

The Secret History of the Zohar at the Hebrew Union College

Or: Red Socks

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I sat in the library. I stayed late. Open stacks, I especially love the kabbalistic texts. I stacked them on my desk, by the window that faces the back parking lot, where I studied, I stayed until closing. Almost every night. I wandered through the books, trying to make sense.

One evening I went out for something to eat. Pop's Lebanese on Calhoun Street. When I returned, there was an older gentleman standing at my desk, paging through the books I had left there. I walked up. It was as if I had caught him going through my dresser.

"Oh, excuse me," he said, "please, I'm sorry, but - are you interested in these texts?"

"Yes," I said, "Very interested."

"Oh yes, they are beautiful. Come, I'll show you."

He took me into the stacks and pulled down text after text, then took me to the reference shelves where he introduced me to resources.

"I have to go back to work now," he said. He padded quietly in and out of the adjacent wing to the library where the rare books were stored.

"Who is that man?" I asked at the desk.

"Dr. Lehman. He works for the library."

I sat there every night. I watched him come quietly through the corridor to and from the rare books. Sometimes he stopped at my desk, said hello, introduced me to other texts and reference resources. He always wore a suit, tie, his pants were too short and he often wore bright red socks. He had Altoids in his jacket pocket which he offered me.

We spoke often. Always about the texts: Zohar, Bahir, Yetzirah, he loved the classical Kabbalah. He often mentioned several names well known to me who were his former students. "I taught these texts for many years," he said, "in Europe. But not here."

"Would you be interested in teaching now?"

"Yes, of course, but - I work for the library."

I went to the Dean.

"I've been speaking with Dr. Lehman. He has some background in kabbalistic texts. I wonder if we could set up a course."

"Mmmm," the Dean said, "you know, he works for the library. No, I don't think it would be possible."

I returned to Dr. Lehman. "If I get a room, would you begin teaching us?"

"Certainly."

My friend's mother supervised the dorm. "Is it possible for me to get a key to a room in the dorm where we could hold an, er, informal class? No one needs to know."

"No problem honey."

In the beginning, there were four of us. We sat with Dr. Lehman every Tuesday night and learned. We began with the Zohar. Bahir. Yetzirah. We sat with him for three years. There are sometimes three, sometimes four of us. One of the students I will later marry. We read commentaries as well as the texts. Dr. Lehman unlocked the texts for us. Dr. Lehman was a Semiticist. He convinced me I need to learn Arabic. I took a year of Arabic with Dr. Yerushalmi and soon we were reading Saadya on Bahir in the original Arabic. We went deep.

Dr. Lehman was a wonderful teacher. He repeated this often: "you have to promise that when you leave here, you will teach what you have learned here. These texts are very beautiful. Colorful. There is a vision here that is important, it is an imaginative literature and people will be hungry for it. Promise me you will teach."

We all nodded our heads and promised him that we will teach what he has unlocked for us.

That's as much as has been written of the secret history of the Zohar at the Hebrew Union College. I often tell this story, the story of Dr. Lehman and our secret class, when I teach Kabbalah, the classical Kabbalah, as unlocked for me by Dr. Lehman.

I have a picture of Dr. Lehman and our little class at ordination. He looks proud.

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