

# ISSUES

A · M E S S I A N I C · J E W I S H · P E R S P E C T I V E

ישוע  
שר  
הפנים

Y'SHUA, PRINCE OF THE FACE

## KABBALAH'S BEST KEPT SECRET?

**“God as a Trinity? No way!”**

**“We Jews don't believe in the idea of a divine incarnation!”**

**“And we don't believe in vicarious atonement!”**

**“A *New Testament*?! Are you *meshugge*?!”**

**For many Jews, these statements are givens. Or are they?**

*(continued inside)*

Volume 18:2

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Over the last several decades, the Jewish spiritual scene has witnessed a resurgence of popularity in the mystical tradition of secret wisdom known as *kabbalah*. Hidden away in corners of the tradition and ignored by contemporary popularizations are stunning parallels to a number of doctrines that most religious Jewish people consider anathema, doctrines that are analogous to New Testament teachings.

However, the parallels did not go without notice when more Jews were kabbalah literate. In 1696, one mystical rabbi (Aharon ben Moshe Ha-Kohen of Krakow) became a believer in *Y'shua* (Jesus) based on his study of kabbalah. He wrote three Hebrew manuscript volumes detailing the numerous parallels he found between the New Testament and the *Zohar* (the classic core text of Jewish mysticism). Yochannan Rittangel (d. 1652), the first translator of the Jewish mystical work *Sefer Yetzirah*, was one of several Jewish believers in *Y'shua* to disseminate Jewish mystical wisdom to a wider audience.

In the early twentieth century, Feivel Levertoff (d. 1954) was one of the translators of what is still the premier English version of the *Zohar* (published by the highly-respected Jewish press, Soncino). A yeshiva-trained Hassidic Jew and a third-generation descendent of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liada (the founder of Chabad Lubavitch), Levertoff came to believe in *Y'shua* as the Messiah through parallels he found between the New Testament and his Jewish mystical faith.

The Los Angeles-based Kabbalah Centre, one of the best-known popularizers of kabbalah today, frequently makes admiring mention of a non-Jewish scholar of kabbalistic wisdom, Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494). However, the Centre's spokespersons, books and presentations never mention his ultimate conclusion based on years of exploring the mysterious secrets of kabbalistic wisdom: "There is no knowledge that proves the Divinity of the Messiah better than . . . kabbalah."<sup>1</sup>

## A COMPOUND UNITY

The keystone of traditional Judaism is that God is One. A belief in a multiplicity in the Godhead seems to

be beyond the pale for many Jews. Yet kabbalah teaches that God is indeed a compound unity.

The over-arching narrative of Jewish mysticism is that the infinite, radically transcendent *Ein Sof* ("Endless" One) is revealed through the *Sefirot*.<sup>2</sup> *Sefirot* are vessels or spheres related to the Creator only through resemblance,<sup>3</sup> and are the ten most common names for the varying aspects of Divinity. Though they are one with the Creator, they are also the Creator's garments and the "beams of light which it sends out."<sup>4</sup> The singular, *Sefirah*, shares a root with the word *sippur*, "communication" or "telling."<sup>5</sup> The *Sefirot* are thus seen as the aspects or attributes of the Creator by means of which Deity communicates with creation.<sup>6</sup>

Knowledge of the lowest seven of the *Sefirot* is derived from King David's address to God in 1 Chronicles 29:11: "Yours, O God, are the Greatness (*Gedulah*), the Power (*Gevurah*), and the Glory (*Tiferet*), the Victory (*Netzach*), and the Splendor (*Hod*), for all that is in heaven and earth (*Yesod*), Yours O God is the Kingdom (*Malkuth*)." Two of the remaining three *Sefirot*, *Chokhmah* and *Binah* (Wisdom and Understanding), are one of the most frequent pairings of attributes of God found throughout the Hebrew Bible. The highest *Sefirah*, *Keter*, or Crown, signifies God's rule and authority as King of Kings.

As Levertoff, Rabbi Aharon and many others have found, this is not such a far cry from the metaphors used in the New Testament. Both kabbalah and the New Testament hold that God communicates the sublime interrelationships of his various components to limited human beings in terms they can understand from their own experience—concepts like the *Sefirot*, or like the New Testament's Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Not unlike the New Testament (which speaks of One God in three "persons"), kabbalists recognize multiple "grades," "degrees" or "beings" in the Godhead. Expressions of multiplicitous unity (of God, humans, and other entities) are frequent in kabbalistic literature

and seemingly pose no theological obstacle to orthodox Jewish mystics:

Said R. Eleazar: "As the four sections of the walnut are united at one side and separated at the other, so are all the parts of the Celestial Chariot united in perfect union, and yet each part fulfils a special purpose . . ."<sup>7</sup>

Now the tree of life ramifies into various degrees, all differing from one another, although forming a unity, in the shape of branches, leaves . . . and roots.<sup>8</sup>

This kind of mystical logic not only prevails in medieval documents like the *Zohar*, but also persists to the present. The *Tanya*, the fundamental text of modern Chabad Hassidic philosophy by Rabbi Shneur Zalman, states:

"He and His vivications are one, He and His causations are one. . . . They are all Divinity."<sup>9</sup>

He and His Name are One . . .<sup>10</sup>

Such thinking has been current in Judaism for a long time. Orthodox Jewish scholar Raphael Patai notes that the Holy Spirit, identified by the rabbis with the *Shekhinah* (the "dwelling" or "abode" of the glory of God), was seen as a *second person* in the Godhead even in the early Talmudic period.<sup>11</sup>

But the mystics went beyond merely recognizing a two-in-oneness, stating that the *Sefirot* are actually organized into three "pillars." To the kabbalists, God's ultimate nature is a three-in-oneness:

"Hear, O Israel, *Adonai*<sup>12</sup> *Eloheinu Adonai* is one." These three are one. . . . The mystery of the audible voice is similar to this, for though it is one yet it consists of three elements—fire, air, and water. . . . Even so it is with the mystery of the threefold Divine manifestations designated by

*Adonai Eloheinu Adonai*—three modes which yet form one unity.<sup>13</sup>

## EMBODIMENT AND INCARNATION

Would a Jew ever embrace the idea of God incarnate? Many kabbalists do!

Kabbalah teaches that the human body is an outward expression of the indwelling soul, and that all material things are manifestations of spiritual realities extruding into our universe.<sup>14</sup> However, God has a special way of revealing *himself* in our world:

R. Jose said: 'How are we to understand the words, "and they saw the God of Israel" (Ex. 24:10)? . . . "They saw the light of the *Shekinah*, namely him who is called "the Youth" (*Metatron* . . .), and who ministers to the *Shekinah* in the heavenly Sanctuary."<sup>15</sup>

Nachmanides (1194-1270) holds that the *Shekhinah* can *mitgashem* (incarnate) in an anthropomorphic shape. As an Ashkenazic tradition has it, "Know that . . . 'An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush' (Exod. 3:2) . . . refers to God Himself."<sup>16</sup> Sometimes, the title *malakh ha-kavod* (Angel of the Glory) is applied to the *Shekhinah* in kabbalistic texts.<sup>17</sup>

The term *Metatron*, described as "the Youth," "the Angel of the Glory" and "the body of the *Shekhinah*," is a Latin title translating the Greek *Praecursor*, or Forerunner—the same word used of *Y'shua* in Hebrews 6:20. It means lord, leader, guide, one who shows the way, or goes in advance.

The explanation of "They saw the glory of God" (Exodus 24:10) given by Rabbi Jose is evocative of the New Testament passages describing *Y'shua* as "the radiance of the *Shekhinah*" (Hebrews 1:3), and as the "Forerunner" ministering high priest in the heavenly tabernacle upon which Moses modeled the sanctuary (Hebrews 6:20-8:5).

Several kabbalistic texts reveal that *Metatron* is not

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merely an angel, but a manifestation of the Shekhinah in human form; in other words, God himself. For example:

And R. Tam commented that the Holy One blessed be He is himself called *Metatron*, as is said in the *Pesiqta* [Exod 23:13] “and the Lord walked before them all the day.” The Holy One said, “I was the guide [Heb. *Metatron*] for my children,” that is, their guard.<sup>18</sup>

Metatron is also spoken of as “the voice of God” in a reference of *Midrash Tehillim*<sup>19</sup> to the passage penned by King David: “The voice of the Lord was over the waters . . .” (Psalm 29:3). Keeping in mind that Metatron is held by kabbalists to be the embodiment of the Shekhinah, note the following observation by Chabad founder Rabbi Zalman:

[It] has been stated in the *Zohar* and *Etz Chayim*, that the *Shechinah* . . . is called the “word of God” . . . as in the case of human beings, by way of example, speech reveals to the hearers the speaker’s secret and hidden thought.<sup>20</sup>

This passage uncannily reminds one of the opening lines of the Gospel of John’s description of Y’shua: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. . . . The Word became a human being and lived with us, and we saw his *Shekhinah*.”<sup>21</sup>

So, for both the traditional kabbalists and the New Testament, the Forerunner is identical with the Angel of the Glory, the Name of God, and is the Word of God incarnate. What does the following passage from the *Zohar* indicate about the identity of this Forerunner?: “The ‘spirit of God which hovered over the face of the waters’ is the spirit of the Messiah.”<sup>22</sup>

Could these kabbalists actually be saying that the Godhead is somehow mysteriously composed of three personalities which are, in fact, really One—one of whom is the Word of God in human form, Messiah, the Forerunner-High Priest serving in heaven and embodying the Holy Spirit? Aren’t these the same things the New Testament says about Y’shua? Consider further the following, from R. Yitshaq of Acre:

It is *MoSheH* [Messiah] the High Priest, anointed by the oil, the supernal holy unction, the true Messiah, who will come today, if we listen to the voice of his Master, whose Name is found in him, he will redeem us. . . . “In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of His face saved them” [Isa. 63:9] and “And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him” [Isa. 11:2]. Those [verses] and all similar to them hint at *Metatron* [the Forerunner], the Prince of the Face. . . . [The] sheep, which is the innocent lamb is—in its entirety—good, and it is *MoSheH*, the Prince of Mercy.<sup>23</sup>

Do the mystics ever give a name to the Metatron, this Forerunner, the Prince of the Face, High Priest, Word of God incarnate, Lamb who is afflicted in all their affliction, Messiah? A medieval Rosh Hashanah prayer says:

May it be Thy will that the sounding of the shofar may be embroidered in Thy Heavenly Curtain by the Angel who is appointed for it, as Thou has accepted the prayers by the hand of Elijah of blessed memory and through Yeshua the Prince of the Face.<sup>24</sup>

Yehudah Liebes, Professor of Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah in the Department of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, traces references to Y’shua in traditional Jewish liturgy to Jewish believers in Jesus in the first century A.D.<sup>25</sup> Daniel Abrams of Bar-Ilan University writes of Liebes’s observations, “Yehuda Liebes has brought to our attention the striking identification of Metatron with Jesus in the liturgy.”<sup>26</sup>

## THE MEDIATOR

Many Jews today reject the idea of a go-between to make us right with God. The kabbalists, however, have a different view.

Kabbalists see the angelic Prince of the Face as intermediary between God and his people. Recalling R. Yitshaq of Acre’s equating of the afflicted Forerunner with the Messiah who saves Israel, the following passage from the *Zohar* almost sounds like an epitome of the

New Testament’s assertions about Y’shua’s mediating, vicarious atonement:

When the Messiah hears of the great suffering of Israel in their dispersion, and of the wicked amongst them who seek not to know their Master, he weeps aloud . . . as it is written: “But he was wounded because of our transgression, he was crushed because of our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5). . . . The Messiah . . . calls for all the diseases and pains and sufferings of Israel, bidding them settle on himself, which they do. . . . As long as Israel were in the Holy Land, by means of the Temple service and sacrifices they averted all evil diseases and afflictions from the world. Now it is the Messiah who is the means of averting them from mankind.<sup>27</sup>

## INVESTIGATING THE SECRET FOR YOURSELF

Do these passages from the mystics prove the New Testament is correct, that Y’shua is Messiah of Israel, God in the flesh, who makes atonement for our sins? No.

But they *do* demonstrate that there have been Jews (many, famous kabbalists), whose orthodoxy no one would question, who held beliefs startlingly like those that Jewish believers in Y’shua affirm.

If this exploration of kabbalah has piqued your curiosity, why not explore what the New Testament has to say about these things? In the Hebrew Bible, God states that he will establish a New Covenant: “See, a time is coming—declares the Lord—when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jeremiah 31:31). The Hebrew word *brit*, translated here as ‘covenant,’ may also be translated ‘Testament.’ The kabbalistic text *Oriot de’Rabbi Akiba* says regarding this passage: “And the Holy One . . . will expound to them the meanings of a new *Tora* which He will give them through the Messiah.”<sup>28</sup>

Jewish mystics for Jesus, kabbalists who actually believe in a Triune God, a bodily incarnation of the Deity, and a vicariously atoning Messiah—*Who knew?!* Feeling like you’ve been let in on a pretty well-kept secret? Could Y’shua, the Prince of the Face who sits on God’s throne, the Messiah, be the biggest mystery you’ve yet to unriddle? ■

## Endnotes

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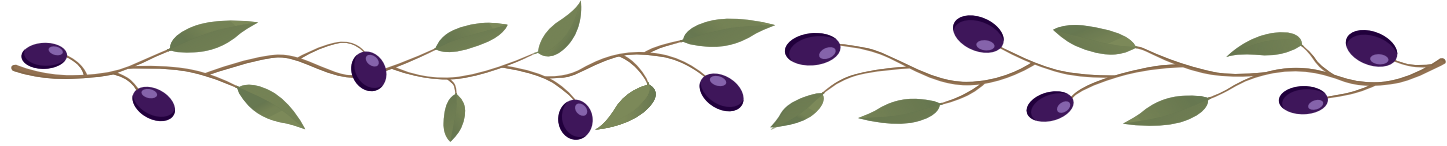
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# A HASSIDIC COUPLE ENCOUNTERS THEIR MESSIAH



Yoel and Adel Ben David live in San Francisco. Now both aged 30, they married when they were 20 and were involved in the Hassidic Breslov movement. Here is their story.

“I was born in Israel and lived there for the first three years of my life,” Yoel begins. “My father worked for a hotel chain, so we lived in the Caribbean, England and Paris over the next sixteen years, and then came back to Israel.

“My mother is a proud Moroccan Jew; my father is Scottish. My Mum was very forceful with our Jewishness. She had served with the Israeli Defense Forces during the Yom Kippur War. Every time there was anything about Israel on the television, or anything about anyone Jewish, she made us aware of it!

“We were a traditional Jewish family rather than religious. We sat down every Friday night, and because my dad was not Jewish and I was the eldest son, I said the *Kiddush*, the blessing over the wine. We ate our meal and then, like any other family, we went into the living room and watched television. An Orthodox Jew, of course, would not use any electricity and certainly would not watch TV on *Shabbat*!”

Adel’s background is quite different. Her parents were from Latvia and in 1978 moved to Berlin, where Adel was born.

“I was brought up in a Russian culture while living in Berlin. My mother died when I was very young, so my grandmother brought me up, and I can remember asking her, ‘Am I German or am I Russian?’ And she would answer me, ‘You’re Jewish!’ As a child I couldn’t understand that. On holy days we would go to the synagogue, but it was more of a social event than religious observance for us.

“I lived in Berlin until I was nineteen. Then I came to Israel and met Yoel at the *ulpan* [language school], and a year later we were married! I was involved in New Age philosophy, and Yoel wasn’t a practicing Jew. What connected us in those early days was philosophizing about God.”

Yoel continues: “In my teenage years I went to the vicar at the school in England and asked him to give me some books about God, including the Koran and some Hindu writings. The real shock for me was that he didn’t try to dissuade me. As I was reading the Koran on my bed, the thought came to me that if God exists, I shouldn’t

really need to read these books. Rather, he should just show up.

“So I said, ‘God, if you’re real, show up.’ And before me I saw the face of Jesus! I looked at him and I felt a presence in my room, and I felt afraid. I saw a clear vision of God—and ignored it. I decided it was a figment of my imagination.

“When I came to Israel and met Adel, we were really searching to find the truth. We decided that if we believed in God, we were being hypocritical if we didn’t do something about our Judaism. We went through different stages. At first it was observing Shabbat. Then I began to study the *Torah* and other writings. Next it was practicing the holidays.

“We became more *Haredi* (Orthodox). We left the language school. We were living together, so gradually the idea of doing that and not being married seemed wrong. We were faced with a choice: separate or get married. We knew we were right for each other, so why wait?

“We approached the Breslov movement, but I still prayed in a Chabad (Lubavitch) synagogue, where I began studying Talmud with the local rabbi. I wore a big *kippah* (skull cap) and *tsitsit* (prayer tassels) and grew the *peot* (earlocks). I learned more about the difference between laws from the Torah and those added by the rabbis.

“As my enrollment into the army was coming up, we decided to move to Jerusalem. The atmosphere was more religious there than in Tel Aviv, so we thought we would feel more at home.

“We picked up the basics of Jewish mysticism. There are ten *Sephirot* or vessels in what is called the tree of life. Each time we say the name of God in the *Siddur*, rabbinic authorities have the name for a different vessel to meditate upon, to focus on the mystical method through which God has created the world.

“We also engaged in the mystical side of Hassidic Judaism through the writings of the founder of the Breslov movement, Rabbi Nachman. He was famous for many different sayings, among them (I paraphrase) ‘all the commandments mean nothing without love.’ Non-Hassids focus on the laws rather than the experiential.”

For one and a half years, Yoel and Adel attempted to live a “religious” life. Despite their best efforts, they were disappointed. “I felt I hadn’t found what I was looking

for,” says Adel. “Something was wrong. I thought that if I could find a combination of New Age and Judaism, my search would be over.

“However, everything changed when we met Judy. An elderly lady from Richmond, Virginia, she was the aunt of a friend. We invited her over and she started talking about God as though she knew him! She challenged us to read the Bible for ourselves. This was something we weren’t used to. Her parting words that first night were, ‘If you want to know God, just read the Torah.’ Up until that time I had struggled to read it. I decided to read the Torah. In fact we raced each other to read it!”

For Adel, to distance herself from the Orthodox community was easy. But for Yoel, then serving in the Rabbinical Corps in the army, it was more difficult. He says: “When I’d finished reading the five books of Moses, I began to realize I had a problem with the daily service I had to attend in the synagogue with all the other soldiers. They were just going through the motions, saying the prayers as fast as they could. I couldn’t say them that fast and mean it. So I told my fellow soldiers I would wait until they’d finished praying, then I would go into the synagogue and pray by myself.”

“Meanwhile,” Adel

continues, “Judy became like family to us. But I worked most evenings, whereas Yoel worked during the day and had evenings free. So he would spend many hours discussing the Bible with Judy, which meant I was missing out!”

“I started reading Isaiah,” Yoel recalls, “and when I got to chapter 53 I didn’t understand it, so I went to see Judy. We didn’t know it then, but she’d been praying for nine months for an opportunity to speak with us about Jesus. So when I knocked on her door and asked her to explain Isaiah 53, she sat me down with a cup of tea and started telling me about Jesus.

“My initial reaction was to think I’d been deceived.

Why hadn’t she told me about Jesus before? But as she continued talking, I started to sense what I now know to be the presence of God. I had begun to notice it when I was praying in the synagogue on my own. As Judy kept speaking, gradually the presence of God increased.

“Then I said in my mind, *You know what, God? If this is true, then I’m going to go with my heart—I will believe.* And at that moment, I saw the same vision that I had seen three years before, sitting on my bed in England with the Koran next to me. I saw the face of Jesus. And then I knew, and I told Judy I was ready to believe. She gave me a tiny copy of

the New Testament and I took it home, where I found Adel sitting on our bed, still reading the five books of Moses!

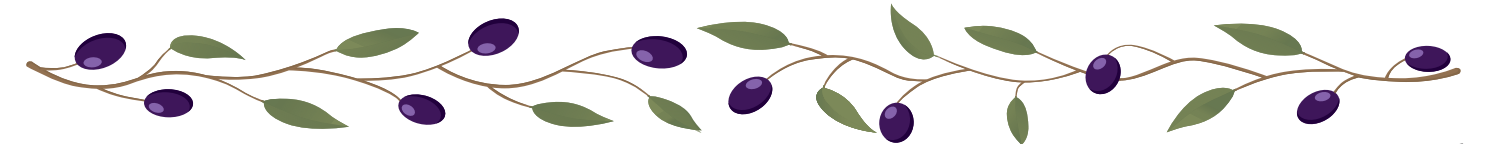
“‘Something terrible has happened!’ I announced. ‘Jesus is the Messiah!’”

“I thought that couldn’t be true,” Adel admits. “A guy came along and people followed him and that became a new religion. Was that supposed to be the truth? Call it pride, but I’d been searching so high and so deep, it couldn’t possibly be that! I didn’t want it to be. At the same time, I knew that nothing would make Yoel change his mind unless he really believed it.

“So I decided to read the New Testament that Judy had given Yoel, and was very surprised. I read through

Matthew’s Gospel and by the end I had tears in my eyes. It was not what I had expected. I couldn’t find anything I disagreed with. I became upset and asked myself, *How come I’ve not read this before?* After all, I’d grown up in Germany where I could easily have read the New Testament, unlike in Israel, where religious Jews are forbidden to read it. I hadn’t understood that I was a sinner and needed forgiveness. And so I too came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah.”

Yoel and Adel’s story reveals a deep search for God, a search that brought them together in the first place and didn’t abate until they found what they were looking for. ■



When it came to a knowledge of *gematria*, no one in Vaysechvoos was as skilled as Mendel the Merchant. His father, Yossel, had taught him from early childhood how important it was to have an understanding of the numerical value of the *alef bais*.

Reb Yossel explained to the boy, “Mendel, my son, do you know why, when a man takes a Nazarite vow for an unspecified duration, it should be counted as 30 days?”

“No, father,” the boy replied.

“Well, we know that from the word *yihyeh* (“he shall be”) which is taken from Numbers 6:5, the numerical value comes to 30.”

Mendel gained much from his learned father.

But he soon surpassed him, for he had a highly developed sense for numbers and complex equations. And this made Reb Yossel very proud. Sadly, Mendel’s father did not live much longer. The truth of the matter is that Mendel was so skilled in *gematria* that he was able to compute the date of his own father’s departure from this world from a passage in the book of Proverbs. He didn’t tell his parents. He thought it best to keep that knowledge to himself.

That was many years ago. Today, Mendel’s reputation for working on *gematria* is known even as far away as Ludz. . . .

How does he do it, you may ask? He looks for a precise meaning in how the letters in a particular Scripture passage add up, and some of the things he has discovered are astounding. For example, when Mendel’s daughter was getting married, he took the traditional text out of Genesis, chapter two and added up the words regarding marriage. Mendel discovered that the marriage about to take place between his daughter and the boy from a neighboring village would produce *tohoo v’bohoo* (total emptiness), and he was ready to call off the celebration. But, wanting to be certain, he kept adding up the letters from the Genesis verses until he got *tov* and *yafe* (good and beautiful), and thus he knew it was going to be a good marriage because he reckoned it with the *gematria*. Then there was the time when a rash of petty thefts occurred in Vaysechvoos. Malka had her Shabbos candlesticks taken; Yonkel found the lock on his workshop broken and his best cutting tools missing. And this thievery

was occurring weekly. So Mendel went to the key text, “Thou shalt not steal,” and he added up the letters in the commandment to find out who had been doing the stealing. Mendel secured the initials of the person, but he didn’t want to tell anyone lest there might be a mistake. So he wrote them down and gave the information to the Sage of Vaysechvoos to hold. He told the Sage, “If in another week’s time, the thief is not caught, then the initials can be divulged.” And Mendel prayed that week with much fervor. Sure enough the thief was caught and his initials were the same as the ones Mendel had secured through *gematria*. The Sage told a few what Mendel had done, and his reputation as a mystical *maven* spread.

By now Mendel had gained considerable confidence in his abilities, so he ventured into an even more complex study.

Mendel took some of the messianic texts to find out when the Messiah will come. He knew that it was forbidden

to compute such a time according to the ancient rabbis,<sup>1</sup> but he went

ahead anyway. His first

computations from passages in the

Pentateuch produced the message, “He already came.” Perplexed, Mendel went to another one of the messianic texts—this time from the writings of the prophet Micah. He made sure the rabbis agreed that the passage was a messianic text. This time he checked and doublechecked his calculations. Yet the same message was produced, “He already came.” Mendel was shocked.

What was he to do now? The only thing a good Jew in Vaysechvoos could do. He kept studying and searching the Scriptures for the date of Messiah’s arrival. Mendel made it his lifelong pursuit. Did the student of this mystical discipline ever find his answer?

Who knows? *Gematria* is not an exact science. And we don’t always like the answers we get.

1. *Sanhedrin* 97b; Derek Erez R., Chapter 11.

#### GLOSSARY

*alef bais*: alphabet

*gematria*: a numerical system of interpretation

*maven*: expert



## In The Little Shtetl Of Vaysechvoos