



Sacred Arts
Summer 2014

Image and the Imageless Kabbalah and the Arts

*Scholars and artists
explore the Zohar's lush
and evocative mysticism.*



This summer, discover mystical texts in all of their depth and personal relevance, as AJR again explores scholarly and creative ways to connect to Torah through the arts. Join us and add your voice to the Kabbalists' conversation.

Half-Day Conference - Sunday, July 13th, 1:30 - 5:30 pm

- Prof. Melila Hellner-Eshed, *The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar*
- Creative Arts and Textual Workshops
- Shir Yaakov Feit, *Musical Interpretations of Zohar Passages*

Four Day Institute - Monday, July 14th - Thursday, July 17th, 9:30 am - 4:30 pm

- Study of primary Kabbalistic sources in the original and in translation
 - Participants' choice of a writing workshop with Rabbi Jill Hammer or a chant workshop with Shir Yaakov Feit
- **On Thursday afternoon, July 17th**, there will be opportunities for all participants to share their work.
- **An optional introduction to the complex system of the Ten Sefirot** will be offered to Institute participants over a light lunch at 11:45 am on Sunday, just before the Half Day Conference. The Conference and the introduction/lunch are included in the tuition for the Institute.
- **The Half-Day Conference on Sunday** is considered an essential introduction and integral part of the Four-Day Institute.

Institute Workshop Descriptions:

1. *Scribes of the Mysterious: Encountering the Zohar through Creative Writing*

Rabbi Jill Hammer

The *Zohar* presents itself as a commentary on Torah, yet reads the Torah in a creative way, innovating new images of God, world, and human being. In this workshop, we will engage the profound and surprising images we find in the *Zohar*, using writing exercises, visualization, and group discussion. We will read the text and respond through poetry and prose, interpreting, understanding, and finding personal meaning. Through this workshop, individuals will define their own relationship to Jewish mystical text, and leave with a new understanding of the Kabbalists' journey toward the mystery.

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2. *Receiving Song: Music as Kabbalistic Meditation*

Shir Yaakov Feit

Music, like Torah, operates on multiple levels simultaneously. Melody, rhythm, pitch, rhyme, movement and memory - each engage discrete parts of our being. Through games, guided meditations, text study in *havruta* and individual composition time, we will meet the *Zohar* through her song, crafting a relationship to meanings deep beneath the surface. Learn how to find your own melody within a text and how to make texts your own through music.

This week will be an extraordinary gift: a chance to dive into Jewish mysticism in a way that is scholarly and personal, ancient yet accessible and, ultimately, transformative. Space in the workshops is limited: 12 per workshop. We recommend you register soon.

More information: jhoffman@ajrsem.org

Biographies of the Presenters at the Conference and Institute

Melila Hellner-Eshed, Ph.D., is a professor of Jewish mysticism and *Zohar* in the department of Jewish Thought at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem. For the past two decades, Melila has been a central figure in the Israeli renaissance of study of Jewish texts by Israeli adults in all paths of life. She has also been teaching and working with Jewish communities in North America, Europe, and the former Soviet Union for many years. Melila is active in the *Sulha* - a reconciliation project that brings together Israelis and Palestinians. Her book, *And A River Flows from Eden: On the Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar*, was published by Stanford University Press in 2009.

Writing in *The Forward* (1/13/10), Alan Brill shared the following:

“Hellner-Eshed claims that the *Zohar*’s style is deliberately exaggerated and rhythmic to capture the experiential mood through trails of sensations and emotions. The rhythm of the *Zohar* offers many voices in which each sage continues and further develops the thought of the prior speaker. Hellner-Eshed compares the *Zohar* narrative to a jazz jam session, where a common melodic theme performed by the ensemble branches into solo improvisations that build to greater surprise, complexity and crescendo - the more virtuosity, the more wonderful and surprising the innovations. One of her conclusions is, ‘The genius of the *Zohar* as a book lies precisely in its ability to capture the life of the experiences in Rabbi Shimon’s circle.’ And thereby, according to Hellner-Eshed, it draws the reader into the mystical journey. She boldly claims that an academic attempt to understand the text should coincide properly with the attempt to induce a mystical experience.”

Shir Yaakov Feit is a singer, composer, designer, producer and teacher who weaves a tapestry of Kabbalistic wisdom, contemporary songwriting, and deep personal spirituality. He has composed dozens of Hebrew prayers and released several albums of original music, both as a solo artist, with *The Epichorus* and as half of the world-hop duo *Darshan*. As a spiritual leader, he has led services and ritual in a wide variety of contexts, from Hasidic *yeshivot* to multifaith, LGBTQ, and earth-based spiritual groups.

Rabbi Jill Hammer, Ph.D., is the Director of Spiritual Education at the Academy for Jewish Religion. She was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 2001 and holds a doctorate in social psychology from the University of Connecticut. At AJR, she specializes in ancient and contemporary *midrash*, mysticism,

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and spirituality. Rabbi Hammer is the author of five books: *Sisters at Sinai: New Tales of Biblical Women* (2001), *The Jewish Book of Days: A Companion for All Seasons* (2006), *The Omer Calendar of Biblical Women* (2012), *The Hebrew Priestess: Ancient and New Visions of Jewish Women's Spiritual Leadership* (forthcoming 2014) and *The Garden of Time* (forthcoming 2014). Rabbi Hammer is the co-founder of the *Kohenet* Institute, a program in Jewish women's spiritual leadership. Her academic articles, essays, *midrashim* and poems have been published in many journals and newspapers.

Rabbi Jeffrey Hoffman, D.H.L., is the Rabbi-in-Residence at the Academy for Jewish Religion. He was ordained by The Jewish Theological Seminary in 1981 and earned his doctorate in liturgy from that same institution in 1996. He is the co-author of *Karov L'Chol Korav, For All Who Call: A Manual For Enhancing the Teaching of Prayer*; and the editor of *Siddur Tisha B'Av* for the Rabbinical Assembly. He is also the author of several articles and reviews including *El Adon: An Historical, Literary, and Spiritual Commentary*, and *Akdmut: History, Folklore, Meaning*. As a member of the AJR administration and faculty, Rabbi Hoffman teaches courses in Liturgy, Rabbinics, and Professional Skills. He served for three years as an assistant rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel in Vancouver, British Columbia and for twenty years as rabbi of Congregation Sons of Israel in Nyack, New York.

Rabbi Haniel Levenson is a sabra, not the thorny desert plant, known in English as Prickly Pear, but born on the same soil. His formative years were shaped on the middle east side of Manhattan, NYC. An expert in the train system, Haniel has received a B.A. in Religion & Art from New York University, a Master of Science in Environmental Policy from Bard College, and rabbinical ordination from The Academy for Jewish Religion in Yonkers, New York. Haniel was a competitive gymnast for 15 years and is now a yoga teacher and personal trainer. Founder of *The God Shop* and *Seven Heart Center*, Haniel asks all free seekers and spiritual warriors to join him on the body-mind-soul train. Haniel is the Associate Rabbi and Director of Education at The Jewish Center of the Hamptons.