

Tabick, Larry, *The Aura of Torah. A Kabbalistic-Hasidic Commentary to the Weekly Readings*, Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 2014, xl + 376 pp., ISBN 978-0-8276-0948-8 (pb).

The cover of *The Aura of Torah* makes this book already a pleasure to own: it features a colourful, seventeenth-century miniature of a rabbi reading the Torah. Behind this beautiful front image, there is a spiritual companion to the weekly readings.

In his introduction, Rabbi Larry Tabick explains the title's meaning. The Torah has two auras. The first aura is visible in the printed editions of the Pentateuch, in which the Hebrew text is surrounded by a 'halo' of commentaries and translations. The invisible aura, on the other hand, is the aura of holiness and spirituality. It discloses deep spiritual truths and reveals hidden realms. However, it is often difficult for those who seek enlightenment to find it in the Torah. The spiritual truths seem deeply buried underneath the plethora of stories, laws and rituals. Tabick points out that Jewish mystics and spiritual teachers were aware of the fact that, at first sight, the Torah does not offer the spiritual guidance and inspiration that many seek. Thanks to their ingenious, highly creative exegetical skills, these mystics nevertheless managed to perceive the Torah's invisible aura and grasp Scripture's esoteric meaning. Yet, ironically, their works are often notoriously difficult to read, let alone translate. The highly complex nature of many mystical texts thus presents another obstacle for those seeking spiritual enlightenment in the Torah.

However, under the expert guidance of Tabick, the reader is introduced to an anthology of texts that disclose the esoteric meaning of Scripture. Very useful is Tabick's brief historical overview of the different schools of thought within the Jewish mystical tradition. He first introduces the reader to the *merkavah* mystics of late antiquity, but since this tradition does not explicitly engage with Scripture, it does not feature in the actual commentary. The author continues with the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, the German pietists of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, who meticulously scrutinized the biblical texts, and whose leaders are quoted a few times in the book. The historical overview is, understandably, mostly devoted to the origin, development and doctrines of the Kabbalah. The author offers a clear and succinct exposition of the complex concept of the ten *sefirot*, the different aspects of God's personality. The kabbalists extensively studied the Torah, as evidenced by the manifold kabbalistic commentaries, and with their theories they cast a whole new light on the meaning of Scripture. Tabick also discusses Yitzchak Luria's radical reinterpretation of the doctrine of divine emanation, and the profound impact of his teachings, such as the concept

of *tikkun olam* ('repairing of the world'), on the Jewish world, most notably on Shabbetai Zevi, the failed messiah. The Hasidic movement, founded on the teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov, further popularised the Kabbalah and shifted its focus towards human psychology, or rather mystical psychology. Tabick also gives voice to the historical opponents of the Hasidic movement, the *mitnagdim*, and he concludes his overview with the surge in popular interest in Kabbalah in modern times.

Tabick has ordered his text material according to the weekly readings, and each parasha is commented upon in three different texts, which have been carefully selected and translated by the author himself (the appendices provide the original texts and short biographies of the mystics and spiritual teachers quoted in this book). His gender neutral translations and rendering of the Tetragrammaton with 'Eternal' should make every reader feel addressed. Although Tabick draws his sources from a wide variety of material, the Hasidic teachings dominate his commentary. The author is clearly inspired by the Hasidim, but he certainly does not treat them with blind adulation, as evidenced, for example, by his critical stance towards the concept of the *tzadik*. He rather believes in the spiritual potential of every human; each individual has the ability to become a *tzadik*. Tabick nevertheless admires the Hasidic emphasis on anti-materialism, mystical psychology, and God-centered living.

The author has made a painstaking effort to present the often difficult and convoluted texts as clearly as possible. In order to reach Scripture's esoteric layer, the mystics frequently employed ingenious, yet abstruse exegetical methods. Moreover, usually their commentaries are heavily influenced by the earlier rabbinic exegesis of Scripture. To facilitate the reader's understanding of the predominantly kabbalistic-hasidic writings, each text is followed by Tabick's helpful notes, in which he provides biblical and rabbinic references and explains underlying concepts – such as kabbalistic symbolism –, wordplays and gematria. Otherwise many textual elements would have escaped the reader's attention. Tabick concludes each section with his application of the spiritual lessons to the present day. Tabick's choice of texts, enriched by his personal observations, will leave the reader in awe of the profound scriptural understanding of the Jewish mystics, who managed to discover a spiritual layer underneath the seemingly most mundane passages in the Torah.

*The Aura of Torah* is a testament to Rabbi Larry Tabick's profound love for Jewish mysticism, most notably Kabbalah and Hasidism. He has made highly complex texts accessible to a wider audience, enriching the reader's spiritual understanding of Scripture. Tabick is clearly concerned with the advancement of each individual's spiritual progress. In his commentary on Leviticus 25:23 in parasha *Be-har*, Tabick quotes Moshe of Sudylkov,

grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, who taught that 'we are only passing through – spiritual beings, not unlike God – sojourning through a physical universe'. With *The Aura of Torah* Tabick has delivered an inspiring and important guide for our spiritual quest here on earth.

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