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Reb Zalman Gathers Figs

A Study of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's Reading of
Biblical Text to Re-Vision Judaism for the Present Day

by Dana Densmore

Reviewed by [Michelle Anne Schingler](#)
December 13, 2015

Though its movements have a rabbinical flavor, the interpretations are intriguing enough to provoke interest among all religious traditions.

Dana Densmore's intricate and spiritually engaging new text, *Reb Zalman Gathers Figs*, seeks to present a clear picture of the exegetical style of Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi, the charismatic founder of B'nai Or, an influential stream of the Jewish Renewal movement. A spirit of inquiry and a conversational tone mark this fascinating, biblically attuned project.

Raised and ordained as a Chasid, Schachter-Shalomi became a center of change and inspiration within Judaism. He ordained women. He studied other belief systems, including Buddhism and Islamic mysticism, drawing spiritual connections between traditions. He befriended and learned from Thomas Merton.

Yet Densmore says that a record of his analytical approach to biblical texts has remained unavailable in print until now. Using recordings from a series of retreats from the late 1980s that held the Bible as a focus, she distills, and then expands upon, his interpretative methods. He employs numerology and near-mystical wordplay, intertextual interactions and historical/theological

precedent, to reveal hidden depths in biblical texts.

Schachter-Shalomi's playful, expansive approach to the Tanakh results in fresh readings. Beginning with the creation story—from which the rabbi draws lessons that favor feminism and self-realization—Densmore traces his readings through to *Ecclesiastes*, drawing life lessons from them along the way. Early textual struggles—between Abel and Cain, between Jacob and Esau—are used to argue that we have a “double inheritance,” that twin forces work within each of us, and that we must work to reconcile disparate impulses and work toward spiritual authenticity.

Moses and the revelation of the law become a force for finding stark security, while *Ecclesiastes* becomes the counter-reading, ever acknowledging our capacity to change and grow. Throughout, the rabbi draws from prayers (Kol Nidre most prominently, and with interesting results) and Jewish history, interfaith and mystical readings, and his own background to expand upon his points.

Densmore praises the fluidity and pensiveness of the rabbi's readings, though her own record of them displays the same elegance. Between sections of his talks, she draws lessons and conclusions from his methods: Schachter-Shalomi reads with “stealth feminism,” with biblical acumen, with sensitivity and verve. She puts him in conversation with other thinkers—when he's not naming them himself—drawing in the work of biblical scholars like Richard Elliott Friedman to expand upon the notions he explores. The very framework of the text suggests the grand Jewish traditions that both the rabbi and Densmore reference: they are Talmudic, inquisitive, open-ended, and inviting.

In her last chapter, Densmore departs from the rabbi's own words to couch him among fellow thinkers and seekers—from Rashi to James Kugel, from Michael Fishbane to Judith Plaskow. She places his work within this continuum to show how connected Schachter-Shalomi's readings are to the whole of Jewish history. This tapestry is both thoughtful and inspiring, and adds to the text's theological prowess.

Reb Zalman Gathers Figs adds to the grand Jewish tradition of biblical con-

versation and contemplation with style and intelligence. Though its movements have a distinctly rabbinical flavor, the textual interpretations that run throughout are intriguing enough to provoke interest among students from all religious traditions. *Reb Zalman* is a thorough and inspiring examination of biblical inquiry.

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