

The Cosmic Movement: Sources, Contexts, Impact

edited by
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Introduction

The Cosmic Movement: Sources, Contexts, Impact

Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss

Several of the occultist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are, by now, fairly well known to scholars and the general public, having been subject to numerous studies, both academic and popular. One thinks in particular of the Theosophical Society, The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Within the nineteenth-century sources, however, there are mentions of another esoteric society, one that has not yet been the focus of any book-length publication. The Cosmic Movement was active during the early decades of the twentieth century and it would go on to have a significant impact on various religious and artistic circles in the years that followed. Groups based on its ideas continued to be active following the dissolution of the original movement, and it had a particularly strong influence within certain French esoteric and artistic milieus of the early-twentieth century. Some small associations are still active even today, in Turkey and Israel. Without doubt, however, the Cosmic Movement's best-known descendent is the system known as Integral Yoga, which was developed by the celebrated Indian philosopher and guru, Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950) in collaboration with the spiritual teacher Mirra Alfassa (1878-1973), whom he named "the Mother."¹ Prior to moving to India and collaborating with

1 On Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, see Peter Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

Aurobindo, Alfassa had been a leading member of the Cosmic Movement. It is unsurprising, therefore, that some elements of its philosophy informed her new spiritual venture.²

This volume is the first to be devoted to the Cosmic Movement and its derivatives. Its chapters are based on lectures that were delivered as part of a workshop held at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in March 2017 that was funded by the Israel Science Foundation and the Goldstein-Goren International Centre for Jewish Thought. The chapters deal with various aspects of the history, doctrines, and practices of the Cosmic Movement and discuss its origins, historical contexts, and various offshoots. Before summarising them, below, we will provide a brief chronology of the development of the movement, an introduction to its founders and most important members, and an overview of its main teachings and publications.

Max Bimstein's Marriages and Trial: Traces in the Archives

The doctrines and practices of the Cosmic Movement and the groups that derived from it were based on the teachings of Maximillian (Max) Bimstein (1850-1927), known as Max Théon or Aia Aziz, and his wife, Mary Ware (1839-1908), known as Mrs. Théon, Théona, or Alma.³ Max Bimstein was born on 12 June 1850 into an Orthodox Jewish family in Warsaw, Poland. His Hebrew name was Eliezer Mordechai, and his father,

2 The connection is discussed by Peter Heehs in “The Kabbalah, the Philosophie Cosmique, and the Integral Yoga: A Study in Cross-Cultural Influence,” *Aries* 11, no. 2 (2011).

3 Max's surname is spelled differently in the primary sources, appearing variously as Biemstein, Bimstein, or Binstein. His given name appears as Maximillian, Maximilian, Maximilien, Maximile, or the initials L. M. We have chosen to spell his name “Max Bimstein” in the text (unless quoting from primary sources) while detailing the various forms in which his name appears in the notes that follow.

Yehudah Leib, was a preacher, known as Rabbi Leibele Magid (Magid means “preacher” in Hebrew).⁴ Max emigrated to London

- 4 According to the synagogue records of Max’s first marriage (see below), his Hebrew name was Eliezer Mordechai, son of the honorable Rabbi Yehuda אֱלִיעֶזֶר מֹרְדֵכַי בֶּן כֹּהֵ"ר יְהוּדָה. The English marriage certificate gives his father’s name as Lewis Bimstein, and his occupation as “preacher.” According to the certificate of Max’s second marriage (see below), the groom’s name was Louis Maximillian Bimstein, and his father, Judas Lion Bimstein, was described as a rabbi. In 1926, Max Théon donated 10,000 francs to buy acreage in the Land of Israel in memory of his father, Yehuda Leib, son of Abraham Magid, who was born and died in Warsaw. According to the Algerian death certificate of 4 March 1927, Louis Maximilien Binstein, aged 76, was born to Judas Leon and Rebo Ken (probably Rivkah), in Warsaw (misspelled, Varnovie, instead of Varsovie), Poland (Pologne), on 12 June 1850. On the basis of this information, we were able to find a picture of Max’s father’s tombstone, located in the Okopowa Jewish cemetery in Warsaw. The date of death is given as 6 May 1899. For a picture of the tombstone, see https://cemetery.jewish.org.pl/id_80309/info/ [accessed 10 August 2020]. The inscription on his grave reads:

פ"נ הרבני המאווה"ג הדרשן המפורסם/המופלג בתורה ויראה מגיד משרים/ולמד תורה לרבים כל ימיו/והי' מגיד יותר מחמשים שנה/בפה ווארשא/ה"ה המפורסם מ' יהודא לייב/בר' אברהם בימשטיין הנקרא ר' לייבלי מגיד

Here lies the rabbinical, the great light, the famous homilist (*darshan*), great in Torah and fear of God, a preacher (*magid*) of uprightness. He taught Torah to the many all his life and was a preacher (*magid*) for more than fifty years, here, in Warsaw: the great and famous sage Yehuda Leib, son of Rabbi Abraham Bimstein, called Rabbi Leibele Magid.

We are grateful to Asher Binyamin and Rami Reiner who helped us decipher the inscription. The name Leib (lion) is a common Yiddish vernacular name that accompanies the Hebrew Yehuda and is often rendered as Lewis or Louis. For further consideration of Max Théon’s identity and birthplace, see Christian Chanel, “De la ‘Fraternité Hermétique de Louxor’ au ‘Mouvement Cosmique.’ L’œuvre de Max Théon” (Ph.D. diss., École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris, 1992/1993), 137-139; Joscelyn Godwin, Christian Chanel, and John Patrick Deveney, *The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor: Initiatic and Historical Documents of an Order of Practical Occultism* (York Beach,

in the early 1870's. On 25 June 1873, at the age of twenty-three, he married Rachel Goldberg, aged twenty.⁵ The ceremony took place at London's Great Synagogue, near Aldgate – the central synagogue of London Ashkenazi life until its destruction in the Blitz. According to the marriage certificate, Max was employed as a cigar seller.⁶ Apparently, the union between Max and Rachel did not last long. Around four-and-a-half years later, on 13 December 1877, the *Bath Chronicle* reported the arrest, trial, and acquittal of Max Bimstein, whose profession was now given as “surgical instrument maker, electro plater and gilder.” Max was evidently no longer married to Rachel, for he was arrested with Eve Lyons, who was described as his fiancée. He was charged

Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1995), 8-9; and Christian Chanel, “Théon, Max,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, eds. Wouter J. Hanegraaff with Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek, and Jean-Pierre Brach (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 1112–1114. For a timeline of historical events associated with the Cosmic Movement, see Boaz Huss, “The Cosmic Movement” at *World Religions and Spirituality*, <https://wrldrels.org/2018/02/09/cosmic-movement/> [accessed 19 June 2020].

- 5 We have two records of this 1873 marriage, the English marriage certificate and the synagogue records.
- 6 On the English marriage certificate, the profession of Rachel's father, Marks Goldberg, seems to be given as “eating-house-keeper,” which ties in with the 1881 English census, in which Marks Goldberg, of 10 Mansell St in the East End of London is described as a “restaurant keeper.” (He is listed with his wife, Kitty, one daughter, Betsey, aged eighteen, and two servants.) On the marriage certificate, Max and Rachel's address is given as 109 Gravel Lane, Houndsditch, not far from the Goldberg family and in the heart of London's Jewish East End. They were married by Rabbi Nathan Adler (1803-1890), the orthodox chief rabbi of the British Empire at that time. According to the synagogue records, Rachel's Hebrew name was Leah Bina daughter of Joshua לאה בינה בת יהושע. We are grateful to Mr. W. Todd Knowles, of the Utah Jewish Genealogical Society, who kindly provided us with a copy of this source.