

Video Clip: Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz

Medieval Zionist Sephardi Poet

Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz is the author of “Lekha Dodi,” among many other poems. He moved from Salonica to the Land of Israel and became one of the founding members of the 16th century school of Kabbalists based in Safed, Israel.

Suggested Implementation

Holidays

1. Shabbat

Philosophy

1. History of Kabbalah
2. Zionism

Background

Rabbi Shlomo HaLevi Alkabetz was born in Salonica, Greece, in 1500, only eight years after the tragic destruction of the Spanish Jewish world. Many refugees of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition found haven in this Greek town. In Salonica, Alkabetz was the student of one of the greatest early Kabbalists, Joseph ben Solomon Taitazak. There is a famous story that Taitazak slept on the floor every night except for Friday, doing this for forty years to appreciate Shabbat that much more. He taught Alkabetz the mystical art of Kabbalah.

Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz started his journey to Eretz Yisrael in 1529. On the way there, he and his wife spent time in Adrianople, Turkey, where he remained for a time after the townsmen there, several of whom were Kabbalists themselves, begged him to teach them how to emulate his *Avodat Hashem*. He wrote several major works in Adrianople, including *Brit HaLevi* in 1563, which he dedicated to his followers, and a Kabbalistic commentary on the Pesach Haggadah.

In Adrianople, Alkabetz also raised some of his most eminent students, like the great Yosef Caro who eventually wrote the *Shulhan Arukh*. Alkabetz taught him to not just be a great halakhic mind but a great Kabbalist as well. It was at this point, in Turkey, that the two of them, coupled by other students, decided to spend the night of Shavuot studying and learning. This has since become a popular tradition for Jews around the world ‘to bring correction to the world’ – *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*.

He often wrote about the holiness of Eretz Yisrael and the *mitzvah* of living there. When he finally arrived in Eretz Yisrael, in approximately 1535, Alkabetz settled in Tsefat. Rabbi Yosef Caro also made *aliyah* that same year. In Tsefat, Alkabetz initiated the ritual of praying with one’s *talmidim* and meditating on the graves of famous *tzaddikim*. This inspired many Jews to make pilgrimages to these Tsefat graves.

Even more famously attributed to him was the act of going out to the fields, shortly before sundown on Erev Shabbat, to physically welcome home the *Shekhinah*, or as it became known, the “Shabbat bride.” This inspired what many will label his best-known piece: “Lekha Dodi.” He drew upon the image in Massekhet Shabbat 119a of Rav Hanina robing himself on Erev Shabbat, exclaiming “Come and let us go forth to welcome the Sabbath queen.” Rav Yannai followed suit, robing himself as well, and exclaiming “Come, O Bride, Come, O Bride!”

Legend says that the song was a wedding gift to Alkabetz’s own bride,¹ yet a deeper analysis shows the song reflects his dream for a Jewish state in the Land of Israel. It was printed almost immediately after he wrote it and was accepted by all streams of Judaism, as they were known then. Today, even more so, it’s hard to imagine a Shabbat service without “Lekha Dodi.” Alkabetz’s composition of “Lekha Dodi” successfully integrated complex, esoteric Kabbalistic ideas of Shabbat’s grandeur into mainstream Jewish liturgy and practice.

Questions for Discussion

1. Read through the prayer of “Lekha Dodi” as seen through the eyes of a Zionist. Name the places where Rav Alkabetz is calling for the establishment of a Jewish state.
2. Rabbi Alkabetz trained Rabbi Yosef Caro, who wrote a book of law, yet he is known for the esoteric, Kabbalah, and poetry. How do the two intertwine in Jewish tradition?

Suggested Readings

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/solomon-ben-moses-alkabetz>

Dr. Henry Abramson on Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8q_2HKGQZc

Special thanks to Professors Jane. S. Gerber and Reeva Spector Simon whose project was initiated by the generous funding of the Maurice Amado Foundation.

¹ Dr. Henry Abramson on Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz, 2015. (YouTube link in Suggested Readings)