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'Torah from the heart' Rabbi foresees new paradigm of Judaism

by Paula Amann

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Rabbi Mitchell Chefitz sees a new Judaism in the throes of birth.

"People will look back on the late 20th and early 21st centuries as when a new paradigm of Judaism began," said the spiritual leader of Temple Israel of Greater Miami in a phone interview last week.

His 2002 novel, *The Thirty-Third Hour*, envisions what that new paradigm might look like in a congregation similar to the one he leads.

It's a hands-on Judaism drawing people across the generations that uses such activities as building an ark to teach about community and *Kabbalah*.

The Boston native, 61, will explore such ideas and their practice in "A Celebration of Jewish Spirituality," a Shabbaton at Bethesda's Adat Shalom Congregation this weekend.

Chefitz launches the program at Friday evening services at 8 with a talk on Judaism's transformations, "From Babylon to Bethesda: An Overview of the Cresting Waves of Jewish Spirituality."

On Saturday, he will bring chanting and meditation to Saturday morning services, then lead a 1:15 p.m. workshop, "How to See a Miracle: Telling Stories on the Deep, Deeper, and Deepest Levels."

"After every major trauma, there is a settling period of a few generations and a reimagining of Jewish life," said Chefitz, citing such shifts after the fall of the Second Temple and again after the expulsion of Jews from Spain. "We're a few generations after the Holocaust, and it's happening now."

Looking back into Jewish evolution, Chefitz points to the religion's reshaping when the Temple's destruction paved the way for a move from animal sacrifice to "the offering of words."

The authority of the priests gave way to the authority of the rabbis, and with that, came the reinterpretation of Torah through first the oral, then the written Talmud.

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Centuries later, the 1492 expulsion of Spanish Jewry preceded the *Shulchan Aruch* by Rabbi Joseph Caro, which summarized the Talmud's laws, and the teachings of Rabbi Isaac Luria, which revived the mystical tradition of *Kabbalah*. The pair pursued both scholarly and *kabbalistic* interests, stresses Chefitz, and did not apparently see them as conflicting.

Today, on the other hand, the Jewish strands of Orthodoxy and Jewish Renewal are on opposite ends of the religious spectrum. Yet both, he notes, are drawing adherents.

Chefitz himself began teaching *Kabbalah* in the late '70s and found it struck a chord with "serious people." Like his novelistic lay leader Moshe Katan, he worked as a traveling teacher-scholar outside the synagogue system for decades, only to return to head a congregation, like his book's establishment figure, Rabbi Arthur Greenberg.

Asked how he views the Jewish future, in light of alarming demographic studies, Chefitz is warily upbeat. He points to a demand for workshops like the ones he leads in communities as far-flung as Indianapolis and Austin.

"I know there is a profound, intelligent, spiritual product that can be created," he said. "We'll have to see if it can draw market share. The first results are promising."

A hunger for meaning among Jews, however, has sometimes led to the marketing of "instant spirituality" that seems to demand no effort.

In his books, Chefitz also touches on the phenomenon of sexual abuse by spiritual teachers. He urges caution among those seeking answers.

"If there are people who want magic, there will be magicians because they will appear to meet that need," he said. "To become a a mystic requires study, practice and discipline."

Meanwhile, he foresees the development in the coming decades of "a Torah that comes from the heart." Unlike the Torah of the parchment, he says, "it may be written on pixels."

And he expects the new paradigm will reflect the influence of the gender that did not participate in the shaping of the Torah, Talmud and Kabbalah.

"The voice and participation of women will make a profound difference," Chefitz predicts.

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