

Rabbi to Offer Series of Talks on Jewish Mysticism

By ROBYN TAYLOR, *The Winchester Star* February 18, 2020

WINCHESTER — Sometimes even regular attendance at a house of worship won't provide what the faithful are really craving — a greater communion with God.

Jewish mysticism, an ancient tradition with Kabbalah as perhaps the most well-known form, may help reveal the divine through in-depth Torah study, prayer and meditation.

“There is a knowledge and understanding that can only come from a direct — or an intimate — relationship with God,” said Rabbi Scott Sperling of Beth El Congregation who has been studying Jewish mysticism for nearly 35 years.

The weekend, Sperling will share what he's learned during a scholar-in-residence study.

“I am hardly a great scholar of this material,” Sperling said. “But I have enjoyed enormous benefit from studying it and take great pleasure in sharing my passion.”

On Friday, Sperling will speak on “Two Modern Reform Jewish Scholars Explore Mysticism.” His talk will focus on the works of the rabbis Geoffrey Dennis and Lawrence Kushner, who has written several books exploring Kabbalah including the novel “Kabbalah: A Love Story.”

And then at 9:15 a.m. Saturday, Sperling will present “An Overview of Jewish Mysticism,” which is a look at Kabbalistic thought and its place in both traditional and contemporary Judaism.

The general public looking for an introduction to Kabbalah may get the most of this talk, Sperling said.

After that introduction session, Sperling will hold a Torah study at 10:30 a.m. with a discussion of Mishpatim and the Kabbalistic influence on Torah commentary.

The series wraps up Sunday, from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m., when Sperling will present “More Hidden Stories from the Jewish Mystical Tradition,” focusing on mystical tales from the European and Middle Eastern Jewish communities.

All of the sermons and discussions take place at Beth El Congregation at 520 Fairmont Ave. in Winchester.

Even those not familiar with Jewish mysticism have likely heard of Kabbalah. In the early 2000s several Hollywood stars including Madonna, Lindsay Lohan and Ashton Kutcher became students of the ancient mystical practice, some of them wearing the red string bracelets said to ward off the “evil eye.”

Kabbalah isn't a standalone spiritual practice, Sperling said, but is tightly woven into the Jewish faith. That said, anyone who wants to learn more is welcome to this weekend's talks.

“I love this material. I am amazed that this branch, this dimension of Judaism, continues to be fascinating to people,” Sperling said.

Studying the ancient mystical traditions is not solely an intellectual exercise for Sperling.

“I find support and comfort in this material,” Sperling said. “As I approach my 70th birthday, I’m less willing to dismiss things I can’t explain. There has been just too much that has happened in my life.”

For more information about Beth El, call the office at 540-667-1043 or visit the website at www.BethElCongregation.org.

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