

## 7. Rodger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India*

Rodger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India*, San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994

**Rodger Kamenetz** (1950–) is a poet and writer. He was LSU Distinguished Professor and Sternberg Honors Chair Professor in the Departments of English and Religious Studies at Louisiana State University.

In 1989, the same year he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his nonviolent efforts, the Dalai Lama turned for the first time to the Jewish people for help. "Tell me your secret," he said, "the secret of Jewish spiritual survival in exile." (2)

Jews have survived twenty centuries of exile and dispersion, persecution and vilification, economic hardship, expulsion, forced conversion, Crusades, Inquisition, blood libel, pogrom—you name it, Jews survived it. But up until now few outsiders have ever looked upon this as much of an accomplishment.

In the Dalai Lama's eyes, and to many of the Tibetans, Jews are survival experts. The idea that Jewish history, with all its traumas, is relevant to another exiled people was inspiring.

But another attraction to Dharamsala was equally important. This dialogue would be an unprecedented meeting of two ancient religious traditions, an opportunity for leading religious Jews to immerse themselves in a living Buddhist community—that had never happened, as far as we knew, in thousands of years of Jewish and Buddhist history. (3)

Now he [the Dalai Lama] turned to address Yitz Greenberg. "Previously we referred to more traditional, more conservative ways. And you said modernity creates new problems. Due to that, if we try to isolate ourselves from modernity, this is self-destruction. You have to face reality. If you have reason, sufficient reason to practice a religion, sufficient value in that religion, there is no need to fear. If you have no sufficient reason, no value—then there's

no need to hold on to it. Really. I feel that." He added that if a faith cannot provide satisfaction for someone, to insist on that person holding on to it is foolish.

"So you see, the time is changing. Nobody can stop it. Whether God created it—or nature is behind it, nobody knows. It is fact, it is reality. So we have to follow the time, and live according to reality. What we need, ourselves, as religious leaders, is to do more research, find more practices to make tradition something more beneficial in today's life" and more open to people. "Then they will choose which is more valuable, more useful." Either the modernity of the secular world or else traditional teachings. (231)

### COMMENTARY BY OR ROSE

When Rodger Kamenetz first pitched *The Jew in the Lotus* to publishers, no one involved in the project expected it to be a bestseller. Since its original publication in 1994, however, the spiritual travelogue has sold tens of thousands of copies, has been translated into several languages, and led to the creation of a PBS documentary film by the same name (1999). While the subtitle of the *The Jew in the Lotus* focuses on the author's "rediscovery of Judaism in Buddhist India," it is a compelling read in large part because it contains several intersecting plot lines that together raise significant questions about identity, community, and spirituality.

The narrative framework of the book is an intercontinental journey to Dharamsala, India, undertaken by a delegation of eight rabbis and intellectuals in the fall of 1990 to meet with His Holiness, the fourteenth Dalai Lama. This remote town in the Western Himalayas has served as the center of Tibetan life in exile since 1959. Intrigued by the story of Jewish wandering over millennia, the Dalai Lama wants to know the "secret" of their survival. What could he learn from these esteemed Jewish leaders that might help his community thirty years after escaping an oppressive Chinese regime, now still taking refuge in this picturesque village? While the invitation was a noble gesture by a wise and aging leader, the challenge for this small, but fairly diverse group of Jewish delegates was that "they did not agree on which secrets to bring ... which of the secrets was relevant, or even if there was a secret" (24). With respect and humor, Kamenetz introduces the reader to several colorful and creative Jewish figures, sharing their process of navigating various theological and praxis-based matters, including tensions and compromises. The fault lines within the group serve as a window into discussions and debates in the wider Jewish community.

Among the individuals Kamenetz features are rabbis Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (Reb Zalman) and Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, who serve as the spiritual elders of the group, with Schachter-Shalomi playing the role of the heterodox, free-spirited mystic—"half beatnik and half Hasid" (113), and Greenberg the (modern) Orthodox, more circumspect, rationalist. Kamenetz—a poet and storyteller—is clearly more drawn to Schachter-Shalomi as a teacher, seeing in him an oral master, "best appreciated in person," who can inspire others through his "flow of ideas, images, and illuminating tales" (73). But by no means is Greenberg presented as a strawman or foil, but rather Kamenetz portrays him as a courageous traditionalist who worked diligently for decades at both intra-Jewish and interreligious engagement. In fact, one of the more touching moments in the book is when Reb Zalman says of Yitz, "He is bridging more tensions than any Jew I know at this point" (50). Learning about these two towering figures—including both their similarities and differences—is one of the gifts of the book.

Of course, part of the allure of *The Jew in the Lotus* is the opportunity to travel with the Jewish group to an exotic location and to encounter a world-famous, yet enigmatic, spiritual master and several of his associates, including an oracle and several learned monks and nuns. The actor and humanitarian Richard Gere even makes a cameo appearance early in the book. But Kamenetz is aware of the dangers of shallowness and condescension, reporting with both a critical and compassionate eye on the people he meets and the highs and lows of the dialogue. At the heart of the exchange between the Jewish and Buddhist participants is the complex subject of tradition and change. As the author notes, "The Buddhist leader had brought with him into exile a Noah's ark of practitioners" (45), but like the Jewish people themselves he and his advisors had to painstakingly sort out what to keep, what to adapt, and what to let go of. The reader also learns that for all of the ways in which the Dalai Lama is venerated, even deified, one attribute that makes him special is his finely developed ability to be present with other people. Reflecting on this point, Reb Zalman says, "There were times I was close to tears just from the intensity of his listening" (106).

In addition to the Dalai Lama's graciousness, part of what allowed for a rich and searching dialogue was that Jews and Buddhists do not have a long history of animosity. This allowed for a more appreciative interreligious exchange, without some of the usual defensive or polemical elements that can emerge in dialogue between communities with more complicated and entangled pasts. Participants were able to explore both the exoteric and the esoteric dimensions of the religious life, including matters of cosmology and consciousness. While

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some of the Jewish delegates were squeamish at times as Reb Zalman and Rabbi Jonathan Omer-Man discussed various Jewish mystical ideas—God's tenfold nature, angelology, and the transmigration of souls—Rabbi Moshe Waldoks quipped, "the esoteric is like gefilte fish to the Dalai Lama" (82). Presentations by Rabbi Joy Levitt (Reconstructionist) and Blu Greenberg (a pioneering Orthodox feminist leader) on the "secrets" of synagogue and family life were crucial to understanding the concrete ways in which Jewish men *and* women live out their spiritual and social commitments publicly and privately, and the evolution of these rites (including gender roles) throughout Jewish history. As Kamenetz notes, Blu's discussion also led to a fascinating discussion of inter-generational hopes and responsibilities, particularly since the Buddhist participants were celibates who believed in reincarnation (215–217).

One thorny issue that arose in the dialogue and related conversations was the question of why there are a disproportionate number of Western Buddhist teachers and practitioners from Jewish backgrounds—including those who identify as JuBu, culturally Jewish but spiritually Buddhist, or simply as Buddhist. The members of the delegation grappled with issues of "religious switching" and "hybridity" (both terms that were not yet a part of the popular discourse on religion), particularly in a post-Holocaust age in which issues of continuity are especially charged. Importantly, in exploring these issues, the delegates were brave enough to ask whether or not they and other Jewish leaders were offering their constituents compelling reasons to live engaged Jewish lives. Given the excitement about Kabbalah on the trip (which also dovetailed with its growing popularity in the United States) there were lively conversations about making Jewish mystical teachings and practices (including meditation and visualization) more accessible (148–149). There was also frank discussion about people's mis/perceptions about what is "real" or "mainstream" Judaism, and the universal truth that in "every religious tradition, what you invest is what return you get," as the famed American Hindu teacher, Ram Dass (formerly Richard Alpert), stated at a post-trip public event (268). Finally, the dialogue participants also grappled with the fact that some people—including some Jews—simply find greater fulfillment in a religious tradition other than the one into which they were born, and that others feel comfortable belonging to more than one tradition.

All of this brings us to the final plotline: the spiritual journey of the author himself. Reflecting on his Jewish identity early in the book, Kamenetz candidly states that for much of his adult life it was like a "strongbox," well protected by ethnic pride, but lacking interior meaning—"much like the Hebrew letters I could

pronounce but not truly read" (57). While the trip itself was brief, it helped open him to new possibilities for spiritual growth as a Jew. One of the strengths of the book is Kamenetz's openness about his questions and biases, as well as his insights. As he wrote in a new afterword in 2007, "I simply tried to tell the story as I experienced it, very personally, with feelings intact" (308). In so doing, he invites others to explore their inner lives through renewed engagement with their own traditions and in dialogue with people from other communities of practice. Interestingly, in Kamenetz's next book, *Stalking Elijah: Adventures with Today's Jewish Mystical Masters* (winner of the 1997 National Jewish Book Award in Jewish Thought), he returns "home" for extended conversations with Reb Zalman, Rabbi Arthur Green, and other American Jewish figures.

The *Jew in the Lotus* communicated several important insights for contemporary Jewish life that remain relevant today. Through his presentation of Reb Zalman and his students, Kamenetz helped share some of the intellectual and devotional riches of the Jewish mystical tradition (as distilled through a progressive, neo-Chasidic lens). By extension, the reader is asked to think expansively about making creative use of Jewish resources, ancient and modern, whether "normative" or not. In highlighting the lifelong work of Schachter-Shalomi and Yitz and Blu Greenberg, the author also provides examples of iconoclastic Jewish leaders who have labored on the edges of their communities to renew Jewish tradition in different ways. *The Jew in the Lotus* also helps us to gain a greater appreciation for the beauty and pain of the Tibetan Buddhist community in exile, and the dignity and humanity of His Holiness, the fourteenth Dalai Lama. The thoughtfulness with which the participants interact also serves as a model for anyone interested in genuine dialogue. Finally, in his conversations with various American Buddhist practitioners with Jewish roots or connections, Kamenetz helped further an important discussion of the possibilities and challenges of religious adaptation, permeability, and of dual belonging. Many years after the original publication of this popular memoir, *The Jew in the Lotus* serves at once as a tale of personal awakening, and as a call to spiritual and ethical renewal within and beyond our community.