



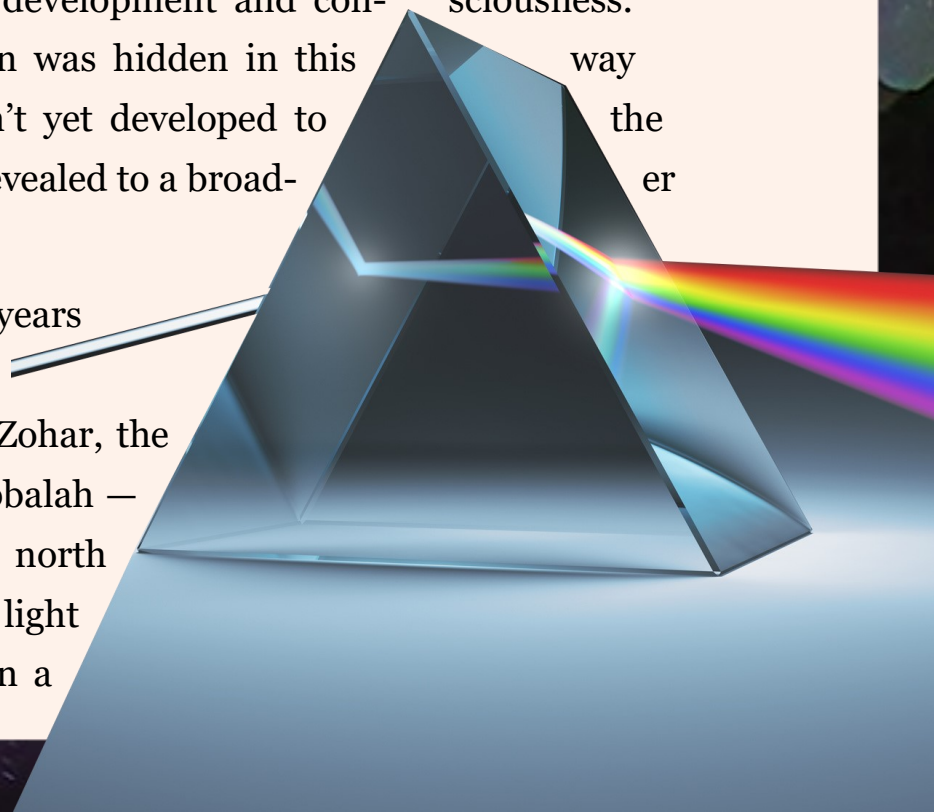
THE HOLY FIRE
OF
REBBE SHIMON

REVEALING THE HIDDEN

THE KABBALISTIC TRADITION HAS ALWAYS existed, just like the Infinite One has always existed. And just like the Creator keeps Himself well hidden to preserve the integrity of our own free will, the teachings that explain the mechanics of His ways were also kept very quiet. Even righteous and scholarly people throughout the ages were not necessarily privy to their mysteries. In every generation, those secret vital seeds of the Kabbalistic tradition were only entrusted to the disciples who proved worthy and able to guard them carefully to plant them into the future.

In our Internet-fueled information age, it's hard to imagine there was ever a time when there were secrets. I don't mean secrets in the personal sense; I mean the purposeful concealment of an entire system of spiritual development and consciousness. The Kabbalistic tradition was hidden in this way because the world hadn't yet developed to the point when it could be revealed to a broader audience.

Nearly two thousand years ago, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai — author of the Zohar, the great ancient text of Kabbalah — rose to greatness in the north of Israel. And the Divine light refracted through him in a



different way than it had through Moses, revealing new dimensions that had been hidden until then.

When pure, white light flashes through a prism, a whole spectrum is revealed...but all those colors were really hidden within the beam of white light all along.

Kabbalah isn't about knowing more; it's about sharing a sense of the meaning of existence so that our lives are transformed. The mystical tradition isn't metaphysics, it's the reorientation of our minds and hearts to focus on the inner dimension of reality. It's the soul of the Torah...the Tree of Life.

When we understand that revelations of the secrets of Creation and Providence aren't about information, but about connection, the evolution of the Kabbalistic tradition assumes a whole new meaning.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's revelations were rooted in his compassion, because there's no greater act of compassion than to help another human being understand the purpose of his existence.

Where did Rabbi Shimon get his

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knowledge of this tradition?

He certainly had teachers; he was one of the main students of the great sage Rabbi Akiva. But we see from his history that his light only really began to shine after he went through an ordeal. Rabbi Shimon's struggle to unearth the hidden Torah took thirteen years of

constant effort, near-constant physical deprivation and suffer-

ing. If it's hard for us to imagine that there were ever secrets, it's far harder for us to imagine the kind of self-sacrifice it took to gain the privilege of revealing the hidden Divine light of compassion in the world.

THE HOLY FIRE OF RABBI SHIMON

AFTER SPEAKING OUT AGAINST THE Roman occupation, Rabbi Shimon and his son Elazar fled to a cave outside the Gallilean village of Peki'in. There, they subsisted on carob fruit and water, and studied Torah in great deprivation and solitude for twelve years. But those twelve years transformed Rabbi Shimon completely.

Throughout those years, the prophet Elijah came to study with him; he received a flow of Divine information that came from a much higher Source. They were on fire, Rabbi Shimon and his son, and when they emerged from the cave after the danger had passed, the fire in their gaze was so powerful that it would incinerate everything it hit upon.

*Looking out on a
mundane
world of
fields and
crops and
people
tending to
their everyday con-
cerns aroused
their judgment*

— *“How could you waste your lives on such fleeting concerns? What about your spiritual lives?!”* But a Heavenly voice called down: *“You left your cave to destroy My world? Go back!”*

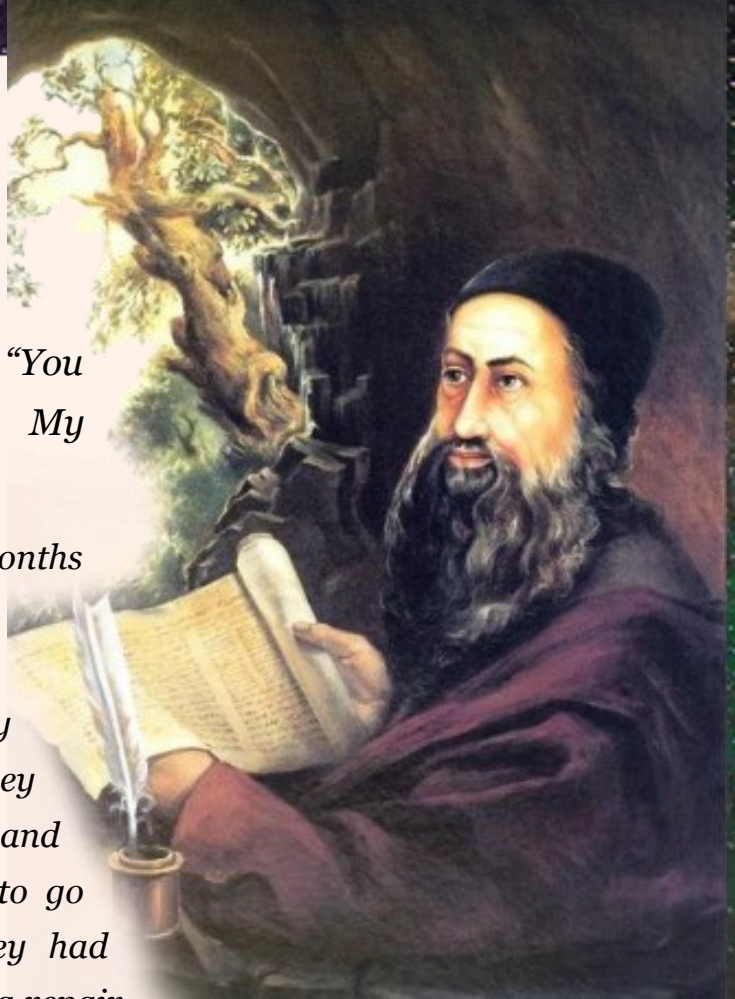
They spent another twelve months in the cave, but this time their garments were in such tatters that they had to bury themselves in the earth so they could cover their nakedness and continue to study. They had to go down into the earthiness they had scorned and scorched to make a repair.

Later, Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar met up with Rabbi Shimon’s father-in-law, Rabbi Pinchas ben Ya’ir. Wrapped in rags, their skin covered with sores from the earth that had covered them, Pinchas ben Ya’ir was devastated at seeing how debilitated they had become.

“Woe is me, to see you this way!” he cried.

Bur Rabbi Shimon answered serenely, “No — you should be saying, ‘Happy am I to see you this way!’ Had I not suffered the way I did, I would never have succeeded to unearth such treasures of Torah!”

Every year, on the anniversary of Rabbi Shimon’s death, anywhere between half a million and a million people travel north to Meron to pray and celebrate at his gravesite. The vast majority of these visitors are not scholars or mystics, or even necessarily all that religious.



What brings them there? And what keeps them coming back, year after year? What happens at the annual celebration is rooted in a very deep mystery, one that people don't need to articulate to themselves because they're just drawn to the place without necessarily being able to explain why. On some very deep level, people realize that the inner essence of even Rabbi Shimon's most obscure teachings does include them — but it took the work of later sages to reveal just how.



RABBI SHIMON'S LAST DAY

WHEN WE THINK ABOUT THE arc of a person's life, we can get trapped in a limited, materialistic view. If our focus is on physical accomplishments, life can look like an upward climb from birth until adulthood, peaking around the prime years of strength and productivity, and afterward declining into old age and death.

But when spiritual evolution is our focus, we see how life can be a gradual upward motion that culminates in the moment when the soul is ready to rejoin its Source.

Rabbi Shimon's life reached its high point just as it was poised to end.

On Rabbi Shimon's final day, only the closest disciples were permitted in the house. Outside, the humble dwelling was surrounded by fire. Angels descended from heaven to hear the teachings; no one could draw close to the building as it was encircled by blinding light and flame. Rabbi Shimon took his closest students and arranged them around him according to the cardinal directions. It was just as the tribes had been arranged around the Tabernacle in the desert, and just as Jacob had instructed his children to arrange themselves around his coffin to carry it back from Egypt to the Land of Israel for burial. Rabbi Ab-

ba, filled with fear and trembling, was instructed to record the final gathering. He wrote down Rabbi Shimon's every word. And Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai spent the last day of his life revealing the nature of God's Thirteen Attributes of mercy. Before he began his final discourse, Rabbi Shimon said, "God's Presence is with us, and this is a sign that now is the time to reveal the Torah's deepest secrets. I refuse to go to the Next World ashamed. All of the secrets that I held close until now, I'm going to reveal before the Divine Presence. And then it will not be said in paradise that I died incomplete." No one will be able to say that Rabbi Shimon left his secrets unsaid.

Rabbi Shimon left nothing unsaid; his intent was to get all of his teachings set down in a way that both revealed them (so they could be accessed by the wise) and concealed them (to keep them safe from the unworthy). Since his time, successive teachers have — and this is the greatest Divine mercy — revealed more and more of this tradition. With connection and compassion, they have literally drawn it down into the atmosphere of this world, where you and I live and breathe.



A UNIFIED LIFE

MOST OF US SUFFER FROM a dysfunctional kind of thinking. We're not focused, because we're in the world of multiplicity. When we're "bound to this world," we tend to feel fractured, because this world is a place of fragmentation. We're pulled in endless directions, driven by numerous and shifting desires and motivations, assailed by endless distractions and temptations. Yet, before Rabbi

Shimon left this world, he summed up the essence of his life:

All the time that I was bound up with this world — all the days of my life — I was, in truth, tied with a single bond to the Infinite One.

Even when Rabbi Shimon and other tzaddikim like him are “tied down” here because they’re living in a physical body, they remain bound up with the Infinite One. They’re focused on the Divine Will and they stay aligned with it. And then all their human experience is also bound up with the unified Will of the Infinite One. The multifaceted life can be tied with a single bond to the Infinite One.

Rabbi Shimon teaches us that it’s possible to be bound here in the physical world and still be unified with the Infinite One.

So what was Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai so determined to share before he left this world? What was the essence of the teachings that he had his student, Rabbi Abba, commit to writing in the Zohar itself? It’s really the encapsulation of his tzaddik-mentality, his way of seeing and being, informed by the Torah’s secrets.

His final lesson was on the Infinite extent of God’s mercy.

With an internal landscape formed by these teachings, it’s possible to leave the natural state of fragmentation and bind ourselves up with the Infinite One. It’s possible to live in alignment, in unity.

When our minds let go of the racing and the self-will, we come to a kind of clarity. We can imagine that our minds are like the pressings of grapes that are still fermenting; thoughts run in all

directions, bubbly and clouded. But if we've received good influence from minds more clarified than our own and we give it time, the lees start to settle and our thinking begins to clear too.

The unified mind is serene; it's no longer self-seeking.

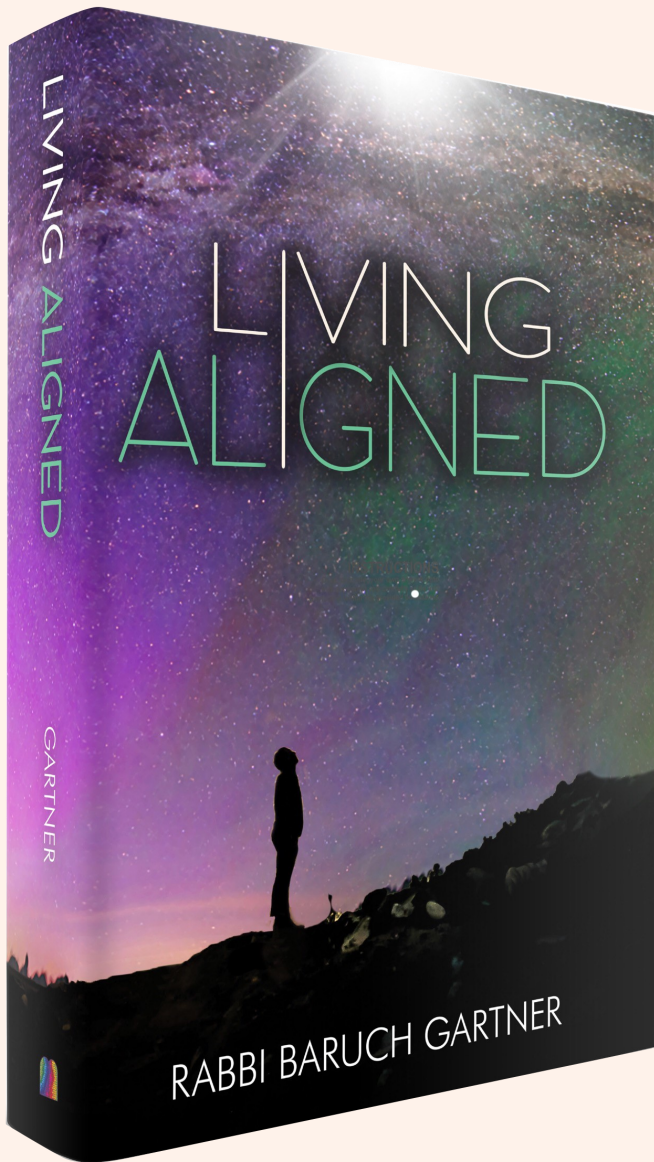
The unified mind is serene; it's no longer self-seeking. All it wants is the Infinite One and His teachings, and since the Infinite One is available to us at all times, in all situations, the external focus of all human striving

starts to become less relevant.

It doesn't matter so much if I have a lot of money or I don't have a lot of money, whether I have a large apartment or a small one — conscious contact with the Infinite One is available to me no matter what my circumstances. Instead of striving, I can be serene.

Instead of being driven by dissatisfaction, I always have a reason to rejoice. Because I'm bound up with a single bond — my life is unified to a single purpose, to a single Will, which is infinitely merciful.

All of the chapters in this PDF is part of Living Aligned by Rabbi Baruch Gartner.



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