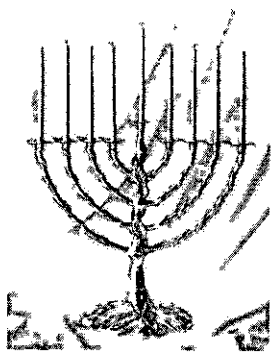


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A Mystical Light

The Lamp of God: A Jewish Book of Light
Freema Gottlieb

Jason Aronson, 1989. 498 pp., \$35.00

Reviewed by Nehemia Polen

At the beginning of the biblical account of creation, God says, "Let there be light." And light there was, but the precise nature of light has eluded human understanding from that time until our own. Today's physicists argue about the meaning of wave/particle duality and the paradoxes of quantum mechanics, while the rabbis of the Midrash wondered where the light of the first day came from if the sun had not yet been placed in the heavens. (That happened on the fourth day.) The midrashic teachers explained that the light of the first day was a different kind of light, more sublime and powerful than anything we see today. This *or ha-ganuz*, hidden light, is saved for the righteous, who will bask in its radiance at the time of the messianic redemption.

Many rich and provocative midrashic themes, such as the *or ha-ganuz* motif,

are collected in Freema Gottlieb's *The Lamp of God: A Jewish Book of Light*. Here we read about the time when the moon shone with the same light as the sun and how the moon came to lose her ability to emit light directly. We learn of the inner significance of the Chanukah candles and how the shining aura of a person's countenance is a window into a pure soul. Gottlieb's writing is informed by a kabbalistic consciousness and she makes frequent references to the *sefirot*, the 10 divine emanations, and the *shechinah*, the receptive Presence of divinity.

Gershom Scholem, the foremost academic scholar of Jewish mysticism, wrote that there never was a woman Jewish mystic. One wonders what Scholem would have thought of Gottlieb's work, which revises the entire kabbalistic system from a feminine (not necessarily a feminist) perspective. Gottlieb tells us, for example, that "the Feminine and not the Masculine...is...the initiator of Creation." Her work combines sensitivity and grace along with sweeping scope and penetrating insight. Every major kabbalistic theme is presented from the standpoint of woman, within the framework of feminine images, feelings and insights. The writing is not linear and expository, but associative and reflective. Some passages appear to have been written in a meditative consciousness and might serve as the objects of spiritual contemplation.

The story is told that Bertrand Russell once gave a lecture on the logic of modern physics. Alfred North Whitehead, who was in the audience, rose to express his gratitude for the illuminating lecture but also thanked Russell "for not having obscured the great darkness of the subject." Freema Gottlieb's *The Lamp of God: A Jewish Book of Light* manages to conjure up the very texture of light, allowing the reader to experience its palpable presence and personality. But perhaps the greatest achievement of Gottlieb's dazzling poetic meditation is that in the end, one emerges with a new appreciation of light's mysteries and indeed, its "great darkness."

Nehemia Polen is Associate Dean of Students and Assistant Professor of Jewish Thought at Hebrew College in Boston. He has written widely on chasidism and Jewish spirituality; his new book on *Esh Kodesh*, the Warsaw Ghetto writings of Rabbi Kalonymos Shapira, is soon to be published.

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His voice silenced by a stroke, the 91-year-old Lubavitcher Rebbe's penetrating eyes are searched for guidance by his devoted followers.

Photo of the Rebbe by S. Roumani, Lubavitch photo by Richard B. Levine.

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