

Telling Tales Novel Method Of Teaching Discipline

By Teresa Mears
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MIAMI — For years, Rabbi Mitchell Chefitz tried to write a book about the Jewish spiritual discipline known as Kabbalah. To him, the discipline and its mysticism enhanced his life in a way he wanted to share.

He was, after all, a rabbi — a teacher. A book would spread the spiritual insight much more widely than he could teaching classes and contributing to an occasional spiritual text.

But, he couldn't make the book work. It was as much a failure as the 400-page "something or other" he had tried to write 30 years ago, when he left college with the idea of making writing his career.

"I found that my nonfiction writing was dry, that it did not bring the Kabbalah to life. ... It was preachy," he said.

Six years ago, as he drove home alone from dropping his son off at college and saying goodbye to his dying father in Boston, he realized how to write the book — as a novel.

In fiction, he discovered, he could make the Kabbalah real. "The Seventh Telling: The Kabbalah of Moshe Katan" (St. Martin, \$24.95) is a novel within a novel, about a rabbi and his spiritual journey, his relationship with his wife and his struggles with the limitations of traditional religious practice, told by a middle-age couple whose lives they touch. The spiritual lessons are interspersed in the struggles of the characters and the stories they

tell.

"You can read it as a love story," Chefitz said. "You can read it as an allegory. You can read it as a spiritual text."

The book isn't autobiographical, although Chefitz shares some qualities with protagonist Moshe Katan. Like the fictional Katan, Chefitz was reared in a traditional but not religious Jewish home. He studied at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and served in the Navy in the Gulf of Tonkin in Vietnam. Confused by his wartime experiences and by the radically changed country to which he returned, he went to Israel.

"I had a sense that I might find some balance studying in Israel, and I was right," Chefitz said. He continued his studies for the rabbinic in New York. But he still had questions.

He began studying the Jewish mystics and discovered the Kabbalah, the study of which was for many years forbidden to most Jews. The Hebrew root of Kabbalah is from the verb "to receive," and Chefitz explains the concept using the metaphor of a radio or television receiver.

"Everybody is a receiver," he said. "The training of a kabbalist is to get one's head on straight so you're at least pointed in the right direction when the signals come."

To do that requires quieting oneself through meditation to reduce distortion and static.

The result, he said, is an amplified life and a partnership with the creator. "One can receive greater and greater ecstasy from smaller

and smaller stimuli," he said. "The down side is the guilt and remorse that one feels for smaller and smaller transgressions. It makes you much more sensitive in your daily contact."

His practice of the Kabbalah, of spiritual discipline, suffuses his work, he said. "When you surrender to the art, when you surrender to the craft, you have a partnership with the divine," he said. "It's as if I put the bricks together but the building appeared miraculously."

While study of the Kabbalah has gained some adherents among New Age seekers, Chefitz doesn't consider it a New Age practice, pointing out that it originated with Jewish scholars centuries ago.

Like Moshe, his protagonist, Chefitz also found something missing in traditional Jewish worship. He wanted to create opportunities for people to experience a more intense and more personal relationship with God, not merely to listen to teachers but to take responsibility for their own Jewish lives.

In 1980, he founded Havurah of South Florida. Havurah means fellowship, and many such small fellowships meet throughout South Florida, mostly in people's homes. Havurahs run the range from traditional to liberal, Chefitz said, but treat men and women equally. Participants study in pairs, each one learning and teaching. The rabbi is more a coach than a preacher.

"There is an intensity in such a grouping that one doesn't find in an auditorium-type setting," Chefitz said. "I saw more Jewish growth in those small groupings ... than in

anything else I was doing."

For most adults, spiritual growth starts with examining the roots of their own beliefs, often formed as children and never updated. "There are all sorts of hurts and resentments that one holds against religion and therefore against God. ... But they are very different things, religion and God."

"The Seventh Telling" is the first of a trilogy. Chefitz has finished the second, "The 33rd Hair: The Torah of Moshe Katan," which will be published in 2002. He is working now on the third book.

Learning to write fiction was a struggle, he said. His agent referred him to a writing coach, Lesley Kelles Payne. "She tore me apart to my very core and showed me what I was afraid of facing," Chefitz said.

This summer, he and his wife, Walli, an occupational therapist and practitioner of the mind-body Feldenkrais therapy, plan to take a year's sabbatical to get to know each other better now that their three sons are grown.

Chefitz sees his book as more about questions than answers, questions about the Jewish spirituality, questions about the role of the rabbi in the community, questions about God in the world today. He wants people to disagree, to debate and discuss the issues he has raised.

"Arguing is a form of Jewish growth. But the arguing has to be done for the sake of heaven, not for the sake of ego," he said. "If my book can provoke such an argument, I'll consider my book successful."

RIGHTS: Role Of Church To Help Everyone, Lewis Says

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tinue, she said, "but not necessarily in the same shape."

Equipped with seed money and backed by the Episcopal church, Lewis set up shop in the county seat of Georgetown — a small town surrounded by chicken houses — and started talking to poultry workers who complained of poor pay, dangerous work and unpaid overtime.

He spoke to the family farmers, who raise the chickens under contract for the big poultry companies, and heard complaints of underweight feed shipments and sick hatchlings.

He looked at the waters of the rivers feeding the Chesapeake Bay and the inland bays of southern Delaware, fouled with algae blooms linked to the nutrients in chicken waste.

"We're talking about systemic problems, economic justice issues, the corporate farming and agribusiness that just rolls over people here," Lewis said.

"I've learned that conflict is not only critical to making change, it is also important to my faith," Lewis said. "The cross is a sign of conflict. Jesus was put to death, and it wasn't for handing out bread on the streets."

Lewis made enough noise to draw the United States Department of Labor, which in a January report to the U.S. Senate listed wage, safety and

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Episcopal priest

child-labor law violations in the poultry industry.

He has been labeled a publicity hound by some, including his opponents in the poultry industry.

After Lewis refused to leave the lobby of the Mountaire Farms plant in Selbyville, Del., before a union vote among its workers, Mountaire executives called police and filed a criminal trespass complaint. Lewis was arrested.

"Jim came here seeking publicity, came into the building and wanted to have meetings or something with our employees," said Dave Tanner, Mountaire's human resources director.

"Jim was basically seeking publicity for himself," Tanner said.

Lewis denies the accusation. "The role of the church is to be out there with the folks to get their stories told," he said. "I'll make as much noise as possible to get those stories told."

TEST: Online Quiz Shows Differences, Similarities

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site includes links to nearly 2,000 other tests written by volunteers. At the peak of the campaign season, their presidential candidate selector was receiving 80,000 visitors a day.

Since making its debut last August, the religion selector has been attracting 7,000 users a day, and the site now includes advanced quizzes to help fundamentalist Christians, Jews, Gnostics, agnostics, pagans, Muslims and others further refine their options. The site includes scores of links to official Web sites, representing the various churches, movements and traditions.

Lorie Anderson worked on the religion quiz off and on for at least six months and has continued to fine-tune her text, based on user feedback. The goal was to find issues that united the faiths — creation, evil, salvation, suffering — to provide some structure. Then, she had to pinpoint doctrinal differences to sift through the users and pin on some theological labels.

The results often yield strange bedfellows. Orthodox Jews, for example, have more in common with Muslims than with Reform Jews. Liberal Protestants have more in common with pagans than with evangelical Protestants. Liberal Quakers resemble Hindus, while orthodox Quakers may hang out with the Mormons.

The test still isn't perfect. In particular, the Andersons have struggled to break the Christian doctrine of the Trinity down into bits of computer data. Is God a "corporeal spirit" (has a body) or an "incorporeal spirit?"

"That's a tough one," Curt Anderson said. "Christians believe that Jesus had a body, yet God the Father does not. Yet, they're both in the Trinity. ... We're still working on that one."

"Right," said his wife. "Words mean a whole lot when you start trying to describe who or what God is or isn't. ... When it comes to words, religious people get really picky."

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