activity of Bnei Baruch there, originally “felt that Christian religion was very appealing, very beautiful.” Janet was an exchange student in Salt Lake City, where she stayed with a Mormon family and decided to become a Mormon. Since she was a minor, she needed her parents’ permission to be baptized. She wrote to Israel, and as a result her father “came to Utah. And he took me.” He told her that “before you go to other areas, you need to know your own religion,” and sent her to a *yeshiva* in Jerusalem.

Chaim practiced alternative medicine in Australia and “used to go almost every second weekend to one of those spiritual workshops ... New Age, exactly, there are so many of them. ...I was searching for anything and everything, paying thousands of dollars to different retreats.” Chaim is one of those who was more than a seeker, playing an active role in the subculture of alternative spiritualities. He went from attending retreats as a client to “teaching in all these retreats.” Janet, after her juvenile fascination for Mormonism, “started to channel” three different spirits—one was called Metatron, although she did not exactly understand the implications of the name in the Kabbalah, where it indicates a powerful angel—and “people came, and they paid. Yes, they did. It was a profession, an occupation,” which lasted until she “started seeking on the Internet, still searching for something that I didn’t find in the channeling.” After she joined Bnei Baruch, she completely repudiated these previous activities.

In the U.S., Gina heard about the Kabbalah by attending a group studying the teachings of English magus Aleister Crowley (1875–1947). She then searched the Internet for more information about Kabbalah and found Bnei Baruch. Marcel was very active in a group inspired by Armenian esoteric leader George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866–1949). He also discovered Bnei Baruch via the Internet, attended some meetings, and ended up persuading another two members of his Gurdjieff group to move with him to Laitman’s organization.

A market search the movement obtained in 2010 from a marketing expert and kindly shared with me confirmed that a situation where one looked around for

different religious and spiritual answers was usually the starting point of itineraries leading to Bnei Baruch. The search profiled the “typical” person who decides to become a Bnei Baruch student in the English-speaking world, distinguishing between those with a Christian and a Jewish background. In both cases, future students started by questioning their religious roots. While Christians doubted that theirs was the unique true religion and looked elsewhere, Jews were dissatisfied with the Judaism they knew but in a way wanted to remain within the perimeter of their Jewish roots.

At one stage, what the market search called “seekers” experimented with fashionable alternatives:

Common things tried are Buddhism, Yoga, Reiki, and common books read are self-help titles of bestselling authors like [Mexican neo-shamanic master] Don Miguel Ruiz, [popular American self-help author] Dr. Wayne Dyer [1920–2015], and [German metaphysical teacher] Eckhart Tolle among others, but there are many directions a person takes here, each one unique. Less common “one-off” routes included searching through conspiracy theories, the paranormal, interest in life after death, and many other unique directions.

But, while the future student was involved in these experiences, the report continues, “although she found them to be interesting and that they opened her up to new things, she still felt like they were all only putting pieces of the puzzle together, without ever completing the picture.”

Finally, the seeker came across Kabbalah, often by reading either popular presentations such as those by British author Z’ev ben Shimon Halevi or scholarly books, mostly by Scholem. One interesting result of the market search is that the typical future student of Bnei Baruch often also experimented with Berg’s Kabbalah Center. Then, “at Berg’s Kabbalah Center, [the seeker] was put off by the aggressive, sales-like, marketing-heavy approach. She couldn’t believe that representatives of genuine spirituality could charge money to people who need spirituality. It seemed to her the contrary of what spirituality is all about.”

When she tried Bnei Baruch, on the other hand, she “liked the way Bnei Baruch offered free classes and materials.” Apparently, not “selling” anything worked as the best sales pitch.

Affiliation

None of the interviewees used the word “conversion” in order to describe the process of affiliation to Bnei Baruch. Their narratives make it clear that becoming a student of Bnei Baruch is different from joining a religion. For Marty, “it’s not a religious thing.... And there was nothing to believe in; there was nothing mystical

about it; there was nothing compelling you to ‘You have to believe this is like this or that,’ it was something completely different.”

Eli, who has an important leadership position in the movement, explained that in Bnei Baruch most students pray “only on Shabbat, not on a daily basis. And only the ones who want to. There is an opportunity to do it. Most of the people are not doing it. Attending the morning lessons is regarded in itself as a form of prayer.”

An integral part of the shared narratives of students is that the starting point for their eventual affiliation to Bnei Baruch was a sense of void in their otherwise successful life. Marty had a good accounting job in Australia: “The job was always good, the life’s always good, but there’s always something not right. It just doesn’t give me that fulfillment.... ‘What are we living for? What’s the point in this whole life?’”

Moshe was a successful photographer, with works exposed in museum exhibitions, but “in all this allegedly good life I felt that it’s empty.” When a museum in Moscow exhibited his work, “I should have felt all the respect and honor, I should have enjoyed it. And I didn’t, and I began to ask myself questions why.”

Sometimes, there was a specific event evidencing a spiritual void. For Dafna, it was “when my little sister disappeared in Mexico, and she hasn’t been found until today, and of course we are continuing searching.” From this tragic event, she “understood...that I have no true control over my life.”

After formulating the question about the meaning of life, the future students of Bnei Baruch became spiritual seekers. How did they find the movement? The usual way of affiliation, through family and friends, is not absent. Some married a student. A surprising number of interviewees, however, discovered Bnei Baruch through the Internet or television before actually meeting a student. Marty found a book on Kabbalah in a bookstore. He dropped it as too religious but then “did a little Google search on Kabbalah, and I found the Bnei Baruch website.” He downloaded material, read it for weeks, and then “sent an email to Bnei Baruch, asking ‘How do you study? Do you have a group? I am in Australia.’ And they said there was a few people like me in Australia.” Moshe received some very generic information about Kabbalah from his parents and “went to search Kabbalah [on Google]. ...And the first site that I found—like I searched for the book of Zohar first thing—the first site was Bnei Baruch.”

At one stage, Moshe decided to “disseminate” (a typical word used by Bnei Baruch) the movement’s teaching in Italy. Typically, rather than traveling around Italy he built a website in Italian and “a forum where people could ask questions, and I was giving answers. I was translating a lot of materials—original texts. And putting them on the website.... And this is how the Italian group grew exponentially.” Only after a significant number of Italians had started interacting

systematically with the website, congresses were organized, starting with some thirty students and reaching the record number of 250 in 2009.

Marty told me a similar story about Turkey. He is a Turk who earned his master's degree in Australia and remained there to work with an insolvency company. There, he became involved in Bnei Baruch and at one stage felt called to disseminate the teachings in Turkey. While in other spiritual movements this call would have meant going back to Turkey, Marty actually moved in 2006 to Israel and, with the resources and technological skills of Bnei Baruch, built a rich website in Turkish about Kabbalah. Rather than spending time visiting friends and relatives in Turkey, Marty "just built a website in Turkish," and "we translated articles...as many as we could do." Finally, the result was achieved that "if you write 'Kabbalah' in Turkish Google, our site is the first one to come up." Marty insists that "we don't pay for Google AdWords," Google's program aimed at promoting websites in search results for a fee. The reason Bnei Baruch's Turkish site comes up first in Google searches about Kabbalah is simply "that it's the richest" about the subject. Then, Marty decided to supplement the website with television programs in Turkish. Again, he did not go to Turkey for this purpose. The programs are produced "in a TV studio here [in Petah Tikva, Israel]" and are largely broadcast via the Internet. As happened in Italy, only after Bnei Baruch's teaching was disseminated through Internet and online television, congresses followed in Turkey, with some fifty participants every year.

In Israel, television is no less important than the Internet for the movement. Janet described how she at first was not impressed by Laitman's TV programs: "I couldn't understand what he was saying. His Hebrew was awful" (Laitman's mother tongue is Russian). Later, however, a particular TV lesson by Laitman impressed her so much that she "cried for three days" and decided to study in a Campus, one of the courses Bnei Baruch offers to those who are new to the movement. Moshe told the story of an Italian flight attendant who recognized Laitman during a flight of her airline, Alitalia, as she had followed his lectures via online TV. Although she had never personally met a student of Bnei Baruch before, she accepted Laitman's invitation to attend a congress in Rome. Eventually, she married a Dutch member of the movement and became a dedicated student herself. Nitzza discovered Bnei Baruch "on TV," although television induced her to "check it on the Internet."

There are also more traditional methods of dissemination. Lectures are organized in several cities in Israel and internationally, and, as Oren reported, "we hand out a lot of flyers." A flyer advertising a lecture at the Israeli Club in Sydney, Australia, attracted Chaim to Bnei Baruch, although he eventually discovered that "they didn't actually have a live lecture. They showed Dr. Michael Laitman on a screen." At one stage, Bnei Baruch printed 250,000 copies of a weekly newspaper. As Eli explained, "We decided to discontinue it because

we decided to move very strongly to the Internet.” Chaim is involved in advertising through flyers but acknowledges that the movement produces “less and less flyers as time goes on, but it’s mostly Internet.” There are local differences, though: “In New York almost all the students came through introductory lectures. In Brazil it was 100 percent Internet.”

When I asked Laitman how a group of some ten students who followed him after Baruch Ashlag’s death became an international movement with tens of thousands of students, he answered by attributing the success to the Internet. Other leaders expressed the same feeling. My observation of Bnei Baruch seems, to some extent, to disprove the conclusion reached by several studies of conversion to new religious movements, from a pioneer 1965 article by John Lofland and Rodney Stark to subsequent research by the same Stark and William Sims Bainbridge (1980) and a number of other scholars, including myself (Introvigne 2011; Introvigne and Stark 2006). These studies concluded that empirical observation did not confirm media accounts claiming that new religious movements had discovered new and almost irresistible proselytization techniques. In fact, just as it happened in mainline religions, personal interaction and working “along the networks” through family and social relationships accounted for more conversions than booths in the streets and forms of “disembodied” propaganda (Stark and Bainbridge, 1980: 1376–80). A majority of my Bnei Baruch interviewees first met the movement on the Internet, although it is true that actual affiliation came only after personal contacts. Further research would be needed to determine whether Bnei Baruch is uniquely skilled in using the Internet or affiliation processes are slowly changing in the 21st century.

Work, Family, Children

Becoming a student of Bnei Baruch is a life-changing experience. Night lessons are held daily. Even housewives told me that they hear daily the 3-hour recorded lessons while they do their household chores and devote several other hours to various activities on behalf of the movement. Judith, although a busy professional woman, estimates that she devotes 24–25 hours per week to Bnei Baruch. Only some sixty people, however, work for Bnei Baruch full time. The others have jobs outside of the movement, and Laitman actually emphasizes the importance of working in order to maintain a healthy approach to life and spirituality. Dafna reported that after she joined Bnei Baruch, “my life didn’t change externally. I continue working at the same work I had before I started studying. I continue having great relationship with my family, with the same friends that I had.”

Although they acknowledge that this regimen is somewhat difficult to explain to their friends, students report that they adapted their schedules quite well to the

demanding practice of the night lessons without disruption of their family life at all. Dafna's husband was a student for fifteen years before she finally decided to join Bnei Baruch herself. The husband started attending the night lectures one year after the marriage, "and I told to myself, 'Oh my God, what is this, why?' Because he used to go during these hours, in the mornings, and for me these hours were crazy. But then it became a habit...the relation between us became warmer."

Actually, some students *prefer* to hear lessons at night. Marty recalled that "when there's a lesson here in Israel, in Australia it's in the morning or around lunch time." But, rather than taking advantage of the different time zones, Australian students "were watching it at night time in Australia, a recorded session. ...First of all, none of us had time during the day." But there was also a willingness to replicate the spiritual experience of waking up during the night for the lesson.

Children of students attend regular schools. The movement never thought of opening its own schools, although, as Eli explained, "we had at least a few kindergartens that used to be operated by our students. But that's not officially Bnei Baruch. There is at least one kindergarten where mainly Bnei Baruch students go to, but it is not closed to others. Also people who don't study send their children there." Apart from kindergartens, "we have a center after school where they have extra curricular activities: arts, playing, acting, whatever. They are done by students as an addition to the normal school system."

Dafna reported that her adolescent daughter is particularly enthusiastic about the center, while other interviewees said that their children do not attend it. Originally, adolescents accompanied by their fathers were admitted to the lectures from the age of 13. Now it is 18, or 16 in exceptional cases.

The parents I interviewed reported that their children go to secular schools, although a few go to religious, ultra-Orthodox schools. I asked whether they feel discriminated against there because of their connection with Bnei Baruch. The normal answer was no within secular schools, as children of the Bnei Baruch students do not dress distinctively and are instructed not to try to disseminate the movement's teaching among their schoolmates. In religious schools, however, when the connection with Bnei Baruch is discovered, children may have some unpleasant experiences.

Gender Issues: Women and LGBT

One of the most controversial issues about Bnei Baruch is the separation between men and women. As mentioned earlier, women do not sit in the communal hall for the night lesson, although some follow it by television in a separate room of the center and others do the same at home. During my participant observation in Petah Tikva, I took meals in the communal canteen,

where women sit together at a long table, separated from men. I was told that there is no regulation about this practice, but it happens.

Only one interviewee, Janet, admitted that initially she had a negative reaction about the separation: "I looked at this [women and men sitting separately], and I said: 'What's going on? No, it's not my style. ...I thought, 'It's primitive.' [But then], as time goes by, you start understanding it." You study the Kabbalah, Janet said, and you discover the deeper reason for the separation: "You can feel that the energy of a male or a female, it's different." Judith claimed that the separation helps building "homogenous groups" and "never really bothered me," although it is obviously far from her secular professional life.

When I discussed the issue with Laitman, he indicated at first a more mundane, practical reason for the separation:

There is no difference between women and men in studying Kabbalah and in implementing Kabbalah. The only difference we do make is during the study, but also not for beginners, but for more advanced students, we separate men from women. Why? To prevent distractions. The difference in genders influences specifically men. Women are less influenced by that. When men see women, it is more difficult for them to concentrate on the topic we are learning.

Apart from the night meetings and the communal meals, however, women and men work together on behalf of Bnei Baruch. The student who manages from Israel all activities in North and South America is a woman, and she is not the only example of a woman in a leading position in Bnei Baruch, with men working under her.

Some women actually claim to enjoy the separation. Nitza, who was the manager of a large travel agency and now works as a personal trainer, stated that

this is the thing I love very much in this place. To tell you the truth, I always tell my husband: One of the things I love very much is the separation. I'll tell you why. I came from working in a masculine world, and I always saw that it's a fact, very much, when you do business as well, all the connections between men and women, it's a fact. It affects you in any way. So here, when I want to concentrate on the work, so I want to be very much in the intention, and for me, it's very good to separate.

Dafna said that "maybe I will surprise you," but the relations between men and women in Bnei Baruch are "much better than what I've experienced anywhere else, in the secular society," and should not be confused with what she perceives as the real discrimination against women in ultra-Orthodox groups.

One important difference between Bnei Baruch and Kabbalistic groups grounded in the ultra-Orthodox tradition is the former's good relationship with the

Israeli LGBT community. Shay Rokach is a well-known gay activist in Tel Aviv and a student of Bnei Baruch. He operated the historic gay bar Evita until its lease expired in 2016 and continues working “with alcohol and pharmaceutical companies to bring their brands to the gay community.” He claims that in Bnei Baruch, “the teachings say that in every person you have the masculine and feminine part all together, so your outer form doesn’t matter.” Being gay, according to Shay, “is not an issue” in the movement:

When I talked to Rav [Laitman] about it, he told me, “Let’s go to the Gay Center. Let’s make a lecture there. Let’s get closer to the people,” and we put on a special evening in the Gay Center in Tel Aviv. In Gan Meir, it was in 2010 or 2011, something like that [actually, the lecture was held on 10 April 2011]. Rav came, and it was amazing.

If there were any doubts about Bnei Baruch’s attitude towards gay people, “when Rav came to a LGBT center, we had all the answers.”

Perhaps some questions remained. Janet, who is divorced, shares an apartment with a friend who is also a Bnei Baruch student: “She’s lesbian. I’m not.... It’s not a problem on the day-by-day basis. It’s a problem in the essence, as I see it.... But for me it’s a question, the minus and the plus, the male and the female. But it’s not a problem. It’s a question.”

Eli told me about gay students that “as long as they don’t make an operation and look like a woman, they can sit in the hall [for the night lectures], it’s not a problem.” Shay, however, claimed that “Kabbalah connects everyone” and that he took a transsexual friend to a lesson without experiencing any problem.

Politics

Several interviewees were eager to share their experiences in social and political activities. Janet spent a considerable amount of time working with inmates in jail. She wants to teach them Bnei Baruch’s “method” and developed a course based on the first thirteen conversations of the “New Life,” a series of TV talks by Laitman, without expecting that they will eventually join the movement, although some of the inmates “when they return home, they practice the method in their family.” Others reported working with the Israeli social movement born of the 2011 protests about housing, or in the political party students promoted in Petah Tikva, although they were keen to explain that “it is not Bnei Baruch’s party.” Judith acknowledged that this party also created divisions in the movement: “We...had a vivid discussion here and you know, there are people who still think that this is the wrong way, and it’s completely fine. You always say, ‘two Jews, three opinions.’”

Judith is a skilled political analyst working for a European organization in Tel Aviv, and I discussed with her what may seem a contradiction between Yehuda Ashlag's socialism and the presence of three Likud cabinet ministers at the 2016 conference of Bnei Baruch.¹⁴ Would not the very socialist Yehuda Ashlag turn in his grave? In fact, Judith explained, "If you would check the natural voting patterns among our students, many of them would float to the liberal, democratic left." But she also insists that if Yehuda Ashlag were alive today, he would move somewhat to the center-right.

If we could "bring it down to a very simple sentence," Judith insisted,

we have to strive to very leftist ideas, by changing the society, by being involved, by etc., etc., etc. ...but there is a very tough reality that we have to work in. And the danger of most leftist societies and leftist doctrines, is that they take a very beautiful idea, and they try to impose it on a very capitalistic and very egoistic nature of humankind. And that's why they don't work.... We have to work with society as is, and not lie to ourselves about the nature of humankind. ...In a realistic world, we have to be on a kind of center-right.... You know, you need to have defense, security, etc., etc..... The realistic world has to be dealt with in a center-rightist ideology. But yes, by changing humankind, we will eventually reach a stage called "altruistic communism." But we will not achieve it by placing the lion and the sheep in the same cage, because the lion will simply eat the sheep. But we have to achieve it via education.

While some American students I interviewed would prefer to use a different name than "altruistic communism" because of the negative reactions the word *communism* elicits in the United States, Judith likes to maintain it, and she claims that this beautiful ideal for a remote future can coexist with a proximity to the Likud in the difficult Israeli present. And Eli told me that, at any rate, Baruch Ashlag used to vote for the Likud.

Beauty and the Visual Arts

Laitman told me that the Kabbalah does address the question "Where does beauty come from?" According to him, the very Ashlagian answer is that beauty

¹⁴ See *Ynet* 2016. The Minister of Culture and Sport, Miri Regev, wrote on her Facebook page after the congress, "I was excited to take part yesterday at a Kabbalah Laam event, headed by Dr. Rav Michael Laitman, and to be a part of a huge group of people from Israel and abroad, that in addition to all their daily activities decided to add meaning to their lives and engage in the acceptance of the other, the love of the other, and the eternity of the people of Israel. I wish that we will magnify our efforts to increase the light, strengthen the spirit that is blowing within us, and charge our deposits of faith, love, and acceptance" (https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=947804811983001&substory_index=0&id=118410851589072 [Hebrew]).

is the splendor of “connection above contradiction. Kabbalists are capable of perceiving an inner beauty of creation concealed to others.” As for the outer beauty of the arts, Laitman explained, “we give many reasons, topics, insights to people who compose songs, music. That we do. But in terms of visual arts, like painting...perhaps it’s possible. We have to maybe speak to people who do modern arts. Maybe they are more capable of expressing emotions, than classical arts.”

Kabbalah inspired significant modern art and architecture, but artists looked particularly at the academic Kabbalah of Scholem and his school. The German painter and sculptor Anselm Kiefer devoted many works to Kabbalah after he went to Israel in the mid-1980s to learn it from Scholem’s disciples. Scholem’s influence also appears in the approach to Kabbalah by American abstract expressionist Barnett Newman (1905–1970), whose parents were Polish Jews, and in the presence of Kabbalistic themes in synagogues and even Christian churches and secular building created by Jewish architects such as Louis Kahn (1901–1974) and those who continued his work, including Alexander Gorlin. Indeed, Gorlin (2013: 114–15) finds Kabbalistic themes even in one of Kahn’s masterpieces, Jatiyo Sangsad Bhaban or National Parliament House, hosting the Parliament of Bangladesh in the capital city of Dhaka, despite the fact that the building includes a mosque.

Bnei Baruch is already very active in the field of music and dance, where it has directly inspired well-known Israeli, Russian, Ukrainian, Canadian, Croatian, and American performers, including Arkadi Duchin, Tony Kosinec, Rami Kleinshtain, and the Israeli rock band HaDor HaAharon (The Last Generation). Laitman indicates that “speaking to people who do modern [visual] arts” is part of Bnei Baruch’s agenda for the future. But in a way, the future is already there. In addition to actors and musicians, Bnei Baruch includes visual artists whose work its teachings directly inspire. One such artist is Austrian-born Zenita Komad, whose works include both Kabbalistic symbols and illustrated quotes from Yehuda Ashlag and Laitman. Leading galleries in Vienna and elsewhere have exhibited her paintings and installations.¹⁵ In the installation *It’s Time to Change the Record* (2013), first exhibited at the Galerie Krinzinger in Vienna, stretched cords are connected to various dots on a map of world trade dated 1929, the year of the Great Depression. Komad (2015: 99) refers the installation to Abraham, since “according to Kabalistic interpretation, Abraham represented the stage of connection in spiritual development.” Then, as Laitman teaches, the connection broke and world crises followed, up to the Great Depression and the present global economic and social crisis. But the cords are still there, as a reminder of “a

¹⁵ Komad was indicated as one of the three top under 40 Austrian artists by the *Art Guide 2016* of *Trend* magazine (*Trend*, 2016: 59).

possible natural development in humanity from an egoistic and private society to an altruistic, humane and social one” (Komad, 2015: 99).

In a literary rather than visual form, Jeff Bogner expresses the same thoughts in his memoir *The Egotist*, a travelogue of a journey from the life of a bored New York socialite to Bnei Baruch’s Kabbalah, from below to above, from reception to bestowal. Finally, “consumed by the power of the bestowal, I felt the urgency of connecting with and helping the friends. Even on the bus ride I was beginning to connect with people as I never had before. My sickness was no longer. I began to see that the natural order of the universe was built in connection...” (Bogner, 2014: 144).

DISAFFILIATION AND CONTROVERSIES

The students I interviewed are well aware of controversies but insist that most of those who leave Bnei Baruch are not involved in them. They describe the process of disaffiliation through the image of the revolving door. “The door is open,” Chaim explained; people come and leave, and “if someone leaves they don’t become an opponent.” Moshe, reflecting on the situation in Italy, added that “many people are coming—some are leaving—some are coming back, and everyone is free to enter and free to go. This is the most beautiful thing because it puts the freedom of choice in your hands.”

What, then, are the controversies all about? Although Israel had its first anti-cult media campaign in 1974, mainly targeting a movement imported from India, the Divine Light Mission (Beit-Hallahmi, 1992: 44), reiterated efforts for a specific legislation against “cults” never succeeded. They were revamped in 2015, after two “cult” leaders, self-proclaimed ultra-Orthodox rabbi Elijah Chén and polygamist Goel Ratzon, were sentenced to severe jail penalties for slavery, rape, and child abuse in 2011 and 2014 (Cavaglioni 2008; Ruah-Midbar and Klin-Oron 2013).

As early as 1992, Nurit Zaidman-Dvir and Stephen Sharot (1992: 279) had noticed a unique feature of the Israeli anti-cult movement: “In contrast to other western societies, the most active and effective anti-cult activities in Israel have been initiated and carried out by religious interests and organizations and especially by the ultra-Orthodox.” Zaidman-Dvir and Sharot astutely noted that secular critics may easily regard the ultra-Orthodox groups themselves as “cults.” In fact, the report of the Belgian Parliament on cults, dated 1997, denounced with very harsh words and included in a list of cults Satmar, the largest group in Hasidic Judaism (Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, 1997: 1:358–59).¹⁶ This circumstance, however, did not deter ultra-Orthodox organizations in Israel

¹⁶ This report spells *Satmar* as “Szatmar.”

from participating in the anti-cult movement and denouncing as “cults” groups seen as luring Jews away from Judaism or being otherwise heretic.

Israeli anti-cultists have criticized Bnei Baruch both for being a “cult” and for misrepresenting Kabbalah. While my interviewees perceived the hostile reaction against Bnei Baruch by the ultra-Orthodox groups as particularly strong, scholars believe that secular anti-cultism is actually currently more active than its religious counterpart in Israel (Ruah-Midbar and Klin-Oron, 2013: 810–16). It is, however, part of the unique peculiarity of the Israeli anti-cult scenario that the two forms of anti-cultism are often almost impossible to disentangle. Particularly vocal against Bnei Baruch in the Israeli media have been four former students, a father of a former student, a former wife of a student, and the leader of the largest Israeli anti-cult organization. They offered depositions in a civil case involving one of them, wrote to politicians, and published hostile articles both in printed media and websites. As happened for other groups during the “cult wars” in Europe and the United States,¹⁷ a small number of ex-members, hardly typical of the majority of students who left the group harboring no particular grievance against it, were promoted by the moral entrepreneurs of the anti-cult movement, mistaken for typical ex-members, and received disproportionate attention from certain media.

Bnei Baruch has been accused of being a personality cult of its leader or “guru,” of creating a climate where students disconnect from their families and surrender work and career opportunities, of a strict control of its students and of separating them from the larger society, with arguments reminiscent of the “brainwashing” theories.¹⁸ Critics also claim that the group is exploiting members by requiring exaggerated monetary contributions. It has also been accused of causing potential harm to young children, inter alia by asking them to wake up at 3 A.M. to follow the daily meetings, although in fact a group of women who did so were told that their behavior was wrong and ultimately banned from participating in the group’s activities.¹⁹

These arguments are not original and in fact are part and parcel of the standard anti-cult treatment of countless groups labeled as “cults” and attacked using disgruntled ex-members as a main source. A large majority of social scientists who have studied new religious movements reject these clichés as stereotypes and do not believe that “cult” or “brainwashing” are valid categories. Even if one accepted the standard notion of “cult” proposed by anti-cultists, however, Bnei

¹⁷ There is a large sociological literature on the “cult wars.” Classic works include Shupe and Bromley 1980; Bromley and Shupe 1981; Shupe and Bromley 1994.

¹⁸ For an overview of the controversies on brainwashing see Introvigne 2014; Anthony and Introvigne 2006. A collection of essential documents on the controversy is *Gehirnwäsche und Sekten. Interdisziplinäre Annäherungen* (Introvigne and Melton 2000).

¹⁹ This is acknowledged in a typical anti-cult expose of Bnei Baruch published in the Israeli daily newspaper *Haaretz*, although paradoxically that the women were disciplined was offered as further evidence of the authoritarian nature of the group (Blau 2012).

Baruch would hardly fit. As we have seen, it does not propose a religious “conversion” from one religion to another. Bnei Baruch disseminates most, if not all, of its materials and lessons free of charge. Its main source of income is tithing. This practice has been criticized but is quite common among groups of both Jewish and Christian origin. Tithing is a time-honored practice in many Protestant churches and is a core practice in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, better known as the Mormon Church.

In all spiritual groups, leaders, and particularly founders, are considered with great reverence. I did not find in Bnei Baruch, however, any extravagant personality cult of the leader, typical of certain Far Eastern new religious movements. “Guru” is an honorific title attributed to spiritual masters in India. Anti-cultists normally use it to designate a spiritual leader who exerts a totalitarian control on the life of his or her followers. The use of the word “guru” outside its Oriental context is questionable, and the label has now become merely polemical.

Contrary to the claims of the handful of hostile ex-members who interact with the anti-cult movements and the media, my interviewees dismissed as mere slander the criticism that Laitman “dictates” their choices in matters such as work, marriage, and divorce, although they acknowledged that they may consult with him on personal matters. In particular, they emphatically denied that he invites students to leave work in order to devote their lives solely to Bnei Baruch. Laitman’s writings actually emphasize the value of work. He argues that a person who does not work and thus is incapable to provide for his or her family is in fact harming his or her spiritual path. Students are asked to be active members of society, pay taxes, serve in the army, pursue a career, and invest in their families. Additionally, Laitman’s teaching style constantly calls attention to what he calls the “method” rather than to himself or his teachers. I found no evidence that he claims to have supernatural powers, as argued by anti-cultists, although students certainly revere him as a very advanced scholar of Kabbalah and the legitimate successor of such great Kabbalists as Yehuda and Baruch Ashlag.

Another area of criticism concerns women. Bnei Baruch has been accused of patriarchal attitudes and of discriminating against women, a criticism also heard against other Kabbalah groups, Hasidic Judaism, and Orthodox Judaism in general. Admittedly, the vision of the woman in the classics of Kabbalah, including the works of Yehuda Ashlag, is somewhat traditional, and the practice of separation, discussed above, is also common in ultra-Orthodox groups. Some militant ex-members, however, occasionally reduce this practice to a mere caricature in interviews. They claim that Laitman encourages husbands to devote to their wives “no more than seven minutes of attention per day” (Bar-Stav and Liberman 2016). Students of Bnei Baruch regard this claim as ridiculous. Works by Laitman emphasize the value of marriage, family, and healthy relationships

between husbands and wives. Laitman compiled a series of teachings in the spirit of the Ashlags about the importance of a loving relationship between spouses, and this theme recurs in his lectures (M. Laitman 2009; 2014).²⁰ They are certainly far from feminism as understood in 21st century liberal culture, but they do not promote abuse or discrimination against women, nor—as we have seen—against homosexuals.

In this field as in others, claims by disgruntled ex-members should be evaluated against testimonies by actual members in various countries and by ex-members who left the group quietly and did not engage in militant criticism of it (Bromley 1988; 1998). It is certainly both unacceptable for a social scientist and unethical for a reporter to come to conclusions about a movement involving thousands of students based on the opinions of five or ten apostate ex-members only.²¹

Interestingly, as far as I know no criminal cases have been filed against Bnei Baruch for the alleged wrongdoings mentioned in the anti-cult campaigns, although the movement is involved in civil lawsuits about copyright, defamation, and other matters. The experience of the “cult wars” in other countries shows how important it is that serious charges against spiritual movements be investigated by the proper authorities and examined by courts of law. When media substitute themselves for courts, they poison the well of a fruitful societal debate about spirituality and create a climate of intolerance.

CONCLUSION

Our empirical study of Bnei Baruch offers some answers to the question why a tiny movement was able to grow and expand internationally, acquiring tens of thousands of members in the twenty-six years following the death of Baruch Ashlag in 1991. Bnei Baruch capitalized on the renewed interest in the Kabbalah, both in Israel and internationally, which attracted particularly seekers, not all of them with a Jewish background, who had found Kabbalistic references in a variety of contexts. Many of them were secular Jews somewhat willing to reconnect with their religious roots and heritage yet suspicious of Judaism as an organized religion. Most of those who eventually affiliated with Bnei Baruch met the movement via the Internet or its television programs. Only a few attended a lecture without a previous exposure to Bnei Baruch through its websites or television. Once they became personally acquainted with the movement, those

²⁰ On this subject, see also programs 21–46, 195–202, 213, 414–415, 601, and 704 of Laitman’s TV series *New Life*. In these lectures, Laitman mentions that he normally devotes himself daily one hour to a quiet walk with his wife.

²¹ Empirical research has confirmed that “apostates,” e.g. ex-members who become militant critics of the movement they have left, are indeed a small minority of the ex-members (Introvigne 1999).

who stayed specially appreciated the message presenting Kabbalah as universal wisdom, not requiring that students change their religious affiliation or convert to Judaism or to a particular form of it. Once affiliated, most students came to devote to Bnei Baruch a substantial part of their free time, although only a handful decided to work for the movement full time.

As for criticism of Bnei Baruch, it should be partially understood as part of the recent Israeli remake of the older European and American “cult wars.” But it is not less part of the struggle for the Kabbalah.

Kabbalah, as we have seen, has been subject to many different interpretations. Rather than asking which interpretation is “true,” social sciences try to understand what purpose each of them serves. Interpretations of Kabbalah may be distinguished into four groups: academic, religious, esoteric, and pragmatic.

Academic interpretations in the tradition of Scholem, whose main contemporary representative is Moshe Idel, try to reconstruct the oldest versions of Kabbalah through a study of the texts. They are often critical of pragmatic interpretations. For them, the latter simplify what is an immensely complicated system of texts and traditions and impose a coherent meaning to disparate and often contradictory sources. Idel’s criticism of Laitman in some interviews is typical of this position and reminiscent of his mentor Scholem: “In academia, there are assumed to be many types of kabbala. Kabbala has a history, and there are disagreements and debates, while for him [Laitman] it is one clear, unified thing” (Blau 2012). Scholars of comparative religion such as Tomer Persico offer a similar criticism of Bnei Baruch along the lines of Scholem and Idel, occasionally borrowing some language from the anti-cult movement (Persico 2013b). On the other hand, Idel appears more critical of Berg’s Kabbalah Center than he is of Bnei Baruch and has manifested some interest in Laitman’s ideas (Huss 2016).

Religious interpretations insist that Kabbalah is intrinsically connected to Jewish precepts and part of a religion, Judaism. In some of these interpretations, although by no means in all, Kabbalah is in fact Judaism’s esoteric content. For those advocating the religious interpretation, teaching Kabbalah to those who are not qualified does not make sense, and teaching it to non-Jews is tantamount to sacrilege.

Occultists such as Madame Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), who co-founded the Theosophical Society, and the founders of The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn proposed esoteric interpretations. As mentioned earlier, they appropriate Kabbalistic texts and read them through the lenses of their own esoteric systems.

In contrast, pragmatic interpretations deny that Kabbalah is part of a religion or of a given esoteric system. Kabbalah for them is the answer to the deepest human spiritual desires. As such, it can be taught to people of all religions and does not require conversion to Judaism or the observance of Judaism’s

prescriptions. While the leading masters of pragmatic Kabbalah do not ignore the academic literature, they look for coherence, simplicity, and sound spiritual advice where scholars emphasize complexity, contradictions, and theory.

The struggle for Kabbalah between these four interpretations is not purely cognitive. In the process, the very notion of Kabbalah is socially constructed and politically negotiated. Each interpretation serves its own purpose. Conflict is almost unavoidable. In similar cases, social scientists do not ask which interpretation is “true,” but show how the different interpretations work, what purpose they serve, and what the social consequences of their conflicting claims may be.

Who owns Kabbalah? Who has the social authority to define what Kabbalah is or is not? Religionists who pretend that they have the sole authority to define Kabbalah as part of Judaism see in the anti-cult climate now prevailing in Israel an opportunity to reinforce their position by labeling as a “cult” non-religious pragmatic Kabbalah, of which Bnei Baruch is the most successful example. Academic historians of Kabbalah and scholars of comparative religion, who have little sympathy for pragmatic systems, may contribute the occasional negative comment. Even specific esoteric groups may have a vested interest in disqualifying pragmatic Kabbalah as a competition to their own brands of Kabbalistic teachings.

It would be naïve to see this controversy as motivated by purely theoretical or philosophical reasons. The attempt to “own” Kabbalah is largely a struggle for power. Groups that have an interest in affirming their own power promote religious and, to some extent, academic and esoteric definitions of Kabbalah in an attempt to prove that public opinion at large accepts their self-assumed role as the sole custodians of an “authentic” definition of what Kabbalah is.

Religious liberty and freedom of opinion require, on the other hand, that competing definitions and practices of Kabbalah be allowed to co-exist. They serve different constituencies, who have a right to live the spirituality of their choice, without being harassed by groups labeling them as “cults” in order to assert a monopoly in defining what Kabbalah “truly” is.

Authoritative scholars such as Wouter Hanegraaff (2005: 644) warn that the Scholemian argument that Kabbalah is a complex reality with many different incarnations and should not be taught as a unified system may easily be turned on its head. If Kabbalah is a living, protean reality that advances through history by continuously transforming itself, then no single spiritual master has a monopoly on it, but neither do academics have such monopoly. What appear to the academic or the religionist as “misunderstandings” may be the very way for creating spiritual innovation and for Kabbalah to keep functioning as a living and evolving method or system.

Huss (2015b: 217) adds that the notion of “authenticity,” used by academic scholars in order to denounce modern groups of pragmatic Kabbalah, is in itself socially constructed. From the point of view of the social scientist, there is no “authentic” notion of what “authentic” Kabbalah might be. Accusations of inauthenticity are “used by academic scholars in order to promote their own authority as Kabbalah experts.”²² Who owns Kabbalah? The most reasonable, and democratic, answer is that nobody does.

These controversies did not prevent Bnei Baruch from growing, but undoubtedly affected how it presents itself to the world. Further research would be needed in order to assess whether controversies on the Kabbalah affected in a similar way other large pragmatist movements, including the Kabbalah Center, and how questions of religious authenticity interact in Israel with discussions about the “cults” and the larger local political context.

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²² On authenticity in general, see Bromley and Carter 1996.

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