



ZAC KAMENETZ: PSYCHEDELIC JUDAISM

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast. Passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball Campus in Los Angeles and your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, where I look forward to sharing with you a conversation with Rabbi Zac Kamenetz. Rabbi Kamenetz is a community leader and aspiring psychedelic-assisted therapist based in Berkeley, California. He holds an MA in biblical literature and languages from UC Berkeley and the Graduate Theological Union, and he received rabbinic ordination in 2012. Directed toward answering life's essential questions within the Jewish tradition and embodied spiritual practice, Zac founded Shefa Jewish psychedelic support, pioneering a movement to integrate safe and intentional psychedelic use into the Jewish spiritual tradition and advocating for individuals and communities to heal individual and inherited trauma. Zac Kamenetz, thank you for joining us on the Commons Podcast.

Zac Kamenetz: It's a pleasure being here with you.

JH: So to kick off, introduce us to Shefa and its mission.

ZK: Well, Shefa is the very first non-profit that is dedicated to Jewish psychedelic support, and we envision a world where Jews can reconnect to the depth of their spiritual traditions through conscious and supported psychedelic use. And we do that in three ways. The first is through Jewish integration support and community building. There are Jewish people who have done psychedelics since they were let loose out of the laboratory in the '50s, '60s and '70s, and those people then, and people who are having psychedelic experiences while we are speaking, have not found venues or communities or individuals, especially rabbis, where most of the time, they feel confident and safe to be able to talk about the experiences that they've had, the challenges that they've had, the growth and insight that they've had, not only just to be able to share that and externalize it, but wondering what resonance there might be within their own Jewish culture,

their own religious traditions, within their wisdom and practice. We have been there to create integration circles. Monthly, people from all over the world get together, they have time to share, they have time for people to reflect back to them what they heard, and if they are asking for it, ways that they might be able to bring Jewish wisdom, bring Jewish ritual into the insights and encounters that they've had in psychedelic or expanded states of awareness, and then we also do community building in that way, we have...

ZK: Just this past year, we launched the Jewish Psychedelic Summit, where we had 1500 people... We reached 5000 people, come together for two days of learning and for talks through leaders that are in the Jewish psychedelic space, research, rabbis, mystics, musicians, and to say we actually have a broad community. People know that Jews are psychedelically active, but they might not know to what extent. So, we're bringing more people together, virtual and in-person experiences. The second way is through community education and leadership development, people are carrying those anecdotal stories about the friend that they knew that had a bad trip, the experience that they had that was less than pleasant, they were at a concert, they were in their home, that was maybe not as conscious or supported as they want it to, and they don't know what has happened since the Renaissance, about 20 years of new research that has come out about the toxicity of various plants and compounds, the drug interactions that happen with anti-depressants and psychedelics, what psychedelics are and what the promise is for mental health healing.

ZK: So we want to be able to share that with synagogues, with Jewish community centers, with rabbis and Jewish educators, and we want people to know what are the real risks and the real rewards of psychedelics as they are. So we're gonna be kicking off a number of programmatic offerings this coming year after the Hagim. And finally, we want to be doing research, publishing and learning. You're looking at me with all of my sefarim, all of my books behind me, and in just about every single one of them, there is something about the preparation, exploration or integration of expanded consciousness in them.

ZK: We don't necessarily think about Judaism, Jewish ritual, Jewish holidays in terms of grasping at and achieving an expanded state of awareness, so what we are doing is trying to organize some of the greatest thinkers, some of the greatest lineages into English, into an idiom that people can understand and in a way that actually is helpful, is results-driven for people to achieve these states of awareness, either using psychedelics or not, and we wanna be doing more publishing, actual real materials for people to use either learning in community, using this as journals or even as integration guides, and finally, just the opportunity to come together and learn the Torah of Consciousness, the Torah of Healing, and the Torah of Creativity, either in a beit midrash or yeshiva setting or many other ways. So these kind of interlocking paths, that's our theory of change, and it seems as though people are really excited about all three of them.

JH: You use the word integration in a way that felt like it was a technical term, so I wanted to ask you to define it so we can more properly understand you well.

ZK: So integration in the psychedelic world is the term that is used to describe the process of meaning and making that happens after a psychedelic experience or an experience with expanded consciousness that just happens naturally. Sometimes maybe your listeners, maybe yourself, you've touched one of these experiences, a feeling of effervescent, the feeling of being outside of your boundaries, either mental or your physical, or your emotional through stirring music or being in a large group of people, or taking a psychedelic plant or compound or just dancing vigorously. And sometimes when people have this encounter, they have an insight about their life that they didn't have before about some relational aspect.

ZK: Sense of intuitive knowledge about their place in the universe, a social issue, their feeling of being at one in the environment. And so when we have these insights, sometimes they are transformative. Personally, I had an encounter with this kind of awareness when I was only 15 years old, I was on an Israel trip, I had a natural mystical experience and it changed my life, I became a rabbi almost 15 years later because of this totally mind-opening experience. But when some people experience these things, they fade, right. That hot core that you touched over that experience, you think, "Yeah, that was amazing, I should do something about it."

ZK: And then you wonder what it is that I'm supposed to do, and then over time, that insight fades. So integration is the active process of saying, now that I have had this insight, now that I have had this encounter, what are the tangible anchors that I can start to create the habits of mind, the habits of hand and heart that I can be doing on a daily basis to actually keep that insight with me, to keep that healing with me, keep that energy and focus going as opposed to letting it just disappear into the background. So there are many practices, it depends on the kind of insight, of course, but it's about making these things real. I say that psychedelic Judaism is not just about encountering altered states, but it's also then about helping create altered traits. That's a line from Houston Smith. If we make this Jewish, it means taking those apprehensions and those insights, having it affect our kishkas, to change our middot, to change our personal traits in some way that is for the betterment of us, our families and communities, and ultimately, please God, the world.

JH: Having read the Shefa website, something I found very interesting, you frame your mission in terms of a problem, namely, "The spiritual disconnection between a large critical mass of Jews and God", and I know you're not a sociologist, but you are a practitioner of spirituality, and so I wanna ask you, to what do you attribute this disconnection, particularly as expressed by Jews? Because you very briefly point this out, but I think anecdotally and experientially, we Jews know this to be the case, but there's a higher rate of Jewish... Shall we call it non-religiosity or standoff-ish-ness to religiosity or God talk or whatever it is. I think the problem you're describing is something most of us sort of understand, but what do you bring to that problem in terms of not just solving it, but also determining its roots?

ZK: Well, that sociological piece that you just mentioned, we saw again, this Pew study that just came out about the widening gap between Jews who are Jews of some religious association and Jews of no religion. At the same time, though, I wanna mention that there's a large number

still, a majority, of Jews who still are in touch with the ineffable, A spiritual force, a transcendent sense, and so the issue for them might be religion itself and not, their awakening into the divine presence or divine reality just to make that distinction. It might be about institutions and traditions that they don't connect with, but they might have belief but not belonging.

ZK: We know that Jews in eastern Europe, Jews in North Africa, in Arab lands, Jews basically for the past thousand years or so, they have had an orientation of the divine being a meaningful part of their lived lives. And I think that the process of emancipation and rationalization that maybe probably started with Maimonides and other Jews that were trying to have Jewish religion and Jewish tradition be more sensible in terms of philosophical truths, and then continuing with Spinoza and working on through the Maskilim, I would say maybe potentially early reformers, who are helping helpless Jews to be able to be accepted as citizens in their Christian host countries, there were changes that needed to happen to external Jewish life that then had a deep internal impact. And I believe that there was a process of demystification, demythologization, that happened in Jewish life, where the rational became ascendant and the mystical was downplayed.

JH: To clarify, you attribute that shift to the need to be more palatable to post-enlightenment Europe that was putting this rationalism on a pedestal, and so that if the Jews wanted to function in those societies, they too needed to elevate the rational... Rationalistic, perhaps is a better way to describe that, to the expense of whatever mystical expressions may have pre-existed the period.

ZK: Yes, of course, and we can see this in the writings of the Maskilim, the early emancipators who were railing against Kabbalistic belief, they were railing against Hasidic practice and theology, and we know that Anglo Protestant countries and the classical reform and early other reform synagogues, they were creating a kind of decorum that did not have that either ecstatic or cosmological impact on realms that one could not see, but it was about the here and now in history, and not about the realms of speculation and theosophy, like wondering what God is up to.

ZK: So yeah, there is an external factor, I think, but the other external factor, not only for Jews to be able to be included into Western society, at least in Western and Eastern Europe, Jews of Arab lands, North Africa, and otherwise had something like this, but let's say to a different degree, but it was also not only bred out of us, but also beaten out of us. And now that I have delved into this as a topic, just the idea of the scores of students of particular Hasidic and Kabbalistic lineages that were lost through pogroms, displacement in Arab lands, the murder of great spiritual masters and teachers, I'm thinking specifically just one Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Piaseczna Rebbe. Think about the work that he did before World War II, before he was stuck in the Warsaw Ghetto, his writings buried underneath the ghetto in milk cans. He was working with mesmerism, he was working with self-quieting techniques, he was working on creating spiritual communities that in his own words were to re-awaken prophetic consciousness.

ZK: You know, we don't have Hasidim of him today, they were all murdered. So just to think about that one person and the worlds and worlds that could have come out... Now thankfully, his writings were recovered, people are continuing now to be learning his techniques, to consider his writings more, but he's just one example of these great lineages that were wiped off the face of the earth. And so I think not only was it a sociological need and shift for political stability, but we have been robbed, we are spiritually bereft of some of the great masters, men and women, Rabbis and folk healers that we will never know about. And so I think that in a dual way, we are worse off there, but it is not a lost cause. Through the threads of writing and tradition, even though they're discontinuous lineages, we can re-awaken this inner core that still abides and re-inspire new movements through the safe and conscious application of psychedelic technique.

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JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at collegecommons.huc.edu for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click "Sign Up" at collegecommons.huc.edu. Oh, and one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes, but whatever you do, do not give us 5 stars unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

JH: So let's dive in a little bit to the connection between psychedelic techniques and substances on the one hand, and mysticism, this thread of thinking that you and I have been discussing thus far, on the other hand. And so I'd like to ask you to walk us through the connection between them in a three-part way to help us follow you. First, I'd like you to share with us your understanding of what mysticism is, then I'd like to ask you to tell us specifically how you understand Jewish mysticism and then from that launching point, tell us how it is that psychedelics enrich that project.

ZK: So mysticism is not a Hebrew word, mysticism is a word that intends a reality that is beyond the sensed perception, but there is a really technical definition that I'm using and wanna go beyond in some ways, and this one is found in comparative religion research and now is also being used in psychedelic research, there's actually like a mysticism scale to understand the relative experience that someone has based on some criteria, but the one that I'll work with right now, we can talk about how to go beyond that. This is from Robert Forman, he's a researcher. Anyway, he says, that common core of mystical experience is a feeling of unity in one way or the other, that a person has either unity with the divine, unity with the world or all people, all humanity, I would say probably even within themselves, not feeling that there's some part of them that is disconnected, but that they are a whole in and of themselves. There's the transcendence of time and space that wherever I am right now, I'm in Berkeley, California, it's 2:00 PM, that I could actually experience something beyond Berkeley and beyond the time that I'm living in on a different plane of reality.

ZK: The third is intuitive knowledge, that there is something that only through being in a practice, a meditative practice, an ecstatic practice, being in touch with the psychedelic compound, that something might come to me that I could not work through my rational mind or deduction somehow to get to, but it only came to me in the midst of that expanded awareness. Fourth is a sense of sacredness, this is not my everyday day-to-day life, but there is something holy and special about it. Fifth is a deeply felt positive mood that even though these experiences might be terrifying, they might be difficult, they might be painful, and they might be upsetting that you can actually access a deep felt sense of joy and wonder.

ZK: And the sixth is ineffability, that there is something where language is a limit to the ability to be able to talk about what I went through. And so there are other experiential categories also, but that seems to be the core of mystical experiences in the way that people are talking about them, at least right now in 2021. Jewish mysticism is in other words, *penimiyut*, the inner life of Torah, we might call it Kabbalah, which is not necessarily about any content, but about the transmission between a teacher and student of esoteric teachings that start in Torah itself through the prophets, mainly Ezekiel or Isaiah, where there are passages in the Torah that seem esoteric. There is some sort of secret knowledge and then carry on through teacher to student, through the Merkabah, the descent of the Chariot school into ecstatic Kabbalah practices like with Abraham Abulafia into the Zohar, other schools of mystical thought and practice, and then into Hasidic, modern Hasidic teachings and writings and practices and of communities that carried on this lineage, also North African, Ethiopian, Italian, there are many other schools of Jewish mysticism, not just through the Hasidic lineage.

ZK: So that is usually about the experience of the practitioner or the rabbi or the community communing with the divine, the divine presence, making the divine presence a reality in their lives, not just an abstraction, not just something that is distant, but actual joining in some way with divinity, creating healing and peace within a person and in a community, and receiving greater degrees of truth and insight as to what Torah means for us now. And some see that as being only done within a mystical state. So the connection between mysticism and, for my purposes, Jewish mysticism and psychedelics, that really came about in the early 2000s when a researcher, Roland Griffiths, from Johns Hopkins University, he had been working in psychopharmacology and was working on studies with caffeine, and during his studies with caffeine and coffee and seeing the interactions between that compound and the human mind where someone suggested that he actually start looking at psychedelics. And that he had never had any experience with that, he had been doing some meditation in his life, but psychedelic research had been shut down since the late '70s, really the early '80s because of the schedule one classification in America, there was total prohibition and all of that research that had been started in the '60s basically ended.

ZK: And the paper that Roland Griffiths and others came out with was psilocybin can occasion mystical type experiences, having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance. They had people in a double-blind placebo study take psilocybin, which is the

active compound in magic mushrooms, or take a placebo, I think like a high dose of niacin, they might feel tingly. But the people who had actually taken psilocybin, 65% of them said that that experience was the top five experience in their life, and I think over 80% of the people in that study said it was the number one experience of their life, and that feeling persisted for up to six months, if not longer. So the experiences that people were having, the deeply felt mood, the sacredness, the transcendence of time and space, some insight about their life, the world, their family, their relationship only happened because of their interaction with psilocybin. And they were able to determine that it was basically indistinguishable. If you gave it to a professor of religion, you wrote off the notes and said, "What is happening to this person?" They would say, "Oh, this person's having a religious experience," not knowing that they were having a drug experience.

ZK: So now we can see through data that people are able to have these profound moments in their lives with a lot of support from their guides and the setting is incredibly important also to those things happening in this particular way. But for my purposes, that when Jewish people are going to have these experiences or have in the past, that they can experience them and to be able to ground them in their own traditions versus wondering how this has any connection to their Jewishness.

JH: So let's take this to its next logical place, which is the Jewish Psychedelic Summit, which took place in May of 2021, and which you helped to found, and I wanna ask you, not so much as a founder, but as a participant, to tell us one key novel takeaway from that learning summit that you took with you from the experience.

ZK: Well, you asked for one, but I'm gonna give you two. The first is that the attendees and other people who were interested but couldn't come, regardless of their religious affiliation, their denominational, post-denominational, non-denominational, they want to know this kind of Torah that helps them access these deeper realms of self and knowledge. And they're out there, but they just don't know how to get it.

ZK: The second was actually the panel that we had by major researchers and therapists talking about inter-generational trauma and the possibility and potential for healing as Jews from these traumas, individual and collective traumas. I think that that was the best attended, it was the one that has inspired a group of therapists to continue to meet, and when people tell me about the feedback from the Summit, that is the panel that people say that they were most excited about.

ZK: I think that in all the work that we do as a community, education, continuity, making people feel comfortable and making people feel seen, giving opportunities for leadership and growth, what is not on the table or what I have not yet seen in a major way is healing, and that is the same in the mental health space. I think that we are good at managing the symptoms of trauma in Jewish community, but not about being able to release from the pain and the trauma that actually happens to get to see what is next. Some of that is baked in, we just had Tisha B'Av right at this moment of collective trauma, we're seeing our wounds, we re-open them, we live

them again, and then we close them back up, what would happen if we actually focus focused on healing in a major way? I think it might be the next stage, the next turning of Jewish civilization, Jewish society.

JH: It begs the question, though, what if we are our pain, and what if we don't want it to heal, and we need it to be us?

ZK: I mean we are, in some ways. We are our pain, but that is... I think that's the idea of this transpersonal state, we are and there is more than. And I think sometimes we focus on only, we are and our only, versus we are and there is more. If there's more, what could it be?

JH: So I'd like to close out with a question that I'm really curious about, it's gonna sound oppositional, but it's actually from a place of real curiosity. I wanna know what you gain from your encounter with firm rejection-ism of your position, and I don't mean skepticism because skepticism puts the burden of proof on you and may approach you with a certain suspicion, but true skepticism is also at least open to your argument and to hearing you out and presumably being convinced. Rather, I wanna ask you how you are enriched by those who have considered the issue seriously and thoughtfully, and who have come to the conclusion that it's hogwash.

ZK: What I think it helps clarify for me is that, of course, this is not for everyone, this will never be for everyone. There are people for whom rational mind and empiricism is all that there is. And what I say isn't to hate, those people should be well, and for the people who have a sense, have an intuitive, deep sense that there is more here than what is available to my sense of perception, to my rational waking mind and I just don't know what it is yet, that's what we're here for. I think mysticism will never be for everyone, psychedelics will never be for everyone, but for those that are and are looking for that beyond or the beyond within, I want them to know that they have a Jewish home for it.

JH: Well, Zac Kamenetz, thank you so much for the conversation and the pleasure of your company, and I look forward to our paths crossing again sometime.

ZK: Thank you, Josh.

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