

The Kabbalah, Indigenous Wisdom and Ancestral Healing

A collaborative project by:

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For the class of Jewish Mysticism

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*"Our job is not to set up a battleground to eradicate evil, but to search out its spark of holiness. Our task is not to destroy but to build; not to hate but to find a place of yielding; not to polarize but to discover the points of commonality so that we can work together."*¹ Rabbi David A. Cooper

Atava's story:

I am a student in the Indigenous Mind Concentration at Naropa University. My ancestors are the Polish and Hungarian Slavic people, the Navajo people of the US Southwest, and the Tomtec people of Mexico. My focus of study has been on recovering the traditional indigenous spiritual and cultural ways of my Polish ancestors. Before beginning this program, I knew very little about the history or culture of my Polish ancestors.

Last fall I made a pilgrimage to Poland. All of my father's grandparents had emigrated from Poland in the early 1900's. At that time in Polish history, from 1797-1918, Poland was completely erased from the map. Poland was conquered and divided between Germany, Austria and Russia. Harsh laws were passed in an attempt to eradicate Polish language and culture. As a result, many Polish people, including my great-grandparents, fled to other countries in search of a better life.

My journey to Poland was full of spirit, blessing, shadow and pain. After 12 years of Catholic school and 4 years of college, I had been educated very little about the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust. As I walked on Polish soil, a nation where some of the worst atrocities against human kind have occurred, my relationship to Polish and world history changed forever. I was/am profoundly affected by what has happened to the Jews in Poland, and what role my ancestors may have played in it.

¹ David A. Cooper, *God is a Verb* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), 156.

How does one begin to heal such an ancestral wound? At an Indigenous Mind intensive this winter, I asked this question to Dogon elder Yacine Koyoute. He told me that the healing begins with forgiveness. We must first start by forgiving those who came before us.

In Poland I could feel acutely the non-presence of the Jews. As I walked through the streets of Kazimierz, the former Jewish district of Krakow, I could sense the ghosts, lingering amid the cobblestone streets, deserted buildings, and crumbling synagogues. After our visit to Kazimierz, my traveling companion Barbara and I were planning a trip to the former concentration camp, Auschwitz. Auschwitz, a place where millions of Jews, Poles and others were “exterminated”, is now a popular tourist spot. As we made our plans to go, I had a feeling in my belly that something wasn’t right. I knew I couldn’t go to Auschwitz on a tour, as if I were visiting a medieval castle. I recalled the teachings of my Indigenous Mind sister, Audri Scott Williams, as she told us about her journey to the slave dungeons of West Africa. She and her companions had done extensive preparation and ceremony to be able to visit the dungeons in a safe and honorable way. I knew that Barbara and I must be similarly prepared to visit Auschwitz.

The night before we were to go, I had a nightmare, which I called “Auschwitz with No Shoes.” In this dream I stood with my Polish Jewish friend Missy outside the gates of Auschwitz. Inside the gates the ground filthy and covered with broken glass. I looked down at my feet and noticed I was barefoot. I knew it was terribly unsafe for me to enter Auschwitz with no shoes.

I woke up knowing that my dream was warning me not to go to Auschwitz. I was not properly prepared. My soul (“soles” of my feet) was in danger. My suspicions

were confirmed when I received a phone call telling me that Barbara was seriously ill. We cancelled our trip. I never visited Auschwitz during my trip to Poland. In my heart I still felt very called to go, but in a spiritually correct way, in a way that involves proper preparation and ceremony.

Soon after I arrived home, I met a student from UCS, Maura Singer in my dream group. I soon found out that she was of Polish Jewish descent, and we immediately had a deep, karmic connection. I asked her if she would be someday willing to participate with me in an ancestral healing ceremony. My Polish family has a legacy of silence, shame, denial, and abuse, much of which I suspect is tied into the history of Poland. I wanted to do a ritual to forgive my Polish ancestors who may have scapegoated and terrorized the Jews. I wished to acknowledge the suffering of all the Polish people, who have a long history of invasion and occupation. I hoped to honor and remember the indigenous people of Poland, the Polanie Slavs, who were brutally forced to convert to Christianity, and then in turn brutalized the Jews.

As time passed by, our busy lives prevented Maura and I from initiating our project. Yet our Ancestors had their own plan. Two weeks ago, Spirit brought Maura and I together in the Jewish Mysticism class. I had not known that she and I would be together in the class. When I arrived to the class on Saturday morning, I was overcome with emotion, as my Polish ancestral memories flooded me. Coincidentally, I sat by Maura, and she held my hand as I shakily introduced myself to the class.

A few days after class, I prayed and reflected about what I wanted to write for this class paper. After a day of musing and browsing through *God is a Verb*, a sudden thought came to me: Maura and I could collaborate together and create the ancestral healing ceremony we have for so long talked about. We could draw upon the wisdom

teachings of the Kabbalah as a source of the healing energy, as well as the principals of indigenous science, and what I know about Slavic spirituality. I was inspired by Rabbi Cooper's words: "*Discover the points of commonality so that we can work together.*"² The commonality our ancestors share is the Polish land. Maura and I hold in common love, mutual respect, and a desire for healing. I pray that our work will not only initiate healing for our families and ancestors, but also that it will help prepare and protect me spiritually to make the journey back to Poland, and, if the Ancestors wish, back to Auschwitz. This paper is our both our proposal and the beginning of our documentation of this project.

Maura's story:

I started my masters at Naropa as a stepping -stone to becoming an interfaith hospital or hospice chaplain. I needed a Master's degree and this was a fast, easy way to get it. Who knew that through my work at Naropa and Chaplaincy Institute I would be contemplating going to Poland, possibly with my mother to do ancestral healing work with Atava and god knows who else? I have begun to see, mostly through dreamwork, and deeper study of Judaism, Christianity and Indigenous Wisdom that my connection to this earth, my experience of home, the ability to connect my own body and life to the life of this planet has everything to do with being grounded on this bit of soil on which I am now sitting and writing these words. My ancestral Jewish survival mechanism of continuing despite displacement, of continuing despite a lack of connection to the land, is a story told over and over, year after year in the Torah and in holiday narratives. It is however, only one version of the truth. My mother's mother's father was a forest ranger in Hungary. My mother's father's father ran a general store in a small town, Yavorov,

² Cooper, 156.

Poland. My father's father's father was a roofer in Riga, Latvia. My father's father's father was a carpenter in Vilna, Lithuania. And that's only the men! My parents are the first generation to be born in this country. So it makes sense that my connection here has always been a tenuous one. And yet, my blood ancestors were connected to the land, built the towns, provided food for people in Eastern Europe for possibly a thousand years – many Jewish settlements in these parts of Europe were some of the oldest since the Diaspora.

In a class with Joanna Macy we did a Deep Time backwards walk to gather the gifts of the ancestors and one of the gifts I gathered was a generations-long connection to a land and a place that I have, until recently, thought was inaccessible to me. My grandpa's cousin Mila, was sent to Siberia during the war. She and her brother Mundig were the only members of that part of my family to survive. About ten years ago I talked to Mila at my cousin Judy's wedding. I told her that I felt drawn to go back to Poland to see where grandma and grandpa were from. She told me this story:

After years of resisting the deep yearning to return to my village, my brother and I finally went back. A taxi brought us up to the house where we had lived for our whole lives. The house we had been taken from. To see this house again, words can't describe the feeling – a mixture of joy and the most incredible sorrow. How much has been lost. . . The taxi driver went up to the house to see if anyone was home but before he could ring the bell, a man opened the door, looked out at us waiting in the car and told him to go away, and to never bring Jews there again.

She told me never, never to go back to Poland. Better I should go to Israel where Jews are welcomed. And this is the story I have always taken as the 'truth about going back to Poland'. This is the story that has stopped me from even considering healing my past. Malidoma Somé in his beautiful book, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*, gives me hope that this healing can still take place:

I remember well a conversation between a shaman and a simple villager about the relationship between the West and the indigenous world. The shaman, a young man in his early thirties grounded in the art of healing. . . said that his training taught him that the white man came to Africa primarily to heal himself, not to steal people from the villages. "We Africans also believe that we need healing at the hand of the white man. This is why our children leave us. You see, it's the same world, the same house. When someone is sick, everyone is. Why should we remain passive while the white man searches the world for the means to save himself? We are together in this struggle. All our souls need rest in a safe home. All people must heal, because we are all sick"³

Through Somé's words I find the yearning and possibility for my own healing. And in the mysterious workings of spirit, Atava appeared in my dream group. Our meeting has opened up new possibilities for our work together, including traveling to Poland to take part in the healing of our hearts and the land from which we both spring. "When someone is sick, everyone is. We are together in this struggle."

I have also been actively inviting my mother into my process. She has read Eva Hoffman's book *Shtetl* and is sending it to me. She is also sending a book called *Swastika Over Jaworow*, her father's town and is making the first attempts to find out what happened to the rest of our family, how they died, if it is possible that some we don't even know survived and their children are alive. When I asked her today if she was ready to go to Poland, she said, "Yes!" So this journey could also be an amazing new facet of my relationship with my mother, as well as a whole potential world of her own healing.

Yet another amazing aspect of this journey is the opening of my heart to Jewish practice. I have been steeped in Eastern spiritualities since I was thirteen; in fact I have not been interested in Jewish religion since my Bat Mitzvah. But all along I have known that there is a certain immediate devotion and deep cellular connection to Hebrew

³ Malidoma Some, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa* (New York: Jeremy Tarcher/ Penguin, 1988), 16-17.

songs, chants and prayers and my ancestors. And though I learned about Shekinah when I studied feminism and religion in college, she has now come back to me with a fire and presence that is like coming home after a long journey.

I pray for Jewish mystic and indigenous wisdom to infuse my life – may it guide this deep ancestral healing work that Atava and I are about to begin and light the path all along the way.

Our Intention: Tikkun Olam

In the spirit of the highest intention of healing/repairing the world, we come together to heal our ancestors and ourselves seven generations forward and back. We pray that through these actions we will not only “raise holy sparks”⁴ in our own lives but we will also be taking part in the Tikkun Olam, bringing the broken fragments of the Divine together.

Our intention is to bring healing to the atrocities that occurred on Polish land between our Christian and Jewish ancestors. We are drawing from the traditions of Kabbalah and Indigenous Science. We intend to use dreamwork, prayer, ritual, meditation and chanting. We hope to engage in a deepening relationship with our living relatives, as well as communication with our ancestors, and the awakened teachers/elders from both of our traditions. We call on the sacred elemental energies of the Polish land, and spirits of the land we live upon to guide our journey. We will ask permission and blessing to do this ancestral healing work from the ancestors of this land, the Miwok and Ohlone people. We will ask in a traditional way, by making offerings from our own cultures

⁴ Cooper, 29.

The spirits of the land of Poland/Ukraine schooled the Baal Shem Tov in the Kabbalah – the same spirits to which the indigenous Slavic people were connected. (The tribal Slavs were known for their strong connection to the land, which was reflected in their spirituality. They found and worshipped their gods in nature; they prayed to trees, rivers, and rocks.) Our ancestors breathed the same air, swam in the same water, and were sustained by the same earth. We will call upon the wisdom of Shekinah/Malkut (the feminine presence of God on Earth, and the root of the Kabbalist Tree of Life), Matka Ziema (Slavic deity, translated as “Moist Mother Earth”), and Adama (Hebrew word for Earth) to facilitate healing.

The Teaching that Guides Us: Ayn Sof

The Kabbalist assumes that our views are simply the reality of possessing distinct human consciousness. The world seems pluralistic only because our awareness has its limitations.⁵ Recognizing that the limitations of our own and our ancestors’ individual perceptions are the root cause of separation, we seek the mystical understanding of Ayn Sof. Ayn Sof, Endlessness, the foundation of mystical relationship holds **all** in its embrace, including good and evil. In his book *God is A Verb*, Rabbi Cooper retells Rebbe Zalman’s story of the Baal Shem Tov and his encounter with the heart of evil. Young Israel held the heart of evil in his hands, with an opportunity to destroy it once and for all:

But he noticed a drop of blood trickling down one side of the heart and his soul was touched to its depths. He could see that this heart was in torment; it was in agony. It too suffered the enormous pain of separation just like everyone else in the world. For even the heart of evil has within it the spark of the divine and it too yearns to be returned to the source. ⁶

⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁶ Ibid., 155.

The Bal Shem Tov had the chance to eradicate evil, but through his compassion (Chesed) and wisdom (Chochma) he transcended the temptation of separation. He demonstrated a mystical understanding of Ayn Sof.

Rabbi Cooper writes: “The secret teaching in developing this relationship with the Unknowable (Ein Sof) is hidden in the mystical foundation of the nature of relationship itself.”⁷ We will meditate on Ayn Sof when we remember our ancestors, the Polish people, the Jews, Christians, and native Slavs; as well as when we reflect upon all the “good” and “evil” done by individuals and institutions in the past, present, and future. As we initiate this cycle of work together, we pray that the nature of our relationships with one another, our ancestors, the Earth, and the Infinite teach us and guide us towards wholeness/holiness. We pray that our mystical relationship will benefit All Our Relations.

⁷ Ibid., 67.

May 9, 2003

Dear Chuck,

Thank you for being open to my alternative project for your Jewish Mysticism class. I have appreciated the opportunity to work with Maura, to discuss the Kabbalah, notice its parallels to indigenous wisdom, and to search for ways to apply these teachings to our lives. Maura and I intended to write a short proposal, but we both felt compelled to tell our stories as well. We did not feel like we had enough time to do a ritual by this May 9th deadline. (Although we have already begun a process of ritual by collaboratively writing this paper together.) I am under the last-minute crunch for a grade so that I may graduate, so I needed to hand this in to you today. If you would like, we will keep you posted on our work and where it leads us.

Many Blessings,

Atava