

LAYOGA

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song

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remedy with
yoga

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maternidad

ayurvedic
travel tips



listen, chant, remember, love

an interview with
andrew hahn,
the kirtan rabbi

RABBI ANDREW Hahn, known as the Kirtan Rabbi, has been facilitating Hebrew *bhajan* (sacred song) over the last several years. His goal is to create a cross-fertilization of song and wisdom by bringing Jewish teachings to the Yoga world even as he presents *bhakti* (devotion) to the Jewish world. His new album, *Kirtan Rabbi: Live!*, was recently

released to wide critical acclaim. Rabbi Hahn holds a PhD in Jewish Philosophy and has been a martial arts instructor for more than thirty years. He laces his chants with short teachings and meditation techniques. The Kirtan Rabbi offers monthly *kirtan* at the Integral Yoga Institute in New York City.

SR: Let's begin with some background.

KR: I'm originally from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I like to say that I grew up in Mr. Roger's neighborhood. People say, "Oh, I know exactly what you mean." But I say, "No, seriously...He lived four houses down the street."

SR: (Laughing) Was it a religious family?

KR: We belonged for several generations to perhaps the Classical Reform synagogue in the United States. To me, it was a watered-down Judaism; I didn't really want to get involved as a kid.

SR: A tepid form of religion.

KR: Yes. There was a big cathedral setting, with high ceilings, stained glass, opera singers in the organ pipes. The temple-goers were completely passive. And, though I was young, I sensed a certain shallowness there. The architecture reflected a different, outdated form of spirituality. It showed a vision of a transcendent God, if you know what I mean. The idea was that God was far away, utterly other: in the clouds, in heaven. You were supposed to sit there and be in awe. Participation did not really figure into the equation. You had to sit still, attend the short service and leave. I do want to emphasize that it was a legitimate form of spirituality; at one point or another, it really worked. But the time for this kind of encounter with the divine



by steven j. rosen

had passed; it left me and many of my contemporaries dry.

SR: Were you bar-mitzvahed?

KR: Not in my youth. I celebrated an adult bar-mitzvah later. I sort of dropped out – the Jewish thing just didn't speak to me when I was young. I left the whole tradition for, maybe, ten years. I just didn't identify as a Jew.

SR: So what happened?

KR: Well I could've gone to India (laughter), but as fate had it, I went off to Germany to study philosophy. Or, so I thought. In truth, I was trying to get as far away as a Jewish boy could from his Judaism and parents (laughter). In Germany, it began to dawn upon me that my background had meaning. After a couple of years there, I became involved with a Jewish-German dialogue group in, of all places, East Berlin. (The Wall was still up and the Cold War very much going full throttle.) To make a long story short this was my *Wende*, to use a German word, my turning.

Meanwhile, over the decade or so I had been completely away from Judaism (I mean, there were years when I didn't know when it was Yom Kippur!), things had changed in the communal Jewish understanding of worship and, by extension, of connecting to God. Debbie Friedman and Shlomo Carlebach had transformed Jewish music – the former in liberal Judaism, the latter in the more traditional Jewish world. Important architectural changes also took place: the cathedral vision gave way to movable chairs put in circles in smaller rooms. This of course brought people closer together. It also indicated that the idea of a far off, transcendent God had become deemphasized, and more attention was given to making a close-knit community. God was among us. God was immanent. Jews were no longer sitting in the pews, simply in awe; we were responsible for creating our own spiritual experience. Rabbis, too, were not the sole transmitters of the tradition. When I returned from Germany and encountered this "new" Judaism, of course it appealed to me much

more than what I had grown up with. The pendulum had swung.

SR: The danger there, of course, is that it could get too liberal, and people can forget about the transcendent God. After all, He/She is both immanent and transcendent.

KR: Exactly. And that happened to some extent. Everybody was doing everything. It had swung completely the other way. Traditionally, in Judaism, there had been call and response – in singing hymns, for example. The cantor or any other capable leader would sing and the congregation would respond, usually with the next phrase, that is, antiphonally. But in much of this new, fully participatory Jewish worship style, this had become lost. This was also unfortunate. Now – after encountering *kirtan* – I have learned one needs to know when to be silent, when to listen, and then when to respond. I had heard Shyamdas speak of this: The first step is to listen attentively, then to chant, then to remember...

SR: Yes, in traditional Indian *kirtan*, too, that's the formula. It comes from the *Seventh Book of the Bhagavata Purana*: hearing, chanting, remembering and so on. There are nine processes of devotional service, beginning with hearing and chanting...so is this where *kirtan* fits in?

KR: Yes, exactly.

SR: I see. And why you? Were you a musician?

KR: Well, yes. I suppose. My family was always very musical. We had to learn piano when I was a kid. That was a must. So I was always a musician. I also played classical guitar at a very young age. My first stint with college, in fact, was the Carnegie Mellon University Conservatory of Music, as a classical guitarist. As a child I also sang opera. So it was a very musical childhood. And I always loved great music, from classical material to Dylan and the Dead.

And so when I returned from Germany and I came back to Judaism, it was the music that really spoke to me. I mean the synagogue music, singing at the Shabbat table – it was all so rich and so beautiful. That's what got me. Especially the music that was so joyful and participatory. It caught hold of my heart.

SR: Hmm. And the journey East? And specifically the journey to *kirtan*?

KR: Well, what happened is this: I got my PhD, and I went to rabbinical school and became a Rabbi. But, despite all of my "qualifications," I just could not find work. I wanted to be a regular Rabbi, you know, suit and tie. But a formal position just wouldn't present itself. I was really ready to give back, but there was no outlet. God clearly wanted something else from me, though it didn't feel so warm and fuzzy at the time. I was distraught.

I ended up in Boulder, Colorado. I loved the mountains and my brother was there; so I took the year off and just went to live in Colorado. While there, I met Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the principal founder of the Jewish Renewal Movement. Well, I was blown away with his learning and wisdom. A truly remarkable individual. (You know, he's the one featured in Rodger Kamenetz's book, *The Jew in the Lotus*.) Around the same time, I was listening to Krishna Das, one of his early CDs. And it touched me on a deep level. Not at first; it grew on me, and then it just took me over. There was such depth to his chanting and it was clearly a good device to bring people in, to allow people an experience of the divine.

And then it hit me: I could do this! I could use "Hebrew mantras," if you will. I could take the richness of the Jewish tradition, incorporate certain *kirtan* elements, and make this something special for

Jews. So that's what happened. I went back to New York and I ordered a harmonium – I'd never even seen one before. But I liked the sound and wanted to incorporate it into my singing. I went to chanting sessions at the Omega Institute and got into the *kirtan* scene, slowly but surely.

I came to love Krishna Das, Shyamdas, Wahl, Jai Uttal, Deva Premal – the whole gang. But I wanted to do it differently. I wanted to use Hebrew and to be true to the Jewish tradition. There's nothing wrong with doing it the other way, by incorporating Hindu elements. That's fine. I'm completely nonsectarian. Whatever works. The whole idea of *kirtan* is that it brings you closer to Truth, closer to God. And different models work for different people. So there's no sense of bringing people to Judaism. In a lot of people's personal dictionary, the word 'Rabbi' translates as "person who wants to make you more Jewish." That's not what I'm about. I'm totally happy for people who are "Jewish on their parents' side" if they derive their spirituality from Hinduism, Buddhism or Taoism. Similarly, my chanting in Hebrew is only that: creating vibrational sounds using a language I love and know deeply...know grammatically. I don't expect anything more than that from those who participate in my *kirtans*. It is open to people of all faiths. Ironically, I often find it easier to get non-Jews to chant in Hebrew than those who were brought up Jewish (laughter).

SR: Are you saying that there is no element of using *kirtan* to bring back errant Jews? Don't you really feel that by using *kirtan*, and the popularity of Yoga and Hinduism, that you could bring Jews back to the fold?

KR: Good question. In truth, I mostly want to minister to already practicing Jews. I feel that while the Jewish religion is alive and well, there's a lack of passionate spirituality among Jews, by and large. While our history is important, we get too caught up in our peoplehood, in circling the wagons against further disasters. And so I feel Hebrew *kirtan* can invigorate Jews. It can make them enthused about their own tradition. Get us past our collective PTSD. So I want to mainly play synagogues and Jewish venues, to help Jews become more enthusiastic about Judaism and see it – and our work – as deriving from a God of love.

The Yoga gigs have also become essential for me. It's great to chant in an environment where people already know what to expect. If they come to one of my Yoga *satsangs* (spiritual gatherings) and then want to turn to Judaism, that's fine. But that's not my purpose. Let all people go down whatever spiritual path they choose. *Kirtan* can help. It can make a practicing Jew more contemplative and meditative, and it can take people from other religious traditions and make them more serious about their respective paths. Whether one sings in Hebrew, Sanskrit, Hindi, Arabic, Latin – whatever – *kirtan* is a unique 'technology' that brings one closer to God. By vibrating God's names, in any language, one can more easily achieve the goal of life, irrespective of religious affiliation. I just choose to do it in Hebrew because I love the language, know it well and feel I can transmit most powerfully through it.

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For more information on Andrew Hahn, the Kirtan Rabbi, visit: kirtanrabbi.com

Steven J. Rosen (Satyaraaja Dasa) is the author of twenty-one books, including the popular *Yoga of Kirtan: Conversations on the Sacred Art of Chanting*. yogaofkirtan.com