

FEATURE REVIEW ESSAY

BUDDHIST MEDITATION AND THE JEWISH QUEST FOR TRUTH

Alan Lew, with Sherril Jaffe, *One God Clapping: The Spiritual Path of a Zen Rabbi* (New York, Tokyo, London: Kodansha International, 1999), 315 pages.

Alan Lew's *One Hand Clapping* is the best book that I have read on the encounter between Judaism and Buddhism. Written with his wife, Sherril Jaffe, the book details his own very moving spiritual journey from his secular Jewish family in Brooklyn to his long commitment to Buddhism and finally to his becoming the rabbi of the largest Conservative congregation in San Francisco.

Written with honesty and clarity, this book deserves a great deal of attention by Jews who are open to the possibility that knowledge of Asian religious traditions may help them see their own tradition in a more profound way. What makes this a truly remarkable book is Lew's knowledge of both Buddhist and Jewish traditions. After ten years as a Buddhist who followed a rigorous discipline of daily meditation and twenty years of intense study of the Jewish tradition, including six years in the Rabbinical School at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Lew is one of the few Jewish writers on the Jewish-Buddhist encounter who has a good grasp of these two very different traditions and who understands the centrality of *halacha* for Judaism.

As we begin to read Lew's extraordinary story, we learn that even after he became a committed Buddhist he did not give up his belief in God: "I had no unfriendly feelings toward Judaism; I simply didn't see Judaism as a serious spiritual path, so I set out" (p. 303). Like other Jewish spiritual seekers in the 1960s and 1970s, Lew ended up practicing Zen Buddhism at the San Francisco Zen center and at the Berkeley zendo. The Buddhism that Lew practiced was Soto Zen Buddhism as taught by the disciples of Shunryu Suzuki-roshi, one of the most influential Buddhist teachers of his time. He founded the San Francisco Zen Center and the Zen Mountain Center at Tassajara soon after coming to America in 1958. Suzuki's book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, remains one of the most widely read books on Buddhist meditation. Shunryu Suzuki-roshi places great stress on ritual forms rather than on beliefs or doctrines. For him, the path to peace and joy is through sitting meditation. He was interested in one's posture and breathing, not in one's religious tradition. In *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* he states:

I think some of you who practice *zazen* here may believe in some other religion, but I do not mind. Our practice has nothing to do with some particular religious belief. And for you, there is no need to hesitate to practice our way, because it has nothing to do

with Christianity or Shintoism or Hinduism. Our practice is for everyone.¹

Thus Lew did not experience real conflict between his practice of Buddhism with its stress on sitting and his belief in God, to whom Lew continued to pray throughout the years that he was a member of the Buddhist community. He explains:

My practice, Buddhism, was not a theistic religion. It was not God-centered, but it was not concerned with denying God's existence, either. For me, in fact, it always seemed to bring the sense of the sacred to the foreground. So even though I was a Buddhist, it was a natural thing for me to pray... (p. 98)

However, in his mid-thirties, when he was about to be ordained as a Zen priest, he realized that he would have to begin a new path because he could no longer say, "I take refuge in the Buddha."

Taking refuge in the Buddha is one of the three most precious things in Buddhism. The other two are the *Dharma* (the teaching of the Buddha) and the *Sangha* (the spiritual community). All Buddhists honor these three jewels of Buddhism. A person is very privileged to encounter these rare and precious gems. As a Buddhist, Lew had repeated this formula on numerous occasions. But ironically it was his strong Buddhist meditation practice itself which moved him to follow a new path. Lew explains:

Saying these words ["I take refuge in the Buddha"] as part of preparation for ordination as a Buddhist was suddenly very serious. I couldn't say that I took refuge in the Buddha anymore—I couldn't say it because I was a Jew.

The problem wasn't that I felt I was betraying God. In fact, when I was sitting in *zazen*, I often felt more in contact with God than I ever had before. But I felt I was betraying my soul. Mine was a Jewish soul. I was betraying myself.

Zen meditation, which focused on the present moment, had given me a wide, vibrant view of the world. It laid reality bare. It allowed me to overhear the constant arguments going on in my head. Now I heard something else, underneath, after all the veils were drawn back. I confronted my essence, and my essence was Jewish. (p. 120)

Coming out of the Soto Zen tradition, with its strong, rigorous discipline, Lew was very drawn to Orthodox Judaism. But ultimately he turned to Conservative Judaism because he could not accept the Orthodox understanding of Revelation. He writes that Orthodoxy,

...has frozen the classical evolutionary thrust of Judaism and left it completely unable to deal with new historical circumstances, such as the changing status of women and homosexuals. I don't believe we can go back without giving up more than we ought to

be willing to give up. Judaism owes Orthodoxy a substantial and largely unacknowledged debt, and given the current acrimony among the various Jewish denominations, it is not likely to be acknowledged any time soon. The simple truth, however, is that Orthodoxy sustained serious Jewish spirituality, albeit a particular version of it, when no one else on this planet showed the slightest interest in doing so. I feel enormous gratitude to the Orthodox movement for this and I wish them well. But their version cannot be my own. (p. 304)

As we can see, Lew shows great appreciation for Orthodox Judaism and, like many Orthodox Jews, takes *halacha* very seriously. Nevertheless, he disagrees profoundly with those Orthodox Jews, such as Rabbi Chaim Zvi Hollander, who argue that it is not permitted for Jews "to seek out and explore the spiritual modes of the *Goyim*, even if it is for the purpose of enhancing our own spiritual experiences in the service of our G-d."² Lew's own experience is that Buddhist meditation can deepen the Jews' understanding and appreciation of their own tradition. It was, after all, Buddhist meditation which led to his return to Judaism. He is convinced that Buddhist-style meditation will lead Jews to appreciate and practice their own tradition in a more disciplined way. With the help of meditation, Jews will be enabled to see more clearly the importance of *kashrut*, prayer and other Jewish rituals. In fact, they will begin to perceive more significance in all their daily actions.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, a major influence on many Conservative rabbis, claimed that "Judaism is the *theology of the common deed*."³ This, according to Lew, is precisely the idea which Jews must come to realize. He argues that it is not the mystical aspect of Judaism, but ordinary Judaism presented in a disciplined way, that will help Jews to see in the Jewish path of *halacha* the beauty and preciousness of everyday Judaism.

NOTES

- ¹ Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (New York: Weatherhill, 1970), p. 76.
- ² Chaim Zvi Hollander, "Beyond the Torah's Limits," in *Zen and Hasidism*, ed. Harold Heifetz (Wheaton, IL: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1978), p. 139.
- ³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1966), p. 102. Italics in the original.

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