

**Field Research Experience Report**



Jonathan Esterman MDiv

DMin 746: The Art of Mysticism: Kabbalah and Its Impact

Advisor: Dr. Douglas Balzer

April 17, 2018

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## Research Experience Details

Mesorah: Kabbalah (Portland Kollel Programming)

Dates & Time: March 8, 2017 7:30 PM – 9:00 PM

<http://www.portlandkollel.org/events/>

“What Is Kabbalah & Why Should I Care?” with Rabbi Eli Deutch

Dates & Time: October 30, 2017 6:30 PM – 10:30 PM

<https://www.facebook.com/events/1725729421070073/>

Class on Shacharis (Morning Prayers) with Avraham Yitzchak Warsaw

Dates & Time: January 27, 2018 3:30 PM – 4:00 PM

“Sparks of the Tradition: Jewish Storytelling” at Neveh Shalom

Dates & Time: January 30, 2018 7:00 PM – 9:00 PM

<https://www.facebook.com/events/388691398238286/>

Meditation Session with Rabbi Gadi Levy

Dates & Time: February 19, 2018 8:00 PM – 9:15 PM

“Why Leave Egypt?” with Rabbi Menachem Nissel

Dates & Time: March 18, 2018 8:00 PM – 9:15 PM

<https://www.facebook.com/events/2053510921537307/>

“Kabbalah of Pesach” with Rabbi Gadi Levy

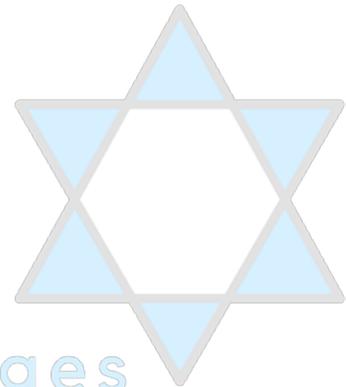
Dates & Time: March 21, 2018 8:00 PM – 9:45 PM

“Kabbalah Primer” with Rabbi Chanan Spivak

Dates & Time: March 31, 2018 7:00 PM – 8:00 PM

Tefillah (Prayer) Study Sessions with Aki Fleschler

**“Introduction”**



Date & Time: January 20, 2018 3:00 PM – 3:30 PM

**“Modeh Ani”**

Date & Time: January 28, 2018 1:30 PM – 2:30 PM

**“Morning Blessings”**

Date & Time: February 11, 2018 4:30 PM – 5:00 PM

**“Shemoneh Esrei & Kevana”**

Date & Time: February 18, 2018 4:00 PM – 5:15 PM

**“Tefillah in General”**

Date & Time: March 11, 2018 4:00 PM – 5:00 PM

**“Birkas HaTorah & Elokai Neshama”**

Date & Time: March 25, 2018 4:00 PM – 5:15 PM

**“Tefillah”**

Date & Time: April 1, 2018 6:00 PM – 7:00 PM

**“Sefiros of the Omer & Shema”**

Date & Time: April 10, 2018 8:15 PM – 9:15 PM

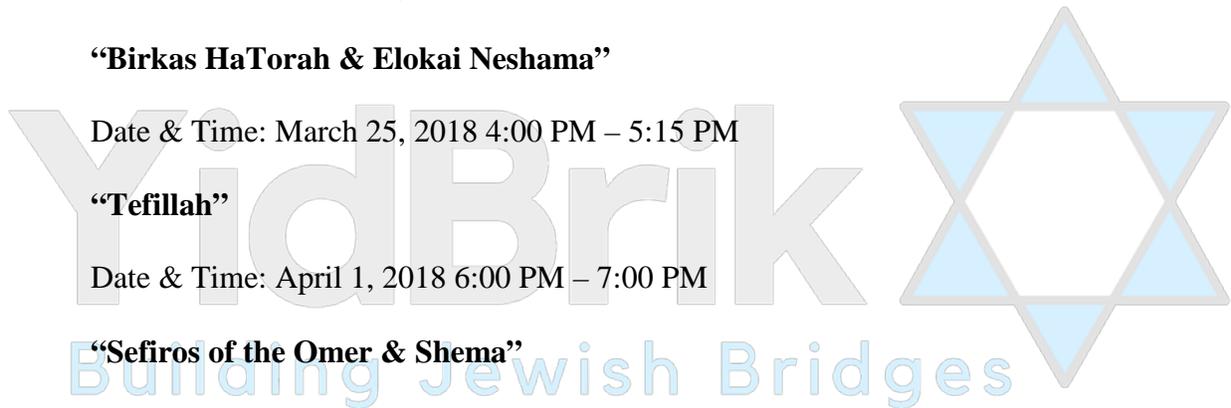
**“Interrupt Levels”**

Date & Time: April 12, 2018 7:00 PM – 7:30 PM

**“Shemoneh Esrei & Its Origin”**

Date & Time: April 17, 2018 7:00 PM – 7:45 PM

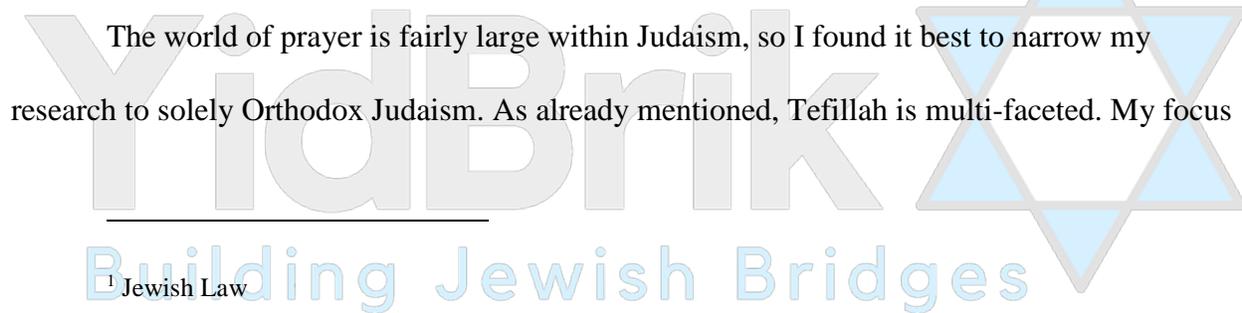
**Summary of Experience**



For my Field Research Experience, I opted to learn more about the practical and detailed components and Halacha<sup>1</sup> of Tefillah<sup>2</sup> within Orthodoxy, including davening,<sup>3</sup> Tehillim,<sup>4</sup> and meditation. Additionally, I attended some courses and asked questions regarding Kabbalah as part of my module. I found the Kabbalah research to be the most challenging, as will be explained, and the davening experience to be the most intense.<sup>5</sup> Most of my field research on Kabbalah has been learning spirituality from Rabbi Chanan Spivak of Portland Kollel and Rabbi Gadi Levy of Oregon Kosher, as well as working my way through the Siddur<sup>6</sup> (which ties Kabbalah and Tefillah together)<sup>7</sup> with Aki Fleschler, the President of Congregation Kesser Israel.<sup>8</sup>

### Methodology & Research Objectives

The world of prayer is fairly large within Judaism, so I found it best to narrow my research to solely Orthodox Judaism. As already mentioned, Tefillah is multi-faceted. My focus



<sup>1</sup> Jewish Law

<sup>2</sup> Prayer

<sup>3</sup> Liturgical Prayers

<sup>4</sup> Psalms

<sup>5</sup> As I will indicate, my classes with Aki also focused on reciting components of davening only in Hebrew with perfect vocalization.

<sup>6</sup> Jewish prayer book.

<sup>7</sup> One apt example is the different prayers found in a Siddur that have Kabbalistic origin, such as Kabbalat Shabbat (Psalms recited to welcome in Shabbat, Kiddush (“sanctifying” Shabbat with blessings over wine and bread), and Havdalah (a separation ceremony to mark the end of Shabbat and our carrying Shabbat joy into the following work week).

<sup>8</sup> Their tagline is “the Orthodox Synagogue for all Jews,” which is an apt description as Jews from every walk, Reform to Orthodox, Sephardic to Ashkenazi, and in between, both attend their regularly and have a Shabbat service that tends to every tradition.

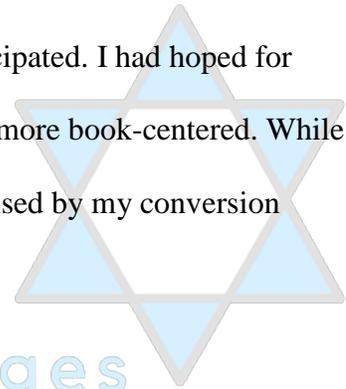
was on communal/corporate prayer (davening – done with a minyan<sup>9</sup> three times a day<sup>10</sup>), personal prayer (prayers of the heart in one’s own vernacular), spiritual/transcendental prayer (meditation), and praise (Tehillim).

Kabbalah is a central component of Jewish living but is inaccurately portrayed, to the degree of stating Christianity is accurately represented by Westboro Baptist Church.<sup>11</sup> As such, and following tradition, Kabbalah is typically not taught to those under forty years of age.<sup>12</sup> The result is that mileage may vary, and I did not find many resources to learn from during my module period and thus relied on the courses I took prior to this module.

### Critical Analysis

My field research this term did not roll out as I originally anticipated. I had hoped for more of a focus on Kabbalah but found that the Yeshivish<sup>13</sup> crowd is more book-centered. While Chabad may have been a good resource to learn from, I had been advised by my conversion

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<sup>9</sup> Quorum of ten Jewish men, age thirteen or older.

<sup>10</sup> Maariv (evening), Shacharis (morning), and Minchah (afternoon).

<sup>11</sup> The point being here that Westboro Baptist no more represents the whole of Christianity as the popular media and Hollywood accurately represent true Kabbalah within Orthodox Judaism.

<sup>12</sup> The tradition is a minority opinion but an outspoken one. While majority opinions typically are adopted as custom, the more stringent approach is also the side to err on when unsure. The notion is that after forty years of age, one’s life is more stable and not in the pursuit of youth-like passions, thus the person is more mature and ready for the mystical teachings of a relationship with HaShem.

<sup>13</sup> Being of Yeshivah, or Seminary, and thus focused on learning, whereas Chassidus or Hasidic focuses on experience, emotion, and relation over knowledge and reading. The difference in the Portland community is great enough that there are three Jewish schools – a secular one (does not teach Jewish spirituality and is like a traditional private school), a Chabad one (does not teach any secular material and designed to raise future rabbis), and a Yeshivish one (finds a balance between secular and religious, empowering youth to succeed in the world but keep their Jewish identity as the core of their existence).

rabbi to not involve and integrate myself in the Hasidic community.<sup>14</sup> My introductory Mesora coursework that put me on my Jewish path and was a part of my DMin 726 research included a class on Kabbalah which I referenced for inclusion since I have regularly referred to my course notes throughout this module. Additionally, an esteemed rabbi from the Old City in Jerusalem taught on Kabbalah in a “secular Jewish” setting last October. I attended based on the advice of Rabbi Gadi Levy, who is an “in-law”<sup>15</sup> to Rabbi Eli Deutch. Those two experiences helped me recognize that Kabbalah is definitely not according to the popular portrayal. My course readings on Kabbalah only confirmed this notion. Kabbalah is Jewish mysticism, but mysticism needs to be properly defined, and “having a relationship with G-d” or trying to spiritually connect with an Infinite Being that is beyond the corporeal world is definitely mystical. Thus, the Christian version of prayer or “speaking to G-d” is an apt comparison. Kabbalah is literally translated as “welcome/receive,” implying the received tradition from Avraham on relational living with Ein/Ayn Sof.<sup>16</sup>

In regard to Tefillah, Kabbalah is intertwined at every level, which makes it hard to study one without learning the other. My Academic Essay will expound on this more. My specific

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<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Kenneth Brodtkin of Congregation Kesser Israel is my conversion rabbi. While he gets along well with the rabbi of the local Chabad House, Rabbi Brodtkin discourages a Hasidic approach to Judaism because he finds it to be an unhealthy expression of the faith and far too stringent for converts (Chabad, as an organization, even refuses to perform conversions). He has approved me reading some of the articles on their site and occasionally participating in an online course, but feels that if one wants to be Chabad, they should go to Chabad, and if not, then stay where they are and build the community they are part of. Additionally, there is a challenge of some Chabad theology, as they believe their Rebbe to be the Messiah, which for many Orthodox Jews is a problematic statement and causes one to consider if Chabad is any more Jewish than Messianic Jews, the latter of which are generally regarded as not Jewish and a part of Christianity.

<sup>15</sup> Rabbi Eli Deutch is best friends of one of Eve Levy’s brothers. Eve Levy is the wife of Rabbi Gadi Levy. They treat each other as distant in-laws. Rabbi Eli Deutch lives in the Old Quarter in Jerusalem.

<sup>16</sup> The Infinite / One Without End. This is the Jewish definitely of who HaShem is, with all of His titles/names merely being a way for us to understand part of His makeup.

experiences in my research on Tefillah, however, have helped me understand the Jewish approach to prayer as a whole. One can recite Tehillim for all sorts of reasons,<sup>17</sup> and it is customary to either recite/chant/sing all 150 Tehillim every week or once a month (reading plans are found in Tehillim books that offer both options). Personal prayer is typically a feminine approach more than a masculine approach, since men are bound to time-specific mizvoth<sup>18</sup> and women are not. Thus, women typically have informal personal prayers while men daven at set times instead. My experiences with davening and learning the specific rules on prayer (pronunciation, what can be interrupted, when to stand, sit, etc.) showed me that while one does not need experience to pray informally, davening requires trained skill and practice. I have been davening at this shul<sup>19</sup> for over a year now and there is so much I have not even scratched the surface of because it is so semiotically rich. On meditation, my readings helped me more than my field research since I only found one meditation opportunity that was focused on mindfulness meditation. My readings gave me insight on the other forms of meditation, which suggest to me that since Avraham is attributed with the original Kabbalistic work and meditation,<sup>20</sup> that perhaps the cultures known for meditation in the East appropriated the technique from a culture in the Middle East.

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<sup>17</sup> Many recite psalms on behalf of those who are sick to heal them or dedicate reading to someone who has recently passed to give them favorable judgement, etc.

<sup>18</sup> Commandments

<sup>19</sup> Synagogue

<sup>20</sup> Aryeh Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation* (York Beach, ME: Weiser Books, 1997).

To summarize my experience, my module topic is looking at the tip of the iceberg, with so much more waiting to be experienced and lived.



## Bibliography

Breslov, Rabbi Nachman. *Outpouring of the Soul*. Translated by Aryeh Kaplan. Jerusalem, Israel: Breslov Research Institute, 1980.

Kaplan, Aryeh. *Jewish Meditation*. New York: Schocken Books, 1985.

Kaplan, Aryeh. *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation*. York Beach, ME: Weiser Books, 1997.

