
Foreword

by Arthur Green

It is now a thousand years since the teachings of Jewish mystics began to appear in writing. These traditions, which may stretch back yet another millennium into the obscurity of Late Antiquity, were passed down largely by word of mouth as the closely guarded secrets of practitioners and their followers. When they were finally committed to writing, the protective shell of esotericism took the forms of elliptical style, unexplained symbolism, and extended treatises emphasizing letters rather than words, especially various permutations of the names of God. Outsiders to the mystics' circles, both the curious and the hostile, were kept away by these devices. Manuscripts of esoteric texts were distributed cautiously, widening the formerly oral privacy of transmission at a gradual and controlled pace.

When Hebrew printing began (ca. 1470), mystical texts were not included in the output of the presses. It took nearly one hundred years for this ban to be broken by the printing of the *Zohar* (Mantua, 1558–60; Cremona, 1660), the masterwork of medieval Kabbalah. When it did appear, it was introduced by a legal opinion of Rabbi Isaac De Lattes, who, after great hesitation, permitted its publication only because messiah was about to be revealed and it was urgent to raise the spiritual quality of Jewish life preceding his arrival. This letter of approbation is reprinted in every traditional edition of the *Zohar* to this day.

Alas, we who select, translate, and comment on Jewish mystical texts today—and in English translation, at that!—have no such excuse. Indeed, perhaps it is redemption's long delay rather than its imminent arrival that motivates us. It is because so many Jews—and others—are in need of inspiration and comfort that will help us live in

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this unredeemed universe and seek motivation to move that redemptive process forward inch by inch, that we have come to feel a new urgency to make the secrets available, dressed up in the finery of readable translations with explanatory introductions and footnotes.

Nothing less than a reclamation of the Jewish mystical tradition is taking place before our eyes. A Western-looking Jewry that two hundred years ago created a notion called "mainstream Judaism" mainly for the purpose of excising and burying the mystical part of our legacy is now in the midst of a complete about-face. Today we are seeking to understand and appreciate our mystical sources, then asking what aspects of their deep and complex teachings might enhance a Judaism of the twenty-first century and what might better be left behind. Different circles within world Jewry have varied answers to these questions, but the sense that there is profound wisdom to be learned from the study of these sources is widely shared.

In this effort to rediscover the mystical tradition, Jewry has no better friend than the Paulist Press and its Classics of Western Spirituality series. From the very inception of the series in 1978, its editors have enthusiastically welcomed volumes of Jewish sources. In the early years, when few other publishers, either Jewish or general, saw any profit in publishing such works, the forward-looking post-Vatican II Catholics at Paulist Press, inspired by my late friend Ewert Cousins, appreciated the importance of spiritual teachings from many traditions and the effort to make them accessible to a new generation of seekers.

Perhaps I will be permitted two brief personal stories to illustrate my gratitude for this openness and generosity. During my years as a rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, I had the great privilege of studying closely with my teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel, of blessed memory. Among the texts he taught was a treatise called *'Amud ha-Tefillah*, the collected teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov on prayer. In 1969 my friend Barry Holtz and I translated selections from that text in poetic format, a little book we called *Your Word Is Fire*. I tried to market it to the three or four well-known Jewish publishers, but could evince no interest. "We don't publish prayer books," I was told by one. "Nobody's interested in this stuff," said another. Disappointed, I left the manuscript in a bottom drawer. About four years later, I received a call from Richard Payne of Paulist, who said

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they were about to publish a series to be called "The Spiritual Masters," including brief poetic selections from each of the great mystical traditions. Might I know an appropriate Jewish text, he wondered. "It's in my desk; I've been waiting for your call," was my response. And so began a long and fruitful relationship.

As plans for the Classics developed, I was asked to join an advisory board. Richard and I discussed several times the question of whether Jews would buy Judaic sources published by a Catholic press, or whether old fears and suspicions would carry the day. I assured him that, while some would hesitate at first, the excellent content and the names of well-known Jewish editors would counter the residual bias. But then the first volume of the Classics series, Julian of Norwich, appeared in 1978. As a member of the board, I received a copy. My heart sank when I opened to the verso of the title page and read "Copyright by the Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle," the legal name of the order that owns the press. I immediately telephoned Richard and told him we had a dilemma. "Paulist" alone we might get away with, I told him. But Jews will surely be suspicious of anything published by "The Missionary Society...." So began the custom of all Jewish books in the series being listed as "Copyright by the author." This immediate willingness to give up a claim to rights and potentially to money in order to include these volumes made a great impression on me.

Now, some thirty-five years and 128 volumes later, Paulist Press has called upon my dear student Ariel Mayse to edit a Jewish mystical reader with contents culled from the rich offerings included in this series. He has made wise if difficult choices, having to leave many great gems behind, but offering students and seekers a chance to "enter the orchard" of Jewish mystical literature in a rich and diverse one-volume sourcebook. I am confident that it will be widely used and appreciated, leading some of its readers back to the volumes from which it was culled, from there back to the original sources, and from them back to the Source of it all. May God bless the work of this young scholar's hands, in this and in many more works to come.

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An Anthology of Jewish Mysticism

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