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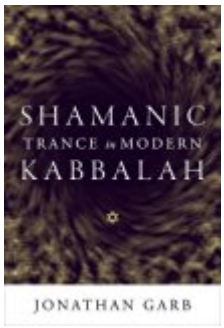
Jonathan Garb. *Shamanic Trance in Modern Kabbalah.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. x + 276 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-28207-7.



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This is a book that can be recommended not only to researchers working in the field of Jewish mysticism, but also to colleagues working in the field of religious studies in general. Through its very provocative title--and then through well-argued but dense chapters--it raises three challenges to the formerly regnant contours of Jewish mysticism studies, which to this day have been dictated by the research agenda and ideological proclivities of Gershom Scholem. At least one of these challenges has been tackled by Jonathan Garb in earlier writings: the notion that there is a useful domain within the history of Jewish mysticism which can best be characterized as "modern Kabbalah." The very term "modern Kabbalah" suggests that the developments, personalities, and movements of Jewish mystical thought of the last four hundred years (Lurianism, Sabbateanism, Hasidism, Mitnagdism, and all that flows therefrom) can be regarded as representing a revitalizing response of Jewish religiosity to modernism. This approach explicitly contravenes the Scholemian view that Hasidism represents the "latest phase" in the history of Jewish mysticism, and that after a few generations of initial mystical creativity, Hasidism experienced a decline and degeneration, marking a kind of end to the history of the movement.

Another potentially disconcerting challenge offered by the title of the book, shamanism is a domain of religious studies typically linked to rural South America or Asia. Garb successfully argues that modern Kabbalah can be readily understood as bearing numerous shamanic traits. One might begin the book with a sense that Garb is trying to fit a round peg into a square hole, but as the book unfolds the reader is compelled to accept that the traits of shamanistic phenomena are indeed present in modern Kabbalistic practice. For that matter, "trance" can be a slippery and fluid term, but by carefully delineating the difference between trance and concentrated meditation, Garb demonstrates that the many diverse streams of modern Kabbalah view the inculcation of trance states as an acme of the mystic way. These trance experiences are comparatively described

by Garb as "shamanic" insofar as they oftentimes invoke and promote the same themes of power, transformation, and healing associated with shamanic phenomena.

The book is divided into six chapters. In the first chapter, Garb provides an impressive survey of scholarship on these three central issues: shamanism, trance, and modern Kabbalah. In the second chapter, he concentrates on the shamanic process of descent (often linked to ascent) and fiery transformations that often ensue. Here we are introduced to the cluster of rituals known as ***nefilat appayim*** (falling on the face) during prayer and the many attestations of transformations involving light and fire that accompany trance states. Chapter 3 deals with trance as transformative empowerment in modern Kabbalah. A series of Kabbalistic texts from sixteenth-century Safed (principally penned by Hayyim Vital) and Jerusalem (principally by Yehudah Albotini and Yosef Ibn Sayyah) are carefully examined, culminating in a discussion of trance reports by the influential eighteenth-century Italian Kabbalist Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto and his associate Moshe David Valle. Chapter 4, "Shamanic Hasidism," returns to some of the themes laid out in the first three chapters as it relates to a panoramic survey of Hasidic trance reports. Continuing the survey of Hasidism, chapter 5 deals with Hasidic trance. The sixth and concluding chapter considers the relationship between trance and "nomian" constructs--the perhaps surprising fact that modern Kabbalistic trance is practiced within the context of normative Jewish ritual conduct. Hasidic trance (often induced in group activities, such as Torah study) is therefore not an indication of antinomian or even hypernomian tendencies, but falls within the "four cubits" of the Law. A short epilogue that briefly reiterates the modernity of the topic, and an appendix entitled "Psychoanalysis and Hasidism" round out the book. Eighty pages of copious notes, twenty-nine pages of bibliography, and a helpful index constitute the back matter. The book was carefully and expertly edited, with only an instance or two of editorial miscues.

This is not an introductory text--it is an advanced study clearly intended for a reading audience simultaneously well versed in the latest methodologies of religious studies, and fully conversant in the primary literature and secondary scholarship of Lurianism, Sabbateanism, and Hasidism. Of the former, Garb centers his book against the groundbreaking work of hypnotist Milton Erickson and his school (thereby effectively dismissing the "psychological" interpretation of Hasidism advanced by Scholem). Of the latter, Garb adduces a number of both well-known and fairly obscure samples from the modern Kabbalistic corpus, and he acknowledges indebtedness to Moshe Idel's experiential turn in Jewish mysticism studies, as well as to the work of Elliot Wolfson and particularly Haviva Pedaya. Garb is well aware that others before him have invoked shamanism as a credible interpretive model for describing aspects of the path of Kabbalah. However, no one before Garb has attempted such a broad and persuasive treatment, even as he warns "that the term 'trance' (just like the term 'shaman') is not indigenous to Kabbalistic discourse" (p. 48).

The book is densely packed, and while there is some effort to place matters within a synchronic arc of development, when it comes to Hasidism the range of sources are presented in a cross-generational, cross-geographic fashion. Every effort is made to give expression to the eccentricities and nuances of the myriad of Hasidic schools, but Garb's intent is to interpret and describe a cluster of mystical experiences and hagiography in modern Kabbalah. The book is therefore decidedly thematic. Essential to Garb's approach is the well-known disagreement between Scholem and Martin Buber as to the relative value of Hasidic theoretical literature versus the hagiographical tales. Garb explicitly comes down on Buber's side: "I believe that the method proposed here can lead to a

more thorough utilization of this vast textual reservoir" (p. 78). Thus, hagiographical accounts of *tzaddikim* who manifest faints, waking sleep, trance states, and magical healing powers (to enumerate just a few types) are combined with autobiographical accounts and intricate homilies to provide evidence for shamanic trance.

It has been thirty years since Scholem has passed. A new generation of scholars has built on and reconstructed the field. Garb's exciting research is the happy outcome of the field passing into an even greater maturity and relevance for the study of religion. As such, ***Shamanic Trance in Modern Kabbalah*** is an impressive and powerful statement of the "state of the art" as practiced by twenty-first century researchers, addressing the interests of specialists and generalists alike.