



POLITICAL VISION & SPIRITUAL WISDOM

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EDITORIALS & ACTIONS

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Rabbi Nilton Bonder Remembers Zalman Schachter Shalomi

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Pardes in Rio Rabbi Nilton Bonder on Zalman Schachter Shalomi

Ben Azai gazed and died.

Ben Zoma gazed, and lost his mind...

Bonder gazed, and lost his job

RebZalman entered, and exited in peace.

December of 1987, Reb Zalman came to Rio for *Tikun Olam*, an event which I had envisioned as a sort of Jewish Woodstock in Rio de Janeiro. Few months earlier I had gone to Philadelphia to convince Reb Zalman to come to the tropics for that occasion. He never answered the question to whether he would come or not... he danced with me in acceptance.

I had this dream that Reb Zalman would be everything suitable to the spirituality of Brazil and that there was a special Messianic chemistry that could work in this corner of the world. At the time, I was the newly arrived assistant rabbi at the Liberal synagogue in Rio and I got permission to go ahead with my dream-event as long as I would raise the money and be solely in charge of making it happen. I am sure the challenge was set with the expectation that it would fail.

But I struck lucky and I was able to convince the most daring business entrepreneur in Rio who just happened to be a very spiritual man to give the amount of money I needed. Not only that but he also challenged me to do something modern in terms of marketing and gave me a blank check for whatever I needed in terms of promoting the event. He called the agency that did the publicity for his chain of shopping malls to be at my disposal. I proceeded with setting up the most sophisticated propaganda apparatus for Zalman's trip to Rio. Posters of a Jew in the Lotus position, lots of pamphlets in a pre-internet era, and the best of the media in Rio interested in this guru-rabbi about to disembark in our land. Brazil was booming with interest in the occult, it was the beginning of the massive interest in Paulo Coelho, a giant best-seller who was writing on magic, alchemy and mysticism.

Suddenly we not only had the 800 places available for the *shabbaton* taken, but it became literally the talk of the town. To do an event in Rio in December (it was the weekend of Christmas) would be totally suicidal for it is the beginning of summer when most people either travel or are not interested in anything else other than the beach. But there was a messianic rush in the explosive mix of my admiration for Zalman, the Brazilian spiritual spice, and lots of creative and abundant propaganda.

The orthodox community became furious and brought pressure on the synagogue. For the first time all the orthodox rabbis who had their differences decided to do a united effort to reveal the dangers of the event and of this strange *Shabbat Tzvi* kind of rabbi about to invade the mediocre tranquility of Jewish Brazilian life. And since they were fighting what seemed as a very sophisticated media machine, they hired an advertisement agency to draw a denouncing pamphlet entitled "Judaism is like a mother — there is only one! Fighting Hellenism on this Chanuka 1987". Zalman was not aware of this context and he arrived with his non-yet-official wife, Eve. From the very beginning it was a little awkward since the newspapers and magazines begun presenting Eve as his official wife. There were several interviews scheduled and it became big, too big.

The senior rabbi pressured by the board called me and ask me to lower the tone. It was running out of control for a synagogue that just wanted to do a calendar event. I promised moderation but in truth I had little chance for that, both because of the interest it had aroused (the orthodox pamphlet just added more fuel to the overwhelming attention the matter already had), and also because I, myself, was not able to control my own excitement.

Zalman and Eve had a huge apartment facing the beach in Copacabana with a cooker, a cleaner, a driver, and a car. I had arranged three major events: the *shabbaton* in the outskirts of Rio, an open talk to take place in the huge synagogue sanctuary, and a performance at Circo Voador (a circus kind of arena that was the most avant-garde site in Rio for rock concerts and other cool events) open to the whole population, Jews and non-Jews.

The *shabbaton* (*Tikun Olam*) was amazing. Most of the attendants were young people and a good half of them were camping with tents, *mamash* Woodstock feeling. Zalman was at his best, speaking Portuguese that he intuitively constructed out of Latin roots with his unique smile delighted on the challenge of communicating without language. Add to the mood a few supernatural moments, like when on an outdoor meeting a woman asked him for a blessing to neutralize some poltergeist occurrences in her house after her mother had passed away. Zalman, turning to the open sky, begun to talk to the woman's soul asking her to let go of any unfinished business down here, which was immediately "replied" by the most bizarre gust of wind in the midst of a clear and sunny day.

I was personally looking forward to the talk in Rio. There were rumors that we would get the unpleasant attendance of a more radical group of Jews that were coming to disrupt the event. The event was packed with people and it all came as a shock to the synagogue's board since there were more people enlisted for that talk than for the *Neilah* service in Yom Kippur. The date was December 28th, between Christmas and New Years' Eve, a date nobody would dare to promote any kind of event; it should had been doomed to failure. I was euphoric with the prospect that Zalman with his charisma and wit was about to change my community forever. I couldn't stop thinking that it could really generate the messianic spark that I, young as I was at that time, was trying to conceal out of my own expectations.

In the afternoon before the talk I took Zalman and Eve on a tour through Rio and ended up at my parent's house overlooking an incredible view of the ocean and of several beaches. I had arranged a special surprise consisting of different native Brazilian tropical fruits as I knew of Reb Zalman's mystic interest on *pri haarets*, the fruit of the land. He was no less than delighted and began saying *Sheecheyanu* for each of the fruits he was both savoring and learning of.

When we got to the synagogue it was packed — a Yom Kippur on a December-ish Rio summer. I was tense with the possibility of an aggressive crowd but at the same time ecstatic anticipating the impact that Zalman would have on those who came to challenge him as well as in the community as a whole. He got on the stage and there was silence. He started to talk about *Tikun Olam* and after five minutes into his talk he said: "Ok I will take three last questions..." I couldn't believe it. "No please talk more, do something, take over this thirsty crowd and change them forever!" I was screaming within myself as I rushed to the *bimah* to demand Zalman for more and better. He then whispered in my ear: "Nilton... the fruits..." I said: "What about the fruits?" "They didn't do well to my stomach... it will have to be just these few last questions". The questions were thrown and they were shallow and quickly dealt by Zalman, who quickly left the place. I could see the disappointment in people's faces and I was desolated and frustrated. As hundreds of people were vacating the place and I was standing outside, a car stopped and lowered the window. It was Zalman's car heading home.

Zalman said to me: "I am sorry, don't be disappointed. It doesn't happen that way... it just doesn't happen that way." And they left me thinking that the words were not just out of comfort but out of some kind of wisdom that he was digesting (no pun intended!). Maybe things really do not happen that way, namely, that maybe there is no *Tikun* that one single talk can produce. Maybe healing and waking up cannot be accomplished in a peak triumphant moment, requiring a process of work and dedication.

There was still the open performance in the Circus. The rabbi and the board of the synagogue called me for a meeting and told me they had enough with the newspapers and the media. They warned me it was too intense and that they didn't want more exposition. I agreed.

Meanwhile, Zalman showed interest in getting in touch with and visiting some of the afro-Brazilian traditions and the spirituality indigenous to Brazil. I told him that he was going to see an incredible demonstration of faith on the last day of the year when thousands of people go to the beaches to send offerings to Yemanja, the queen of the sea. Zalman and Eve would be flying back to the US on that very same night but would still have time to see some of the rituals before going to the airport. I also arranged for him to visit Mãe Beata, the priestess of over a million people in an area of the periphery of Rio called Baixada Fluminense. She was a much respected *Mãe de Santo* (*shaman*) with whom I was acquainted to due to her involvement in an NGO which I presided. The NGO was active in promoting religious freedom and, at that time, Mãe Beata was under severe attack by evangelical groups which preyed on her followers. Since I was busy organizing the evening event I asked a friend of mine, a distinguished sociologist in Brazil, to accompany Zalman and Eve and to work as an interpreter for their meeting.

I later learned about this incredible meeting. As it is usual on summer mid afternoons, a very heavy rain fell on the area they were heading to. At the very moment that Reb Zalman made his way into the little temple, the storm became stronger and it started to thunder. Mãe Beata immediately begun to chant, claiming that Zalman was aligned with *Oxum* — the entity of water, rain, and thunder. My friend, the sociologist, told me that his presence was totally dispensable for there was no need in any help with the communication at all. As soon as Zalman entered the place he took off his large *kipah* showing respect for the sanctuary. They began to communicate in a non-conventional language, a kind of spiritual sign language and Mãe Beata asked Zalman to bless her. Because of the religious war she was in, she had arranged for a photographer to be there and document this "official" visit by a representative of a major Monotheistic faith.

The evening at the Circo Voador was very magic. Zalman and Eve both created a beautiful moment of chanting, talking, meditating, and imagery practice. I was happy.

Next morning, as I entered the synagogue building, the senior rabbi was waiting for me. Also as I stepped into his office he charged me: "What is this? Didn't I tell you that it was enough?" He was holding a newspaper called "O Dia", a very popular and somewhat sensationalistic tabloid, to say the least. In the front page, actually half of the entire front page, there was a huge picture of Reb Zalman with his priestly hands over Mãe Beata's head ministering a blessing. The headline had it: "**Axé Rabi**" (a saluting that means "power" or "strength" Rabbil). I was stunned and tried to defend myself saying that I had cautioned everybody about photos and media and that I did not know how that was possible. The rabbi was half believing in my story as he saw the incontrollable smile slipping out my feeling of pride. Just think of it, Reb Zalman was blessing one of the most popular religious leaders for the poorest population of Rio. The Jews who were always depicted as strange fellows and part of the bourgeois elite were here represented by this smiling and endearing Rebbe who the priestess was legitimizing as a saintly figure. I even dared indicating that line of thought to the rabbi, but backtracked at the first look revealing how appalling this all sounded to him.

I was in a difficult position. It was the last day of Zalman in Rio and I went to check with them early in the morning and deal with details of their departure. The cooker opened the door and told me they were in their room packing for the trip. All of the workers in the house had fallen in love with the Rebbe and acted as if he was their personal religious authority. As I glanced into the kitchen, I spotted a miniature wooden boat (a little larger than a sushi one) filled with goodies. It was a typical offering in the afro-Brazilian traditions that is given to Yemanja. The boats are taken to the sea and are left to float randomly towards the horizon. Usually they carry flowers, fruits and a little *cachaça*, Brazilian sugar-cane vodka. And I in a sort of naive way turned to the cook and said: "So you're getting ready for tonight?" And she replied with a conspiring smile: "No... this is for the rabbi and his wife!"

I couldn't believe it. She was preparing an offering for Zalman to take to Yemanja and he was going right to the sea to offer it! I became both worried and angry. How could he do that to me? For the first time I begun to have second thoughts about who this man really was. I was a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary and I certainly knew what *Avoda Zara* (*idolatry*) meant. You can be lenient and you can be open-minded, but to directly participate in the sanctum of "strange" services, was too much. It immediately came to my mind the reddish face of one of the board members who was very opposed to bringing Zalman to Brazil altogether and that had confronted Zalman in one of the events. He was a former *yeshiva bocher* long ago in Europe and he questioned Zalman: Aren't you doing "*Avoda Gzeira*" (*an incorrect combination of two different rabbinic terms*)? Zalman smiled and tried to explain otherwise without correcting his mixing of words. But maybe this man was somehow right? Maybe he was engaging in *Avoda Zara*, in idolatrous acts? Was I exposing my community to some sort of distortion or heresy? And what if a member of the *shul* gets to see this? On New Year's Eve many people from the Jewish community go to the beaches to see the display of faith and the singing and dancing out of curiosity. What if they would recognize him as he had become a celebrity in the city?

I stormed into the room where they were packing and displayed my annoyance. I argued that there would be people from the community on the beach in an attempt to hide my real discomfort towards his involvement in the ritual itself. Eve sort of tried to make Zalman reconsider it, reasoning that it could put me in trouble and it could jeopardize my job. Zalman as if trying to integrate a disappointed child and a responsible rabbi, nodded as I sign that he agreed. I breathed in relief.

At dusk I came back to the apartment to get them to the beach and head to the airport. As the door in the elevator was closing the cooker comes running with the little boat in her hands. "Rabbi you were almost forgetting it!" — She screamed and handed the boat with the goodies to Zalman who immediately picked it. The door closes and we looked at each other in silence. I was furious: he was really going to do it! But I was not going to take part in it — I thought to myself.

As soon as we got the boat Zalman left the little boat on the sand and we started watching the circles of dancing and chanting. I got distracted and next thing I saw Zalman is not there anymore. He was gone and I was sure he went to do his ritual for Yemanja. I promised I didn't want to take part in it but I was beyond curious what he was actually doing. Zalman was not doing it just out of appreciation for other traditions with an ecumenical spirit, he was actually going to make an offering and partake in the sanctity of that ritual. I kept thinking that one thing is to share; however, another thing is to actively get involved with that sacrament. That could not be right!

I could not restrain myself and began to search for him and Eve in the shore. Suddenly I saw them at the brinks of the water, feet already engulfed by the sea going deeper. I began to approach them but suddenly stopped. There was no more terrain for me and I could sense an imaginary *mechitza*, a barrier preventing me. I understood that I should not cross that line for I was entering *Pardes*, the mystical territory that should only be trespassed by those who have the spiritual ballast to embark in such a journey. It wasn't *Avoda Zara*, idolatry, but a deepest service. From the perspective of the profound authenticity from which Reb Zalman was invested, this was no other than a priestly act — a Cohen at work, at its purest and highest *halachic* expression.

And so they left Brazil. In three different occasions we were able to organize *shabbatons* in Brazil and this land was touched by RebZalman's soul. I did eventually lose my job in the synagogue as they grew worried and discomforted with this "strange" disciple of the "strange" Rebbe. However, in reality I felt deeply empowered and in my Master's own teaching, I graduated the rabbinic realm. I lost my job as rabbi, but I did not want to be a rabbi anymore. From that day on, I only felt authentic either being a *chassid* or striving to be a Rebbe myself. May we all find inspiring souls to whom we can look upon as Rebbes and at the same time continue with determination to awaken the Rebbe in us, the same Rebbe he, our beloved Zeide-Master, once saw in us.

AxéRebbe! Axé to the one who *entered, and exited in peace*.