



AVI KATZ

Rites Of Passage

A memoir of a voyage through cultures and faiths

Tibor Krausz

IN 1969, AT THE AGE OF 20, Nathan Katz followed hippie friends to Nepal. Blazing a trail for generations of Jewish spiritual seekers to follow, the freewheeling youth, already a fledgling religious scholar, fetched up in Kathmandu, where, he recalls, “people stopped in the street to pray at tiny shrines or to relieve themselves with equal abandon.” In a sparsely furnished budget hotel room, Katz says he encountered his *dakini*, a Hindu sky goddess akin to a Greek daemon and Carl Jung’s concept of the *anima*.

She appeared suddenly at night, Katz reports, manifested as a haggard crone begging for loose change. As he tried to shove

her away, his hands sailed right through the apparition before she vanished with a scowl on her face. No hallucinogenic substances, apparently, were involved in the epiphany, which set Katz off on a decades-long exploration of the mysteries of eastern spirituality. As the title of his “Spiritual Journey Home” suggests, with the pictures of the Dalai Lama and the Lubavitcher Rebbe juxtaposed on the cover, Katz’s mystical questing eventually led him back to his religious roots.

What should intrigue us isn’t his ultimate destination, which follows the well-trodden path of back-to-the-sender odysseys of self-discovery, but rather his sojourns en route. In the 1970s and 1980s, Katz, whose book’s contemporary pictures show him resembling a hirsute hasid, with

his large grandpa spectacles and flowing beard, dressed in paisley shirts and love beads, traversed the length and breadth of India and Southeast Asia. He immersed himself in Vipassana meditation at ashrams and learned Sanskrit, Pali and Tibetan so he could study Vedic Hindu scriptures, Buddhist texts and the Tibetan Book of the Dead in their original languages.

Along the way he fraternized with eminent JuBus (Jewish Buddhists), such as the poet Allen Ginsberg and Richard Alpert, the Harvard professor who worked with 1960s counterculture icon Timothy Leary on laboratory experiments involving LSD before metamorphosing into the guru Baba Ram Dass. Though embracing the ethos of the “Age of Aquarius” era, Katz wasn’t, it seems, unduly star-struck by self-anointed holy men. He found A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the Calcutta-born founder of the Hare Krishna movement, to be a petty, self-righteous narcissist. Dr. Leary, in Katz’s eyes, “never ceased being a horny barroom jokester.”

Autobiographies frequently stretch a reader’s endurance with loving recollections of such essentials as what the author had for breakfast one fine day in 1972. At a mere 138 pages, “Spiritual Journey Home” suffers instead from a detail deficit. Katz often mentions tantalizing encounters en passant – during a search for Sufi traditions in hidebound Jalalabad in Afghanistan he alights on transvestite barbers – before rushing on to another briefly treated episode, at times a continent away. Ginsberg, Elie Wiesel, and other heavyweights Katz befriends, make promising cameos then disappear without a trace.

Such omissions are baffling since this account of a prodigal son’s return to the fold was clearly written for a Jewish audience. Indeed, it’s in the account of Katz’s role as a mediator between the Hindu-Buddhist and Jewish traditions that his book comes into its own. Today a practicing Orthodox Jew, or “neo-hasid” as he puts it, Katz is a leading Jewish authority on Hinduism and Buddhism, holding various positions as professor of comparative religions at Florida International University, Hindu University of America, and an Orthodox rabbinical college in Florida. A preeminent expert on Indian Jews, he edits *The Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies*.

It was while doing research in Cochin, a port town in southwestern India, in the late

1980s for what would become a seminal study of Cochin Jews that Judaism “crept into my bones,” Katz reports. During his year-long sabbatical, the scholar stayed on Synagogue Lane in Jew Town with the last remnants of the ancient Jewish community. Largely by osmosis from living in the traditional milieu, he became more observant.

HAILING FROM A FAMILY OF blue-collar Jews of Ukrainian/Hungarian stock in Camden (the New Jersey hometown of Walt Whitman), Katz, now 61, got swept up in the Vietnam War-era counterculture rebellion, which saw traditional identity markers as stultifying and *déclassé*. “Despite some nostalgia for the synagogues of my youth,” he writes, “I found Judaism rather dreary, especially compared with the elegant, direct spiritual teachings of eastern religions.”

He wasn’t much of a Zionist, either. A subscriber to the pro-PLO journal *Palestinian Perspectives*, he mailed a letter from the U.S. to a Franciscan pilgrims’ hospice in Jerusalem’s Old City addressed as “Jerusalem, Occupied Territories, via Israel.” After his first visit in 1976 to the Jewish state, which he fashionably regarded as a colonialist implant in the Middle East, Katz says he was “relieved to board an El Al plane to Tehran.”

Ironically, the leftist Jewish professor comes to identify with Israelis living under a constant barrage of terrorism while he’s in Sri Lanka. During a sabbatical there in the 1980s, Katz witnessed up close the Tamil Tigers’ indiscriminate brutality. “As a child of the 1960s,” he recalls, “I romanticized militants, or ‘freedom fighters,’ ...and staunchly believed that their violence had ‘underlying causes’ in oppression, and was therefore excusable if not heroic. But now my ideological beliefs began to crumble.”

Later, confronted by the strident anti-Zionist milieu across liberal U.S. colleges, this onetime advocate of students’ “prodivestment activities” against Israel becomes a vocal supporter of the Jewish state. Once writing off Muslim calls for the elimination of Israel “as mere rhetoric,” he now urges us to take Islamist firebrands at their word.

AMONG TIBETANS, KATZ FINDS a reverse attitude toward Jews and Israelis. In 1990, on the Dalai Lama’s invitation, a group of rabbis and

Jewish scholars, Katz among them, made a historic visit to Dharamsala, the seat of the exiled Tibetan government in the Indian Himalayas. His Holiness wanted to learn the “Jewish secret” of surviving exile. That secret, the Jewish delegates told him at the interfaith symposium first documented in 1995 in “The Jew in the Lotus” by the poet Rodger Kamenetz, lay in household-based learning. They recommended that Tibetans make traditional education available outside their monasteries, an approach that Tibetan exile communities have more or less embraced.

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Beyond the shared experience of exile, Katz explains, Tibetans share an affinity with Jews because Tibetans don’t encourage conversion to their faith and also consider themselves a “chosen people” – as the choice nation of Avalokiteshvara, the Enlightened Being of Compassion. “In Christian and Muslim cultures,” Katz writes, “we Jews have seen condescension if not outright hostility. But in Tibetan eyes, we saw reflected affection, respect and even a bit of awe.”

Together with the lure of eastern mysticism and spiritual esoterica, such acceptance, untarnished by religiously inspired anti-Semitism, draws hordes of Jews and Israelis to Buddhist havens like Dharamsala. When I made a trip there a few years ago for an article about Jewish seekers for this magazine, Hebrew could be heard as commonly as lilting Tibetan, with young Israelis outnumbering locals in several parts of town. Parochial traditions in normative Judaism, Katz contends, have put off spiritually thirsting Jews, especially women, many of whom gravitate toward Buddhism.

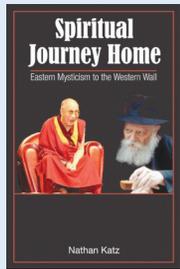
In Judaism’s defense it must be added

that Buddhism’s romanticized image in the West notwithstanding, it too remains largely closed to female clergy outside a few more egalitarian places, such as Sri Lanka. It’s at a retreat on a Sri Lankan island for Buddhist nuns that Katz met the Venerable Ayya (“Sister”) Khema, a respected Buddhist teacher. Sister Khema, née Ilse Ledermann, was born in 1923 into a wealthy Jewish family in Berlin and rescued from Nazi Germany in 1938. When living in California she was inspired by Gershom Scholem’s books on kabbala, but found that as a woman she was barred from practicing traditional Jewish mysticism: Scholem himself rebuffed her.

So she turned to Buddhism. In 1979 Ledermann, by then a grandmother, was ordained as a nun in Sri Lanka and before her death in 1997 she set up Buddhist centers in Australia and Germany, authored two dozen popular books on spirituality, and spearheaded an international movement for the rights of Buddhist nuns and women. “Of course I’m still Jewish,” the nun insisted to Katz in English peppered with both Yiddish and Pali words. “What else could I be? Jewish is something you are.”

Katz clearly shares that sentiment and his conversion to Orthodox Judaism seems to have been fostered as much by spiritual needs as by a desire to finally embrace “my beleaguered, demeaned people.” Ironically, while an Orthodox Jew familiar with eastern spirituality advises Katz to do more Buddhist meditation, a Tibetan lama admonishes him for not keeping the Shabbat strictly enough.

Katz claims to have seen his *dakini* again, in a shul in Safed, the bastion of kabbala in the Galilee, this time manifested as a vision of the Shabbat Queen standing next to his wife up in the women’s balcony. He’s clearly come full circle spiritually if his *dakini*, too, has converted to Judaism. ●



Spiritual Journey Home: Eastern Mysticism to the Western Wall
Nathan Katz
KTAV Publishing House
168 pages
\$27.50