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# The Mystical Exodus in Jungian Perspective: Transforming Trauma and the Wellsprings of Renewal

B. Les Lancaster

*Alef Trust, Bromborough, Wirral, UK*

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## BOOK REVIEW

### *The Mystical Exodus in Jungian Perspective: Transforming Trauma and the Wellsprings of Renewal*

(2021; Routledge)

by Shoshana Fershtman

Reviewed by

**B. Les Lancaster**

Alef Trust, Bromborough, Wirral, UK  
Liverpool John Moores University, UK

Usually, I feel it appropriate to start this review on a personal note. Shortly after being sent the book for review, my father died. The period during which I read Fershtman's book and worked on this review has therefore coincided with the time that I am regularly reciting *Kaddish*, the Jewish mourner's prayer. Inevitably, questions arise as I participate in this time-honored custom: Am I doing this for my father ... that his soul might somehow appreciate the words I chant? Is it rather for me ... that I should feel the support of a community at a time of loss?

Reading Fershtman's book opens a depth that is hugely inspiring and brings such a wider vista to my recitation of ancient words. This book brings a stark reminder of the chain of connection through which we forge our own valuation of the spiritual jewels in a tradition. It lays bare the potent wounds carried as trauma across the generations—from humiliations, false accusations, pogroms, and the holocaust—that have shaped so many contemporary Jews' lives, often in hidden ways. And it tells the story of how those spiritual jewels in the Jewish tradition became obscured for so many due to the religion's peculiar and distinctive history. Fershtman shows how all these strands enmesh in her own, and her clients', journeys through therapeutic and spiritual paths of liberation. As I chant, "*Yehei shemei rabbah mevorach le-olam ule-almei-almaye*" ("May His great Name be blessed forever and all eternity"), I breathe with the sacred

chain and the challenge of renewal that is the soul of Fershtman's *Mystical Exodus* ... and I know why I am saying *Kaddish*.

The biblical story of Exodus—the journey from slavery to freedom—is the quintessential narrative of transformation that came to define the essence of the Jewish people. The core imagery of suffering and salvation, together with that of journeying, touches the deepest connotation of the human religious imperative. Indeed, the root meaning of the Bible's term for the "Hebrews" implies transit, crossing over boundaries, which in more transpersonal terms we might relate to a disposition towards encountering the transliminal, defined by Thalbourne (1991) as "an openness or receptiveness to impulses and experiences whose sources are in preconscious (or unconscious) processes" (p. 182). The epithet of Jews as "wanderers" is seared into the Western psyche, and in the religious sense, all major rituals in Judaism include the mantra that they recall the Exodus from Egypt. The archetypal story of the Exodus is re-enacted annually in the *Seder* ritual not only by observant Jews but also by those who regard themselves as only marginally religious. To be "a people," a group needs a founding myth to integrate its members' sense of origins and of belonging, and to propel them through the exigencies of history. The Exodus has to be amongst the most potent of such myths, having secured the survival of a people for over 3,000 years.

Fershtman brilliantly examines that potency, using an equally potent myth—that of Jung’s scheme of the psyche—to place it in a modern context. But there is so much more to this book than the re-interpretation of a scriptural narrative. Fershtman incisively unravels the course of Jewish history, contextualizing in particular the *Jewish Renewal* movement for which she is such an eloquent spokesperson. And critically for this review, that history is not only parochial to the tiny proportion of the world’s population that is Jewish (0.2%). For those interested in transpersonal psychology the course of Jewish history that Fershtman explores has much larger ramifications, for it charts the progression in re-aligning the gendering of our human sense of the divine towards the feminine, and in re-energizing the mythic inner meaning of religion, that is central to the vision of transpersonal psychology.

Transpersonal psychology has integrated many strands of mysticism and spirituality into its core vision of understanding the transformative potential of what it is to be human. High on the list of influences are the great Eastern traditions, with their profound reflections on the nature of consciousness and mind. But were a definitive history of transpersonal psychology to be written, it would surely demonstrate how the movement’s seedbed was prepared by Jews who, in one way or another, carried both the light and the darkness that the peculiar history of their lineage had bequeathed them.

Fershtman’s work draws heavily on evidence that goddess worship formed the ground from which Judaism grew. Finding ways to reconnect with those foundations is certainly critical to spirituality in our day—whether Jewish or non-Jewish. Contemporary spirituality stresses the immanence of the numinous divine essence and the role of the feminine in leading us to appreciate the interconnectedness of all things. But the roots of transpersonal psychology arguably have as much to do with the interactions between two dominating worldviews—those of Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity—as they do with more ancient female deities. In the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem 2000 years ago grew two conflicting views of how the notion of sacrifice would be perpetuated. In essence, one

path—that of Christianity—stressed an *ascending* worldview, projecting sacrifice onto the Christ figure; the other—that of Rabbinic Judaism—articulated a worldview in which the *descending* direction played a preeminent role, for sacrifice was henceforth to be achieved through individual study and through recognizing the sacred in everyday events and behavior. This is, of course, a huge simplification of a complex subject, but serves to give a framework to the dynamic interaction between the worldviews, which in its darkness gave rise to the horrors of Christian-inspired antisemitism, and, in its light, brought a spirit of renewal to the ways in which we access the creative core of the psyche (Lancaster, 2004, pp. 213–219).

To put it in stark terms, had there been no Abulafia (13<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish mystic), or no *Zohar* (the major work of Jewish mysticism), would Pico della Mirandola have proclaimed his *oration on the dignity of man* that introduced into Western thought a view of selfhood that became critical to the development of psychology as we know it (Tarnas, 1991)? Had there been no Freud, would Jung have commenced his journey of discovery that remains central to the transpersonal orientation in psychology?

Fershtman’s book does not fully engage with the scholarship bearing on the backdrop to the “longest hatred” (Wistrich, 1992), but that is hardly a criticism, for its focus lies elsewhere. The essence of Fershtman’s book emerges through the interplay between her explorations of the Exodus story and the vignettes she brings of her Jewish clients rediscovering their connections with the religion they had been born into. These individuals, whose parents had journeyed to the United States either before, or after, the holocaust, carried the burdens of their families’ confusing and traumatic backgrounds, “the legacy of terror and loss that overlaid their family’s relationship to Judaism” (p. 105). Fershtman’s insightful analysis shows how these family and ancestral stories were enmeshed with the overarching myth of the Exodus. Recurring pogroms and the holocaust eventuated in a “restricted consciousness imposed by trauma” (p. 102) echoing the myth of Egypt since the Hebrew for “Egypt” emphasizes the root meaning of “narrowness” or

“constriction.” The mystical understanding of the Exodus is that of a transition from a limited state of consciousness to an expanded one, clearly relating to Jung’s scheme of individuation, as Fershtman substantially illustrates. It depicts the movement “to a deepening engagement with one’s own truest self and with the cosmic Mystery” (p. xvii). The individuals whose stories are told in the vignettes had struggled to reconcile their inner spirituality with their parents’ outright rejection of religion in the wake of the holocaust, or the seemingly hollow religion they encountered in cases where their parents continued to attend synagogues. The Judaism they encountered in the latter case was a religious shell not only emaciated through the rationalism of the Enlightenment, an outmoded patriarchal order, and attempts to emulate the dominant religion of Christianity, but also eviscerated by the huge burden of the Holocaust and other atrocities. For the individuals whose stories become the lifeblood of Fershtman’s book, encountering the mythic and mystical core of Judaism through the Jewish Renewal movement, as well as opening through Fershtman’s therapeutic touch to the more concealed corridors of their psyches, becomes the journey out of the “restriction”, their Exodus.

We meet individuals whose forebears travelled to the United States one or more generations back, whose grandparents had witnessed atrocities beyond what the human psyche can bear. Their parents or grandparents had so often closed down, refusing to talk about their experiences, in a pattern that is well documented. The stories so movingly related by Fershtman are distinctive in their narrators’ quests not only for understanding of their ancestors’ struggles but also for their own spiritual place in the lineage. It is impossible not to be moved by the stories’ vivid depths and by the creative and sensitive analysis by the author. Fershtman unravels her own and her clients’ dreams and meditative imagery in painstaking detail to illumine this 21<sup>st</sup>-century retelling of the mystical Exodus.

Fershtman draws on *Midrashic* and *Kabbalistic* sources to draw out the relevance of this core myth of the Exodus to her clients’ journeys through the psychotherapeutic process. I shall cite one example, which I think epitomizes not only the

book’s insightful treatment of ancient sources but also the relevance of those stories in the context of coming to terms with intense intergenerational trauma and the importance of finding appropriate avenues for spiritual expression.

The book of Genesis closes with the Hebrews’ oath to Joseph—the mastermind of their “descent” to Egypt—that their descendants would take his bones with them when the time of their promised redemption would arrive. When the time comes, with Moses poised to lead them out of Egypt, he does not know where the bones might be found. There is only one woman, according to Midrashic legend, who knows their whereabouts. Serach bat Asher had witnessed Joseph’s body being placed in a metal coffin and sunk in the waters of the Nile by Egyptian magicians. Guided by Serach, Moses finds the coffin and the journey can begin.

Such teaching stories powerfully convey psychospiritual symbols. In this case, the feminine is the keeper of ancestral memory, and the journey of liberation cannot begin without those memories being brought to the present and processed. The coffin “floating up” from the depths of the Nile (Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 13a) is a powerful image of memories relating to lineage arising from the unconscious. Fershtman shows how such ancestral memories play crucial roles in her clients’ journeys to liberation. In meditations one such client, Ruth

visualized all the women in her ancestral lineage loving her, completely accepting her in ways that her own mother was unable to. This connection with her ancestors healed the lack of relatedness she had experienced in her own family, instilling in her a sense of love, comfort, and belonging to a lineage of profound spiritual depth reaching back many generations. (p. 145)

Another female character in Jewish folklore, Lilith, who, for many Jewish feminists, has become a poignant image of the fiercely assertive woman, is also seminal to Fershtman’s understanding of intergenerational trauma in Jewish women. Here is not the place to analyze fully the historical transformation of Lilith from the negatively framed demonic feminine to the positive image of the fierce and assertive woman. Suffice it to say that,

although the textual and historical evidence for the feminist narrative is not always as strong as implied, the need for this reclaiming of the powerful feminine in Judaism is very real in both spiritual and psychological terms. Fershtman cleverly situates Lilith in her narrative of the Exodus as pivotal in overcoming intergenerational trauma, using the medieval motif that Lilith was transported to the Sea of Reeds (aka “Red Sea”). The image of the path to freedom leading into the sea is of immense potency, not least because the sea is a universal symbol of the unconscious. As Fershtman puts it,

Before we can surrender to God, before we can walk into the sea, before we can find faith, we must come to terms with our own pain and honor the suffering of our ancestors in the clay pits of Egypt, the pogroms of Eastern Europe, the death camps of Treblinka and Dachau. We carry them with us, as we enter the sea. (p. 183)

No matter how comfortable and secure their environment seemed to be, the legacy of such trauma, “taught Jews to keep one eye on the door at all times, never knowing when the hospitality of the land on which they dwelt might give way beneath their feet, opening into a chasm of terror” (p. 122). In hints and barely revealed messages, the parents passed such fear to their children, who in turn became the clients whose stories unfold in this book. But the truly profound message of *Mystical Exodus* is not simply that such individuals need to exorcise their families’ demons. The underpinnings of *Jewish Renewal*, and the thrust of this book is that these historical circumstances conspired to engender a new realization of what it means to make a spiritual journey—that spiritual and mystical goals can be attained only when the psychological quest to be renewed is recognized. It is surely no coincidence that the fullest articulation of this dynamic entered Western discourse through the relationship between Freud and Jung, as if the roots of Jewish trauma, based as they were in the clash of Rabbinic and Christian worldviews, had to be resolved through the re-integration of Jewish and Christian approaches to the psyche which, I would argue, were epitomized in the works of Freud and Jung respectively. In whichever ways we trace these

paths of trauma, what we discern in Fershtman’s book is the way in which Judaism became the testbed for this new orientation to religion, again a point that should place this book on the reading list of many transpersonal psychologists, whether Jewish or not.

On a more critical note, Fershtman is somewhat restricted in her reading of Rabbinic and Kabbalistic sources, with a propensity to make her emphasis on intergenerational trauma fit at all costs. In her analysis, for example, the ten plagues visited on the Egyptians are all found to depict differing aspects of the process of coming to terms with trauma: The river turning to blood in the first plague becomes an image of the need to face repressed trauma; The invasion of frogs in the second plague depicts the importance of becoming aware of the unconscious (frogs having emerged from the river, a symbol of unconsciousness). It is not that these interpretations are inappropriate, but that more nuanced interpretations are also needed. The balance between “reading out” intentionally concealed meanings from the scriptural text and “reading in” our own wished-for meanings is a delicate one, which calls for further analysis in a work such as this (cf. Lancaster, 2007).

It is interesting to note—to take this issue of the plagues further—that the numerical value of the Hebrew for the first plague, “blood”, is 44, and that for the second, “frogs”, is 444. Now, whether we view this as a random coincidence or not is not simply a matter of the statistical likelihood but entails a broader grasp of the significance of the number four in tropes associated with the Exodus, the Seder ritual, and Kabbalistic symbolism. “Reading out” a presumed level of significance and meaning demands an intricate awareness of the web of traditional hermeneutics, through which, for example, the centrality of fourfoldness in both the imagery of redemption and the structure of the Seder becomes evident. In the Kabbalah, the fourth Hebrew letter, *Dalet*, depicts both the final *sefirah* in the Tree of Life and the feminine, with the letter name meaning “door.” When we add Jung’s fascination with the number four as a symbol of Self, a more finely integrated psychospiritual nexus is revealed.



In her section on the plagues, Fershtman draws on a website to bolster her arguments. How reliable is this source? I note for example that the site presents inaccurate translations of the Hebrew terms for the *sefirot*. Now, again, it is legitimate to move into an interpretative frame, but it is not legitimate to present that interpretation as grounded in the literal, as is implied in providing a supposed English translation. Ideally, Fershtman would have critically examined her sources more intently.

I believe that this raises another critical issue for transpersonal psychology more generally—that of *authorization*. The way in which transpersonal psychologists draw on a wide range of disciplines is certainly essential to our goals. But how do we ensure that we can differentiate authenticity from ephemeral trends? Broadly speaking there are three lines of evidence that a work such as Fershtman's references: the models generated by therapists drawing on case histories, insights from spiritual and mystical traditions, and scientific research. Therapeutic models lacking scientific support can be misleading (as in the case of false memories, for example). Insights from spiritual and mystical traditions which are unsupported from within the traditions' own extensive commentarial writings may be suspect, often serving more to bolster the egos of the authors than to further the quest for knowing. Guarding against these scholarly weaknesses is critical for the future of transpersonal psychology. Of course, it would be unrealistic to demand that an author be an expert in all the relevant fields, but the status of transpersonal psychology as an academic discipline is enhanced to the extent that we find more effective ways of incorporating the role of science in *triangulating* across the disciplinary boundaries.

This is not intended to detract unduly from Fershtman's achievement, however. Yes, she is sometimes too ready to cite quotes from therapists without adequate evaluation; and yes, some of the kabbalistic points on which she draws lack nuanced and scholarly analysis. My point, however, is that these are typical examples of the price we pay for the overarching treatments that a transpersonal approach adopts. In this case, Fershtman brings to life the mythic imagery of the Exodus as a paradigm of "post-traumatic growth" (p. 71). It becomes a

lens through which the dramatic arc of Jewish history is projected and a backdrop against which we gain life-changing insights into the complex interplay between psychology and religion that is encountered on the journey to individuation.

Finally, it seems apt to share a dream image from the night before I finished this review. In my dream I was holding Fershtman's book, but it was no longer a "book"; it had become a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle made of wooden pieces. In the dream, I was trying to ensure that none of the pieces fell out of place. Well, in a review such as this it would be impossible to do justice to all the pieces of the puzzle. But there is, of course, more to the dream image. As Jews attempting to forge a religious path that is both alive to the ways in which spirit manifests in our age and, at the same time, honors the great tradition to which we are heirs, we are all holding this jigsaw puzzle. Some, like Shoshana Fershtman, are dusting off old pieces, perhaps found lying in some precious casket, and fitting them with shiny new pieces. We none of us have the finished picture to help in slotting pieces into place—how could we, since, in my dream, it was a three-dimensional puzzle? In reality, of course, the dimension of time is critical to the puzzle; it is four-dimensional, and Fershtman is to be congratulated on her insightful presentation of the central imagery of the Exodus-transformation as conduit for the healing journey across generations.

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### **About the Author**

*Brian Les Lancaster, PhD*, is a Founding Director and Dean of the Alef Trust. He is Professor Emeritus of Transpersonal Psychology at Liverpool John Moores University, UK, an Honorary Research Fellow in Religions and Theology, University of Manchester, UK, and Associated Distinguished Professor of Integral and Transpersonal Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies, CA, USA. He has previously served as Chair of the Transpersonal Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society, as President of the International Transpersonal Association, and as a Board member of the Association for Transpersonal Psychology. Les' research interests focus on the cognitive neuroscience of consciousness and the connections between this topic and mysticism, specifically focusing on Kabbalistic Psychology. His published works include *The Essence of Kabbalah* and *Approaches to Consciousness: The Marriage of Science and Mysticism*.

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