

INTERFAITH Today™

Volume 1, No. 2

May 2009

HINDUISM BUDDHISM WICCA CHRISTIANITY UNITY UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM JUDAISM BAHAI TAOISM



CELEBRATING INTERFAITH CONGREGATIONS

*INTERVIEW WITH RANYA IDLIBY
SAME SEX WEDDINGS
SUNDAY WITH THE DALAI LAMA
BEING IN THE PRESENCE: A SERMON
HEBREW KIRTAN*

SAME SEX WEDDINGS 101 (CONTINUED)



Rev. Sharon Gervasoni has officiated a number of weddings for same and opposite sex couples.

Continued from page 11

level, beyond all the accoutrements—a same-sex wedding is a wedding like any other. Your goal and role as officiant is to make it a beautiful, memorable ceremony for the couple, and to support them in deepening their commitment to one another. And as more of the human family gains access to the fundamen-

tal right to marry, if they so choose, we Interfaith ministers can rejoice that, as the Rev. Dr. King memorably said, “the arc of human history is long, but it bends towards freedom,” and that we have the privilege of being part of that history.

Rev. Sharon Gervasoni, J.D. (TNS2008) has officiated a number of weddings for same-

and opposite-sex couples, and designed and celebrated powerful rituals for milestone birthdays, transition to parenthood, loss of an adoptive child, and other usual and unusual life-cycle events. She hopes to soon be free to marry her partner of 22 years in her home state of Maryland. She can be reached through her website, www.manypathshome.com.

END

CD REVIEW: *THE KIRTAN RABBI LIVE!*

By Rev. R. M. Peluso

Rabbi Andrew Hahn:
The Kirtan Rabbi Live!

Every few generations, Judaism transforms itself. One such radical change has been underway now since the 1970s. A powerful force within the current wave of revitalization—the ecstatic movement—counts among its proponents, an emerging leader, Rabbi Andrew Hahn, “The Kirtan Rabbi.”

Ecstatic worship is not new to Judaism. In Samuel II: 6:15-16, King David accompanies the Ark of the Covenant, leaping and dancing before the Lord. Ecstatic worship, whether through song, dance, chant, the playing of instruments, or fervent prayer, takes us beyond our egos and connects us with something much larger. King David doesn’t care for his image; he states that the most humble of

his subjects would understand his actions, even though wife Michal clearly does not. Unable to relate to his expression of profound spirituality, she chastises him for humiliating his royal personage through his behavior. In so many ways, Michal represents the righteous restrained, rational, ritualized aspects of Judaism at various times in history, when the deepest spirituality has come uncoupled from religious practice. When such uncoupling occurs, religion becomes a shell, and Judaism has had to restore this connection many times over its history.

Throughout the two-thousand years of the most recent (the Roman) diaspora, small circles of Jewish mystics, including Kabbalists, engaged in diverse practices, including various forms of meditation, chanting of scripture, and chanting holy names. For the

most part, Jewish mystical practices were passed from master to small groups of mature scholars. Consequently, an aura of secretiveness surrounded mystical practice. In the 17th century, the Baal Shem Tov and his fellow “Chassids” opened some aspects of ecstatic practice to wider Jewish communities. Good deeds, heartfelt prayer, dance and song were so nurturing to the oppressed Jews of Eastern Europe that Chassidism spread like wildfire. However, during the Enlightenment and well into the 20th century, as rationalism and science took hold, the ecstatic connection was largely lost to Western Europeans and American Jews. The first half of the 20th century gave rise to “lost generations” who became increasingly secularized and assimilated. Many young Jews

Continued on page 15

EVERY FEW GENERATIONS, JUDAISM TRANSFORMS ITSELF. ONE SUCH RADICAL CHANGE HAS BEEN UNDERWAY NOW SINCE THE 1970’S.

HEBREW KIRTAN (CONTINUED)

From page 12:

during the 60's and 70's, ignorant of the existence of

deeper spiritual practices within the faith, or finding these practices inaccessible (young males, women, those lacking decades of Torah and Talmudic learning) went seeking elsewhere. Indeed, during the last quarter of the 20th century, a disproportionate number of Americans bringing Yoga and Buddhist meditation to the West, as well as a disproportionate number of American's leaders in Sanskrit Kirtan chanting, have been of Jewish heritage.

This tide of defection and the wider assimilative trends following World War II, triggered a crisis, forcing open the gates of mystical practice in the 1970's, and Jewish "renewal" became available to thousands who had never been granted access before. Revitalization came from several quarters, spanning a spectrum of religiosity and openness, from the ultra-Orthodox Lubavitcher Chasidic outreach, to the late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach (known for sacred song and story-telling), to Rabbi Zalman-Schacter-Shalomi, Rabbi Joseph Gelberman (a founder of the Interfaith movement), Rabbi David A. Cooperman (a proponent of ecstatic chant and song) and others. Reb Zalman's teachings and his many followers in the Jewish Renewal movement have had an enormous impact, the extent of which may not be fully

documented for several generations.

One relatively recent reformulation of sacred song and chant owes its inspiration to infusions from Sanskrit (Indian) Kirtan. Rabbi Andrew Hahn is a conservatory trained, classical guitarist from Pittsburgh who decided that he wasn't going to turn professional musician. He had trained since the age 16 in the various martial arts, including work with the inner aspects of the Chinese martial arts--meditation through the body. Reb Drew went on to earn a doctorate in Jewish philosophy from The Jewish Theological Seminary in 2001. His area of focus was Medieval studies but he always had an interest in interfaith aspects of philosophy, primarily Christian and Jewish.

Reb Drew says he did not start out to become a rabbi and "fought it at every turn," for about ten years. Yet, he did finally become ordained through the Hebrew Union College in 2003, anticipating a career as a regular, congregational rabbi. The expression, "if you want to make God laugh, tell him/her your plans" applies to what followed in his quest for a job--nothing turned up. Serious frustration set in, and he found himself, in what he termed, "a very dark place." In Boulder, Colorado, and came under the influence of Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi. While in Colorado,

Reb Drew heard a recording of Krishna Das, leading Kirtan in Sanskrit, and it dawned on Reb Drew that he could do something similar in Hebrew. He had never heard of anyone doing Kirtan in Hebrew; in fact, he had never been to a live Kirtan. But he sent for a harmonium anyway, and the moment it arrived, he knew he belonged in front of it. He eventually realized, "Hashem wasn't letting me find jobs because this was what God wanted me to do." Andrew began leading Kirtan in 2004.

In 2007, he approached the Integral Yoga Institute in New York City and asked if they might be interested in sponsoring interfaith Kirtan in Hebrew. To his delight, they expressed interest. This soon led to monthly Kirtans at IYI. After IYI received many requests for a CD, Andrew decided to do a live recording at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun (pictured on the CD). He had some time before met Jewish educator and drummer, Shoshana Jedwab and began gigging with her. She appears on the CD and frequently in live Kirtan. He added an electric bass for the recording date. While various singers had appeared from time to time, now facing a recording date, he knew he needed a number of distinct voices to meet the challenges of a live recording. So, his Kirtan "posse" was born.

Silence is important to Reb Drew. He prefers that the

singers in his posse have experience with meditation so that they aren't coming from a place of nervousness and ego-investment when they are onstage. His own performance is sort of "channeled" in that he does not plan or know from where the music will come; it simply comes through him, from this inner place of silence. He doesn't view what he does as performance. He comes to it as a rabbi first, musician second. Silence is also intense and palpable after chants, live, and between recordings on this CD, allowing the particular energy created to linger. The experience, whether on CD or in live performance, is sublime, but let me add—The Kirtan Rabbi and his Posse rock!

The Interfaith Hebrew Kirtans are held at Integral Yoga Institute on West 13th Street, NYC, after sundown on Saturday nights. Capturing much of the celebration of the Sabbath, and prolonging it into the night, these Kirtans include many liturgical elements, from the welcoming of the Sabbath (Lecha Dodi), the Shema, Kaddish, and the final blessings to end the Sabbath (Havdalah). All but the last appear on the CD—Kirtan Rabbi Live!

When I attended a Kirtan live the power of sacred

Continued on page 14

HEBREW KIRTAN (CONTINUED)

From page 13:

immediately created as Reb Drew and his posse took

their places and began to lead us in chant. I had six months before returned from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem that had left me feeling oddly disconnected from my Judaism. Reb Drew's Kirtan was my first reconnection. He doesn't ask people to commit to anything more than the Kirtan; he doesn't offer Kirtan so people will become Jewish, or more Jewish or anything else. But he says, it's all well and good if people do take the energy they get from the experience and do positive things out in the world. And while his goal doesn't expressly go beyond the Kirtan, many people have told him, that the Kirtan has been the only reconnection they've experienced to the faith in many years. And it is easy to understand why. You can lose your "self" for stretches of time in this ecstatic, transcendent experience. At one point, 40 minutes passed during one chant, though it felt like 10 minutes. (Time distortion is a hallmark of altered states of consciousness.) Some people sit and sway; others are moved to get up and dance. Reb Drew, referencing Martin Buber, says his Kirtan is about the I/Thou, about relationship. And at times, as you enter

into the chanting, you may lose the sense of who is leading whom. In fact, sometimes, the participants, without planning to, *do* take the lead.

A few highlights from the CD. During the Shema (track 1) as on other tracks, Divine Names, including Shekhinah (the Divine Feminine), are chanted. Reb Drew's voice, like the rest of his posse's, is uncultivated; that is, authentic. He growls out the Shema (Listen, Israel), beckoning us with sheer vocal tone alone to listen. As is the tradition, the entire Shema is chanted only once, at the end of the track; throughout the preceding portions of the track, only four of the Shema's six words are chanted along with permutations of Divine Attributes. The experience moves this most profound recitation of faith to our inner core, so when we say the complete Shema at the end, it rings inside us, and the ultimate reality of the One reverberates. The delicate, haunting beauty of Ariel Rosen's voice introduces Lecha Dodi (track 5) with a line from a poem by Rav Kook, that translates to: "Return your joy to me, my Beauty, my Song." Lecha Dodi itself welcomes the Sabbath as a Bride, and celebrates the Divine Feminine (the Shekhinah). There are mo-

ments when a smile comes to my lips, as when viola player, Rima Fand ends a piece with an Eastern European or a blue grass riff. The cross cultural currents of the Diaspora—the Rock 'n' Roll, the Indian Kirtan, and so on—cooks us the richest stew. We can appreciate and savor. It nourishes the soul. The Kirtan Rabbi's first intuition upon receiving his harmonium has proved right — Hebrew Kirtan works!

Recording live is an act of courage. The acoustic variables make it a complex endeavor. Indeed, the sound production isn't flawless, but that's almost irrelevant. The Kirtan Rabbi Live CD isn't about sitting back to listen. And it sure isn't about background music that surges through earphones while you multi-task. You do not listen to this CD as much as participate, join in the chanting. You are the congregation and the *sangha*. This CD will take you to a new place in your spiritual practice, no matter what your background.

To join Rabbi Drew's Kirtan performance mailing list, read more about the chants featured on the CDs, learn about Reb Drew's classes, or to purchase the Kirtan Rabbi Live CD, please visit: www.KirtanRabbi.com.

END

YOU CAN LOSE
YOUR "SELF" FOR
STRETCHES OF
TIME.