

Kabbalah Through the Utilitarian Prism: Contemporary Neo-Kabbalah in Israel as a Form of Consumer Culture

Tomer Persico

In this chapter, I would like to explore the rise of what could be called “the utilitarian self” in the arena of Israeli contemporary spirituality. This social reality, which has its origins in the religious culture of late-nineteenth-century America, is quite a recent development in Judaic social circles, and has only begun to play a significant role in Israeli contemporary spirituality since the 1990s. I would like to suggest that the proliferation of two major Neo-Kabbalah movements since the 1990s, one of which is the largest new religious movement in Israel, is indicative of its rise. The examination of these movements can provide us with a better understanding of the utilitarian self which lies in their background and which indicates the cultural conditions for their popularity.

I will therefore present two typical examples of the utilitarian self’s manifestation in Israel, and will then try to clarify the socio-cultural reasons for its current prevalence. Let us first define the subject matter: The utilitarian self, I propose, is a particular hybrid of the Romantic spirit

T. Persico (✉)
Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel
Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, Israel

and Enlightenment rationalism, joined together by means of capitalist instrumental reason. It represents the current fascination with finding ways—indeed, methods or techniques—which will allow one to actualize and exercise her or his “hidden” or “unrealized” capabilities in order to undergo an inner transformation and maximize the external opportunities of her or his life.

Paul Heelas, from whom I borrow this term, provides three key assumptions that lie at the heart of the utilitarian self’s identity:

That something powerful lies within the person; that this can be tapped and improved; and that it can be utilized to enable the person to operate more successfully in obtaining what the material world has to offer. (Heelas 1996, 166)

The utilitarian self is a development of the Romantic’s expressive self, which, since the eighteenth century, sought to discover and contact our innermost being, deemed to be a natural and primal impulse, an “*élan*”, to put it in Charles Taylor’s words (Taylor 1989, 370). This *élan* is a force running through all creation, and since it also lies as the very essence of all human beings, we can know it by looking within, or by being true to our innermost selves. Thus, in connecting to the *élan* of nature, we are able to express outwardly our authentic and unique self. Indeed, such an expression is not only considered our birthright but also given normative value, and so becomes the definition of “the good life” (372).

In contrast to the expressive self, the utilitarian self is less concerned with normative questions, and charges the individual with a mission that is rather more pragmatic than ethical. As I will elaborate in the final section of this chapter, the utilitarian self—influenced by the spirit of capitalism—sees the basic resonance of one’s *élan* with that of the universe as a way to influence the world around it. A person’s connection to her or his true self is thus seen primarily not as a way to living an authentic life, but as a means of harnessing the powers of heaven and earth in order to enrich oneself, both spiritually and materially.

Following such an instrumental course of thought, a systematic method is considered vital for the efficient development of this connection and for gaining its benefits. It is this change in emphasis that I would like to present in the following pages, by using examples from the contemporary spirituality scene in Israel, focusing on Neo-Kabbalistic movements which fashion an up-to-date version of Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag’s socialist Kabbalah.

These examples of the utilitarian self are not, of course, unique. Indeed, they are simply illustrations of a wide-ranging and diverse social phenomenon. As a characteristically collective religious tradition, the emergence of the utilitarian self within the Jewish tradition is highlighted by a contrasting background that is very dissimilar from it—which makes identifying it all the more easy. I will begin by fleshing out this background, then present utilitarian developments, and finally will try to decipher the cultural and social roots which lie at the base of the rise of the utilitarian self.

RABBI YEHUDA LEIB ASHLAG AND THE MEANING OF “KABBALAH”

Kabbalah is widely known today as the “esoteric” or “mystical” part of the Jewish tradition, though such wide recognition calls into question its presumed esotericity. As for the title “mystical”, the popularity of that term points mainly to contemporary interest in ecstatic experiences and self-transforming practices. It should thus be taken to denote a comparative and perennialist understanding of the subject matter, propagated through both the academic study of religion and the spiritual-cultic milieu that came into being in the nineteenth century (Huss 2012). Both attributes, therefore, should be taken *cum grano salis*, and more than anything are testimonies to the changes this traditional body of knowledge has undergone.

Developed at the beginning of the thirteenth century, Kabbalah (along with Maimonidean rationalism, Ashkenazi Hasidism and Ibn Ezra’s astrology) was one Jewish answer to the rising questions of an age that was growing more literate, city-oriented and exposed to Hellenistic philosophy (Dan 1992; Idel 2002, 280–282, 396–398). In very general terms, it is a large and multilayered corpus of literature, comprising commentary on canonical Jewish texts, varied interpretations of the Halakha and different customs, and instructions for various mystical techniques.

Kabbalah, at least until the last few decades, held two principal “secrets”: the structure and dynamics of the divine worlds, and the specific connections between the different Halakhic commandments and the rectification of those worlds. It is thus an esoteric lore meant to position the Jewish man both metaphysically and normatively. Over the centuries, Kabbalah has developed into varied schools and underwent diverse transformations, though up to and including the beginning of the twentieth century, these basic pillars of Kabbalah were maintained

(and are still maintained in ultra-Orthodox Kabbalistic circles [Giller 2008; Garb 2010]). As we shall presently see, the emphasis of contemporary Neo-Kabbalism lies elsewhere.

Both of the two most popular Neo-Kabbalistic movements, The Kabbalah Centre and Bnei Baruch, draw their inspiration from Rabbi Yehuda Leib Ashlag (1885–1955). One of the foremost Kabbalists of the first half of the twentieth century, Ashlag crafted a modern interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah that blends a Hegelian historical comprehension with a Marxist social vision and a few fundamental psychological insights. Global redemption for Ashlag meant collective transcendence of the Ego, to be brought about by the extensive dissemination of (his version of) Kabbalah.

Born in Warsaw to a Hasidic family, Ashlag was exposed early on to both Kabbalah and the scientific and ideological innovations of the *fin de siècle*. In 1921 he left for Palestine, where he devoted his life to writing and circulating his interpretation of Kabbalah. Two of his students, Levi Isaac Krakovsky (1891–1966) and Yehuda Tzvi Brandwein (1903–1969) attempted to continue his work in the USA, with little success. There they met Shraga Feivel Gruberger, who would become Philip Berg, and handed the torch to him. Berg adapted and continued their work in his Kabbalah Centre and, in turn, along with Baruch Ashlag (in Israel), also taught Michael Laitman, the founder of Bnei Baruch (Meir 2007, 2013; Myers 2007).

In the following sections, I will consider a small but characteristic sample of the ways in which the Kabbalah Centre and Bnei Baruch interpreted and adjusted Ashlag's teachings. In order to make my examples as emblematic as possible, I will examine how the very concept of "Kabbalah" is reinterpreted in these movements. I believe that studying the transformations of this term will enable us to observe quite clearly significant changes of emphasis and of meanings ascribed to it.

What, then, is Kabbalah? As noted at the beginning of this section, what the word stands for today is an illustration of the transformation it has traversed since it became disconnected, in many ways, from its traditional configuration at the beginning of the twentieth century (Garb 2012). Though Ashlag himself, as mentioned above, adapted Kabbalah to modernity, I will take his definition of Kabbalah as a point of reference. In two introductory articles, both written in the 1930s and meant for a popular audience,¹ Ashlag defines Kabbalah. In the first, "The Essence of the Lore of Kabbalah", he states that Kabbalah

is, no more or less, an order of root-causes, descending by way of antecedents and consequents, according to regular and absolute laws, which conjoin and target one very high goal, that is named “revealing His godliness to his created beings in this world”. (Ashlag 2009: 15)

In the second article, “The Teachings of Kabbalah and Their Essence”, Ashlag asserts that

The wisdom of Kabbalah in general is the matter of divine disclosure, set in order by His ways in all His aspects, from what is revealed in the worlds, and from what will be revealed in the future, and in every way that it is possible to ever be revealed in the worlds, until the end of time. (Ashlag 2009: 21)

As can be understood from both quotes, for Ashlag the Kabbalah is first and foremost divine wisdom, a map of the heavenly worlds as well as an explanation of the way in which they affect the earth. It is a systematic body of knowledge, meant to help Man in understanding God, the creation and the connection between the two (stretched along the historical process), the full comprehension of which *is* divine revelation.

While Ashlag did write about a personal inner transformation of the individual (as characteristic of many modern Kabbalists), he did not describe Kabbalah as a method to be used toward this transformation, nor did he think this transformation was an individual process. For Ashlag the change—that is giving up our egoistic drive and changing into altruistic and “giving” individuals—was to come about through observing the Jewish Halakhic law, studying Kabbalah and leading generous relationships with others (Huss 2006, 115; Myers 2007, 63). Such conditions would be possible only in a society which would allow the individual to cease caring for his or her own needs, and begin caring for others’ (Huss 2006, 116).

It is clear that for Ashlag, Kabbalah was divine knowledge meant to enlighten Jews (and not non-Jews) as a way to become altruistic beings, and that a necessary part of this process was building a communist, or at least socialist, society. Ashlagian Kabbalah can therefore be very schematically defined as an ethnocentric and society-centered corpus of divine wisdom.

RABBI PHILIP BERG AND THE KABBALAH CENTRE'S KABBALAH

The leaders of the Kabbalah Centre understand the meaning of their teaching in quite different terms. Founded by Berg (then Gruberger) in 1965 and originally called the National Institute for Research in Kabbalah, the movement went through two main phases. The first, which lasted until the beginning of the 1990s, was characterized by a slightly more conservative approach, closer and more continuous with Ashlagian (and Brendweinian) Kabbalah, in the name of which Berg reached out to American and Israeli Jews—mentioning the essential connection between Kabbalah and Halakha, as well as the narrative regarding the Jewish people's special and unique place in history and within the divine plan. In the second phase, Berg undertook, as a modern day St. Paul, a mission to the gentiles, eliminating the discourse regarding centrality of Halakha and the exclusive status of the Jews (Myers 2007, 52–73). Not surprisingly, perhaps, the Kabbalah Centre has been flourishing since the early 1990s.

Berg taught Kabbalah while visiting Israel all through the 1970s, as well as during his residency in Israel in 1983–1984. At the end of the 1970s, a permanent center was established in Tel Aviv, in which Berg gave special classes at the beginning of each Jewish month and during Jewish holidays, though the usual activity consisted of evening lessons for adults. The main teacher at that time was Jeremy Langford.² The center itself was too small for any communal gathering, and holyday celebrations were conducted in rented hostels. A small, short-lived Yeshiva for intense study was also founded (Meir 2013, 264). It was only since the beginning of the 1990s that the model of contemporary centers—which draw great crowds and in which all the activity is held—was initiated, and a significant growth in the scope of The Kabbalah Centre's activities in Israel was witnessed.³ In 1998, there were already three Kabbalah Centre establishments in Israel. By 2006, that number rose to four, and today the movement maintains six centers in Israel (interestingly, none of them in Jerusalem), facilitating activities for thousands of followers.

In addition to the change in its outreach agenda, the Kabbalah Centre also changed its conception of Kabbalah. While in the 1981 edition of his main textbook, *Kabbalah for the Layman*, Berg insisted that “Kabbalah lies at the very heart of the system of holy actions and deeds known as *mitzvot*”, and added that “without these actions, the life of a Jew is considered incomplete and lacking” (quoted in Myers 2007, 67), in the revised

1991 edition this has been changed, and “comments about Judaism [are] just a passing reference” (68). In the 2012 edition of the book the word “mitzvot” cannot be found at all and Kabbalah is described as “A system, that can deal intelligently with all the problems thrown up by existence in the twentieth [*sic*] century” (Berg 2012, 4).

Of Berg’s two sons, Yehuda is a more prolific writer, who has also authored a few bestsellers. The most well known of these is *The Power of Kabbalah: Thirteen Principles to Overcome Challenges and Achieve Fulfillment*, which has been translated into 20 languages. Its subtitle indicates the book’s utilitarian treatment of the subject. In its introduction, the first mention of Kabbalah in an explanatory context teaches us that “Kabbalah encourages us to expand who we are in order to achieve a lasting flow of fulfillment—not the fleeting variety that lets us down again and again” (Berg 2010a, 4).

In the former volume’s “companion book”, *Living Kabbalah: A Practical System for Making the Power Work for You*, the subtitle of which is also significant, the first appearance of the word “Kabbalah” stresses that

Kabbalah is about action; it’s not some cryptic philosophy. With this in mind, we ask that you be practical. [...] Kabbalah tools—which we call k-Tools—will help reveal new insights that will lead to profound changes in your perspective, awareness, and actions. (Berg 2010b, xi)

From these references, it is quite obvious that the Kabbalah Centre’s leaders see Kabbalah first and foremost as a “system”, centered on the self, and meant to satisfy his or her needs and assist his or her progress along the spiritual path. Contrary to Ashlag’s understanding of Kabbalah, the Centre does not view it as an ethnocentric and society-oriented body of wisdom, but a source of handy and effective tools (or, rather, “k-tools”) at the disposal of the individual.

Since in Israel the Kabbalah Centre reaches out only to Jews, the reason for its growth cannot be openness to non-Jews. Instead, I propose, it is the change in emphasis, and the characterization and portrayal of Kabbalah not as ancient wisdom but as a pragmatic system offering tools for self-development—thus enabling the individual to “achieve fulfillment” and “mak[e] the power work” (to quote the subtitles of the above mentioned books) for him or her—which contributes to the movement’s growth in Israel. Myers observes that

Since the major revision of the curriculum in the 1990s, kabbalistic ideas and their implications have been described as “12 Rules for the Game of Life”. They provide people with a simple method of recognizing their impulses and channeling their desires in a direction that will elevate, improve and refine their soul. (Myers 2007, 76)

The Kabbalah Centre thus literally rebranded Kabbalah, presenting it as a practical set of rules or tools dedicated to the self-fulfillment of their members.

This move was not confined solely to the exterior packaging of the “product”. As noted by Huss, since the 1990s, the Kabbalah Centre has introduced “kabbalistic practices which did not play a central role in Ashlag’s Kabbalah (such as scanning the Zohar and the meditative use of the seventy-two names of God)” (Huss 2005, 617). These are meant to confer spiritual and physical benefits on the individual (Myers 2007, 127, 132, 137), and supplement the change in the characterization of Kabbalah from an esoteric body of knowledge to a universal box of tools.

I will elaborate below on how the rise of the utilitarian self has created the demand for such teachings. It is the willingness and flexibility of the Kabbalah Centre that allowed for the satisfaction of such a demand.

RABBI MICHAEL LAITMAN AND BNEI BARUCH’S KABBALAH

Michael Laitman began his journey into the secrets of Kabbalah under the tutelage of Philip Berg, but eventually became the student of Yehuda Leib Ashlag’s son, Baruch Ashlag, becoming his personal assistant in 1979 and living close to him in the city of Bnei Brak, close to Tel Aviv (Myers 2007, 60). After the latter’s death in 1991, Laitman founded Bnei Baruch (literally “sons of Baruch”) and started teaching his interpretation of Ashlagian Kabbalah. During the first few years of his activity, Laitman drew to him mainly Israelis who—like Laitman himself—emigrated from the former Soviet Union (Meir 2007, 191). After 1996, more and more native-born Israelis joined the group. During this time, Laitman expanded his proselytizing and teaching overseas as well (Ben-Tal 2010, 158), with books and websites that were translated into a number of languages—English and Russian at first, and then up to 33 more languages (Ben-Tal 2010, 159–160; Meir 2007, 192).

Today, Bnei Baruch is by far the most successful new religious movement in Israel, numbering a few thousand in the inner, most committed circle, and a few tens of thousands of students and long-distance believers (Ben-Tal 2010, 161).⁴ It is attracting numerous Israeli celebrities, has its own cable television channel and its own municipal political party

(*Yachad*, in the city of Petah Tikvah). Its success has created a backlash of investigative newspaper articles focusing on its authoritarian and messianic characteristics (followed by attempts of the group to sue the writers),⁵ but so far none have even remotely endangered the prosperity of the group.

Laitman teaches a doctrine similar to that of Berg, if a bit more conservative. Though his group is open to non-Jews, women are excluded from the core of the Kabbalistic activity. Like Berg, he views the Halakha as non-compulsory advice for spiritual development. However, as in The Kabbalah Centre, Bnei Baruch's inner circle observes the Jewish law. Laitman's theology places the transformation of the individual from ego-centric "wanter" to altruistic "giver" as a personal soteriological ideal. There is also a strong messianic current running through his teachings, the end vision of which includes the rebuilding of the Jewish temple and the dictatorial rule of the Kabbalists, with or without a preceding apocalypse. This can perhaps be attributed to the fact that contrary to Berg, Laitman is situated in Israel (Meir 2007, 196–199, 214–216).

Grand visions of universal rule notwithstanding, Bnei Baruch has a very simple message for the individual. This can be learned from the way in which they define Kabbalah itself. In numerous introductory books, most of which can be downloaded freely from the internet, Kabbalah is presented as a method (or system, or technique—in Hebrew *Shita*), by which to develop one's self and/or gain exciting experiences.

Thus, the very first sentence in Laitman's 2003 *The Kabbalah Experience* (in Hebrew) states that "The wisdom of Kabbalah is a method that teaches man how to live in the reality laid out before him" (Laitman 2006a, 7). True to the book's title, Kabbalah is defined through it as a means to experience "the spiritual world", "the Creator", "only the good and eternal" and/or "mind intensity" (22, 31, 42, 74, 165). In Laitman's 2005 book, *Kabbalah, Science and the Meaning of Life* (in Hebrew), the first mention of Kabbalah defines it as a new and scientific world view, one that "develops tools within us that welcome us into a comprehensive reality and provide means to research it" (Laitman 2006b, 10). The 2006 English edition states the same (Laitman 2006c, 13).

This angle is emphasized again in Laitman's *A Look at Kabbalah* (2006d, in Hebrew). Kabbalah here is a "means to get to the good"; "a method that teaches how to get the feeling of the spiritual world"; "a method [giving knowledge of] how to change one's fate"; "a method by which man and humanity reach perfect and eternal life"; and the only way "to draw the heavenly light [and] be happy" (Laitman 2006d, 28, 47, 60, 149, 175).

From the English, *Basic Concepts in Kabbalah: Expanding Your Inner Vision*, which was published during the same year, we learn that “The path of Kabbalah is a path of independent and voluntary realization of the need to gradually terminate egoism” and that “The essence of Kabbalah lies in enabling a person to attain the ultimate level of development without suffering”. Kabbalah is here formally defined as “a method for revealing the Creator to the created beings existing in this world” (Laitman 2006c, 17, 43, 93).

Kabbalah in Laitman’s eyes is first and foremost a functional tool for self-improvement. While he does also present Kabbalah as a “science”, and thus as a body of knowledge (e.g. Laitman 2006a, 25, 221, b, 22), these references are fewer in number, and the idea is again to use this “science” in order to develop oneself.

Indeed, this understanding has clearly been keenly adopted by Laitman’s followers. A review of introductory books edited by some of his leading pupils shows that the treatment of Kabbalah as a technique for care of the self is even more accentuated. In the 2007 book, *Kabbalah for the People* (in Hebrew), the word “Method” (*shita*) is used to describe Kabbalah more than forty times, and with varied and disparate objectives, from “spiritual development” through “reaching the top”, “achieving perfection”, “achieving the greatest pleasure”, and up to “getting all the good in existence” (Aharoni et al. 2007, 28, 50, 110, 118). In the 2012 book, *Preface to the Wisdom of Kabbalah* (in Hebrew), the same word is used more than 80 times to describe Kabbalah, with similar goals to be sought (Levi et al. 2012).⁶

Laitman, who started teaching in the 1990s, did not have to adapt and change his work as Berg did. Indeed, he presented Kabbalah as a pragmatic and efficient method for self-development right from the start of his teaching career. Contrary to Ashlag’s view that individual development is dependent on, and corresponding to, change in society as a whole (Huss 2006, 115–116), Laitman suggests that “Attainment occurs through inner work on ourselves” (Laitman 2006c, 97), and that, in fact, “there is no need to repair the world, because the only thing that needs fixing is man. Once we repair ourselves, we will find out that the world is perfect” (Aharoni et al. 2007, 131).

CONCLUSION: THE RISE OF THE UTILITARIAN SELF

These examples of Jewish and Israeli contemporary spirituality point to a specific and narrow path in which these popular New-Age phenomena tread. Contemporary popularizers of Rabbi Ashlag's Kabbalah have molded traditional knowledge or practice into a modern practical and utilitarian system aimed at self-improvement. Thus shaped and rebranded, these methods serve as ready-to-use religious applications for the universal spiritual seeker, waiting to be picked up from the shelf of the spiritual supermarket (Roof 2001). Indeed, the examples of Neo-Kabbalah presented here are basically Jewish equivalents of Yoga or Transcendental Meditation, that is universalized and homogenized "techniques", cut out of their traditional settings and "stripped for export", as it were.⁷

However, the parallel to Yoga and modern appropriations of Hindu and Buddhist meditations must be qualified. Originating from a traditional Jewish background, Kabbalah does not offer ethical "spiritual paths" tailored for the individual as do the Far-Eastern traditions.⁸ Thus, in order to adjust themselves to the rise of the utilitarian self, its current teachers had to transform the highly religious logic by which they work—from a body of wisdom meant for the communal study and rectification of the upper worlds to a spiritual technique designed for the private development of the self—and at times, as we have seen, also import and appropriate Far-Eastern meditative techniques. The fact that this was accomplished, demonstrates the force and thrust of the utilitarian self as a social reality, and confirms its coercing influence. The reasons for this will now be explained.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, I propose that it was the rise of the utilitarian self that supplied the space, and indeed the need, for this transformation in religious character. In other words, it is no coincidence that Berg and Laitman present a very similar grasp of the function of religion, and of the primal practices of religion and their place in the individual's life. Nor did they both independently provide similar points of religious emphasis by chance. As can be seen from Philip Berg's teaching career, it is only when he learned how to cater to the needs of the late twentieth century Western spiritual seeker that the Kabbalah Centre succeeded in drawing in the masses. I will now briefly outline the process by which the utilitarian self came to dominate the contemporary spiritual scene.

As Charles Taylor has demonstrated, modernity has changed religion first and foremost through providing alternative sources of meaning and morality to the north Atlantic world, and subsequently to other areas of

its influence. Under the general title of “the massive subjective turn of western culture” (Taylor 1991, 26), Taylor traces the process through which what was assigned and consigned to the transcendental beyond has, since the seventeenth century, gradually internalized and made a part of our very selves.

According to Taylor’s analysis, Descartes’ thought is an exemplary illustration of the central and predominant place given to disengaged rationality—first circulating among the elite in the seventeenth century—as a means for discerning not only the value and validity of the world around us, but also the normative significance of our own inner world as well, thus the actions following its motives and intentions (Taylor 1989, 143–153).

This ethical direction, epitomized in Kant’s thought, was challenged in the second half of the eighteenth century by a cultural and intellectual movement that would later come to be known as Romanticism. It is at that point, expressed characteristically through the works of Rousseau, that we were asked to regain contact with the voice of nature within us, and thus presumably contact what is most true and most specifically ourselves (Taylor 1989, 356–363). This connection with the inner *élan* constitutes for humanity not only an indication of what is good, but also the authority to define the good. It thus marks “a transformation in modern culture towards a deeper inwardness and a radical autonomy” (363).

The next step is the rise of the fully blooming expressivist self, for which the inner contact with and the outward expression of its unique core are normative goals. In order to achieve these goals, however, it needs to unburden itself from the influences that society has laid upon it, and that includes not only fashions of dress and table manners, but moral norms and the truths of tradition. Correspondingly, certain feelings and experiences now come to be an essential part of the definition of The Good Life.⁹ Next, sensual fulfillment itself is made morally significant, beginning a path that will lead humanity, writes Taylor, up to the “flower generation” of the 1960s (Taylor 1989, 372).

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the utilitarian self, representing a development of the expressivist self, can be first identified as a cultural phenomenon in late nineteenth century North America. Having its most recent roots in Franz Anton Mesmer’s “Animal Magnetism” on the one hand and the American tradition of pragmatism as brought into spiritual context by Emerson’s Transcendentalists on the other, this concept of a self-sufficient and efficient individual responsible for and sovereign of her or his own spiritual development was made popular by New Religious

Movements (NRMs) such as Emma Curtis Hopkins' New Thought, Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science and Elwood Worcester's Emmanuel Movement (Heelas 1996, 167).

During the first decades of the twentieth century, America saw the proliferation of what came to be called "self help" books, designed specifically for the individual utilitarian care of the self. The majority of these books relied on the assumption—which as an idea can be traced to Romanticism—that the individual has inner resources which need to be discovered and made use of (Heelas 1996; Yankelovich 1982, 232). As many of these books had no religious or spiritual message as such, we can detect quite clearly the influence of the modern capitalist and instrumental frame of mind that had produced them as a substantial cultural phenomenon.

During the 1960s, this utilitarian frame of mind suffered a temporary setback. The Counter Culture was in many ways a reaction against the spirit of capitalism and instrumental logic (or as Theodor Roszak calls it, Technocracy—Roszak 1969), and many of the NRMs which originated at that time emphasized the need for a profound transformation of the egocentric self and the importance of the community (e.g. ISKCON, Meher Baba, and in general the Hippies).

This changed again in the 1970s, which saw the rise of an intensified form of capitalism, what Ernest Mandel calls Late-Capitalism, a form of political and economic hegemony that is able to imbed its principles further and deeper than ever before (Mandel 1975; Harvey 1989). Using Mandel's insights, Frederic Jameson formulates the rise of post-modernism, in which capitalism has finally succeeded in fully colonizing the cultural sphere (Jameson 1991, 399–418), as a result of the anti-metaphysical thrust of enlightenment rationalism turning upon itself, fragmenting what was left of humanism and its aspirations, and leaving only the practical and utilitarian as valid (376–386). By the time New Age spirituality had to contend with the era of Reagan and Thatcher, it was already debilitated as a form of social resistance. In fact, it had become one of the market's most efficient agents.

Global corporate capitalism has learned to direct the Romantic expressivist self's yearning for originality, authenticity, creativity and self-expression toward participation in the market through giving such participation identity, meaning and manufacturing value. In other words, one does not have to wear rags and live in a commune (thus "dropping out" and turning away from "the system") in order to be true to her or his unique self. One can express her or his true nature by shopping at particular chains of

stores, buying natural soap or eating organic. Of course, for those engaged in the spiritual quest, paying for rebirthing, energetic healing or Kabbalah merchandise is also an effective way of getting closer to the divine. Such value-invested economic activity is nothing other than the commodification of spirituality (Carrette 2005), in the course of which the answers to life's great questions are offered for sale.

Israel has experienced these changes since the 1980s, when adjustments in the political arena accompanied swift transformations of the state's economic configuration. Following the adoption of Neo-Liberal economics and compliance with global market strategies, by the beginning of the next decade Israel's economy had become Late-Capitalist and post-industrial (Ram 2008). These economic developments had their parallels in the social and cultural spheres. Privatization was not limited to the market, and the collectivist, republican ethos that had characterized Israel through its first decades gave way to an individualist ethos of self-fulfillment. The religious sphere was also affected, and the incontestable hegemony of Orthodox Judaism was for the first time questioned. The individual was empowered to seek out her or his own personalized path.

These changes in the character of contemporary religion have enabled the rise of the utilitarian self over the last few decades. With spiritual truths and practices turned into commodities, the Western spiritual seeker has become an investor, an individual patron of her or his own soul, a contractor for inner development. Such a seeker wishes to maximize the potential output of her or his psychical capital, and searches for the appropriate tools to do so. It is this rampant demand for control of inner assets that has created the spiritual market's supply of "methods" and "techniques" for the cultivation of the self that we are witnessing today in the North Atlantic world and in Israel.

Berg and Laitman cater to a large crowd assembled from Israeli secular Jews, with additional American Jews and non-Jews for Berg, and Russian Jews and non-Jews for Laitman. They quite consciously and explicitly create a tradition of their own, emphasizing that they are teaching "science" and not religion, and as such, universal and eternal tools for the self. They fashion their interpretation of Ashlagian Kabbalah so as to fit the requirements of the spiritual marketplace, and are noticeably very successful in doing so. Their universal spiritual toolkit is used by many whose spiritual quest is at its base a utilitarian mission for self-improvement and the individual pursuit of happiness.

NOTES

1. The first article לכתוב המלהקת was published in 1933 (and distributed to the general public), in סרטנוג ותמ שדקומ: הרתות לתם סרטנוג (The המשנ לש תורוקמ תועידי תצפהל ידקומו: הרות ותמ סרטנוג) in תידודיה ח-ו' מע, ג"צרת וסיני א, ביבא לת א סרטנוג, מעה תורדש ריב הלבהקה תמכחו תדה, תידודיה הדודה ר' ומזאהמה לארשי תבשהמו הלבקו תד יאשוונ סיירמאמ: מכס ירפח, Yechezkel Ashlag, תוסע-גמק 'מע, ה"משנת קרב ניב, גלשא 2009, published by Bnei Baruch, who today hold the original manuscripts to these texts. I thank Boaz Huss and Jonathan Meir for this information.
2. Langford is today a well known artist. He left Berg due to dissatisfaction with his interpretation of Kabbalah, and like Laitman joined Baruch Ashlag's study group. Today, he teaches Kabbalah to small groups and individuals.
3. Information from a private correspondence with Shaul Youdkevitch, a teacher in the Israeli Tel Aviv center since 1980, 1.10.13. I thank him for his good will.
4. Ben-Tal mentions 50,000 Israelis "who are connected to Bnei Baruch in some way" (Ben-Tal 2010, 161), though his source is the public relations office of the movement itself. Yet the number of people connected to Bnei Baruch is no doubt very high, as formal conferences, held once a year, draw over five thousand attendees (161).
5. See for example Uri Blau, "Kabbalah for the People, Millions in the Bank", Haaretz, 22.8.12 (Hebrew); Amos Shavit, "Ultra Laitman", Ha'Musaf Le'Shabat, Yedioth Ahronoth, 30.7.10 (Hebrew); Roni Kuban, "The World of the Zohar", Uvda, Channel 2, 22.12.08 (Hebrew). For a summary of the threats of the group to sue journalists see "The Wisdom of Kabbalah", The 7th Eye site, 7.5.15 (Hebrew), <http://www.the7eye.org.il/156960>, date accessed 7.6.15.
6. Contrary to Berg, Laitman does not provide specific practical "tools" to be used in Kabbalistic spiritual exercises. He explicitly objects to any sort of meditation (Laitman 2006d, 102, e, 101; Aharoni et al. 2007, 222), and insists that the promised spiritual transformation will take place by the intense study of Kabbalah alone (Laitman 2006d, 40, 102, 113, c, 79, 97, 103). In a private conversation with the author (24.10.2010), he insisted that nothing other than study of Ashlag's interpretation of Kabbalah is needed for the spiritual development of man, and nothing else, indeed, could work. It is this insistence on study that allows Bnei Baruch to structure itself as a hierarchical "academy", in which students are devoted to the words of their one and only master. In this, it is quite different then the Kabbalah Center, which is much less centralized, and whose "tools" can be, as it were, picked up and taken away.

7. On modern western Yoga as conforming to utilitarian needs, see De Michelis (2008, 118). It is interesting to note that Karen Berg is fully aware of Neo-Kabbalah's principal resemblance to modern western Yoga. Talking to Jody Myers she claimed that non-Jews practicing Kabbalah at the Kabbalah Center are similar to western people who practice Yoga for the exercise and calming benefits without accepting Hindu religious principles (Myers 2007, 123).
8. I am referring to the distinction between a religion centered around ritual and dogma and one presenting ethical transformative paths. On this distinction, see Stroumsa (2009), Foucault (2005).
9. The Good Life is an ethical term referring to a life that is desired and a life that is ethically and religiously worth living.

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