Preface

In the last decades of the 20th century, a surprising revival of interest in Kabbalah and Hasidism occurred in Israeli society, in Jewish communities in the Diaspora, and to a certain degree in the Western culture in general. Since the late 1960’s, and especially, during the last two decades, new Kabbalistic movements came into being, whereas old Kabbalistic yeshivot and Hasidic groups have become more active. Today, many forms of Kabbalistic rituals and practices are performed, revived, and re-invented, along with Kabbalistic themes being integrated in literature, art, music and popular culture.

Most contemporary Kabbalistic and Hasidic movements emerged out of earlier forms of 20th century Kabbalah, reproducing and developing previous Kabbalistic themes and practices. Yet, today’s Kabbalah is created in the framework of postmodern culture and new spiritual formations (especially, the New Age) stimulating its revival and to a large extent shaping its cultural expressions.

The present volume includes sixteen articles which investigate the new forms of Kabbalah, their cultural contexts and their contacts with other forms of contemporary spiritual revival. The papers were written by prominent scholars from a variety of disciplines, including history of Kabbalah, sociology, anthropology, and religious studies.

Some of the articles deal with various forms of contemporary Kabbalah and Hasidism. Yaakov Ariel investigates the origins of the movements of Renewal and return to tradition; Chava Weissler examines the performance of Kabbalah in the Jewish Renewal Movement in the United States, and Rachel Werczberger explores the theme of healing in the rituals of Jewish Spiritual Renewal in Israel. The contemporary renaissance of Braslov Hasidism is discussed by Zvi Mark, and Jonathan Garb presents his research of the mystical renaissance in the contemporary Ashkenazi haredi world in Israel. Elliot R. Wolfson’s study focuses on the Kabbalistic-pietistic teachings of Itamar Schwartz, one of the more prolific contemporary teachers of Kabbalah in the haredi world. Jonatan Meir examines the boundaries of Kabbalah in the thought of R. Yaakov Moshe Hillel, of Yeshivat Hevrat Ahavat
Shalom of Jerusalem. In her study “Kabbalah for the Gentiles”, Jody Myers draws attention to three contemporary Kabbalah teachers (Ariel Bar Tzadok, Yitzchak Ginsburgh and Michael Laitman) who affirm the appropriateness of teaching Kabbalah to non-Jews.

Other articles trace the wider contexts in which contemporary forms of Kabbalah emerged and follow the contacts between Kabbalah and other forms of contemporary spiritual revival in the western world. In his essay Philip Wexler goes into the social psychological and religious core of classical social theory, and suggests that this core is relevant for the understanding of new age spirituality. Véronique Altglas offers a comparative perspective on the globalization of religious resources through an examination of case-studies: neo-Hindu movements that spread in the West and the Kabbalah Centre. Wouter J. Hanegraaf examines the way Kabbalistic themes were understood and integrated in the Gnosis magazine, published in 1985-1999, and Graham Harvey explores the negotiations of contemporary Paganism between esotericism and animism under the influence of Kabbalah.

Several scholars deal with the Israeli context of present day revival of Kabbalah and contemporary spirituality. Shlomo Fischer looks at new cultural and social phenomena among the West Bank settlers in Israel-Palestine and the larger radical religious Zionist community supporting them. Tamar Katriel investigates the precursors to postmodern spirituality in Israeli cultural ethos, and Joseph Loss investigates the processes of becoming a Buddha-Dhamma practitioner through an ethnographic study of Buddha-Dhamma practitioners in Israel. Concluding the volume, the editor reviews the research of contemporary Kabbalah and Hasidism and the challenges contemporary Kabbalah poses to the academic study of Jewish Mysticism.

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