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The medium's the message

By Aviva Lori

In times of uncertainty and confusion, existential questions send people on inner journeys. The latest bon ton: communicating with external beings and connecting with previous incarnations. An encounter with people who are otherwise considered quite rational.

A few months ago, Yoav Yafeh, 38, a married father of four from Ashkelon who holds a degree in mathematics and physics from Tel Aviv University, started communicating with his spiritual guide - the angle Gabriel.

He doesn't see or hear him. He receives answers from him to questions deep in the recesses of his mind. "You gradually learn to differentiate when an answer is yours and when it's the angel's," explains Yafeh, who is a vice president at a Tel Aviv high-tech company that sells software products. "Based on the wording, the form of address, the Hebrew."

He can communicate with his angel anywhere - at the pharmacy, in his office at work, while driving in the car. And he doesn't need a hands-free telephone. Whenever he feels the need, he turns to Gabriel and they talk. Not about the world's loftiest issues, but about more mundane human problems - lower back pain, trouble with the kids. Yafeh asks and Gabriel answers, offering practical advice for body and soul, conveying via Yafeh's consciousness a powerful flow of healing energy to the source of the pain, until it disappears.

He first connected to this sort of thing when he read "Ripui shel malachim" ("The Healing of Angels") by Rishon Letzion healer Margalit Ayalon, which she says was written entirely through direct communication with the angels. He started studying with her and now he also does healing to clean out negative energies and "recharge" people with positive energies. He can also do this to people who are not even physically there with him, as long as they've given their consent. For everything in the universe, there is a reason, directives, a goal and a big plan, says Yafeh: "The plan isn't precise, it's just an outline, a direction, and it still leaves a lot of room for free choice. And the plan also changes from time to time."

Yafeh's friends, colleagues and family see he is going through a process akin to religious penitence and accept it. He cannot think of any contradiction between his scientific occupation and his spiritual one. "Science reduces everything to phenomena that can be quantified and anticipated. I'm interested in what's beyond that. As it looks today, this giant wave is flooding us with its power."

There are thousands like him. They may be the accountant, the teacher, the doctor, the professor, the clinical psychologist, the lawyer or the bank manager. Rational people who work by day and communicate by night, via what is called "channeling": opening one's consciousness to a different reality and invoking a spirit entity or guide, who/which "speaks" through the communicator, or medium, to others. At this point, they are still healing and communicating with heavenly energies as amateurs, but one day they hope to become mediums with their own following and reputation, not to mention a tidy income - NIS 300-400 per treatment.

The key questions that have preoccupied humanity since time immemorial - Is there life after death? Does the soul have eternal life? Are there angels? Is there divine providence that guides and plans our earthly actions? - are purely rhetorical to the mediums. For them, the answer to all of the above is: Of course! To prove their arguments, they play music, brandish books and articles, and reveal healing and meditation methods that were all written with the inspiration of heavenly communication and "downloaded" from the angels like software from the Internet. "I believe that a path has opened before me," says Yafeh. "I've also started to treat people and I'm starting to have an effect. It works amazingly well."

"I'm not cuckoo'

Two weeks ago, an exhibition called "Alternativa" (Alternative) was held in Tel Aviv. For three days, the stalls at the Exhibition Grounds offered everything you could think of that is related to New Age teachings: literature, food, massage, healing, crystals, energies and more. Thousands of people flitted from stall to stall; many of them knew each other from various workshops, from previous encounters, from India. Others who were newer to it all curiously perused the material and pored over the books at Uriah Gideon Tohar's stall, which was buzzing like a beehive. Tohar is the proprietor of Uri's Books in Ramat Gan, on the shelves of which "there are maybe 1,000 books on the subject," he says. One day there was also a conference in which about 70 spiritual mediums from all over the country participated. There were also other lectures and more informal gatherings. On the weekend, Tohar, in conjunction with the Givatayim Theater, organized the Mifgashim ("Encounters") Festival, a three-day happening featuring 64 speakers from Israel and abroad, "sponsored by the kingdom of heaven and in the name of the angels," as the event's brochure proclaimed, "with the accompaniment and supervision of the high self."

The reason for the growing popularity of these phenomena, explains Leora Gil, a communicator from Ashdod, lies in the heavens. In the year 2000, the earth entered the Age of Aquarius and new channels of energy and communication were opened, she says. An abundance of frequencies came down to earth, with which anyone can easily connect as long as they find the correct frequency inside themselves.

Gil, the mother of two grown children, has been involved in spiritual pursuits for 20 years. She teaches and performs energy therapy, works with crystals, reads Tarot cards and also does space purification and channeling. She says that her communication is not with external beings, but with the illuminated part of the person sitting across from her. "Sometimes communication is just telepathy," she explains. "The spiritual part in the mind of the medium can connect with the mind of the person sitting across from him. That's how it works with me. It comes straight out of my mouth, without passing through the head at all. I open my mouth and the words come out of there."

In the monologue that came out of her mouth after Gil read the Tarot cards for me, it turned out that I was once a princess, the daughter of 19th-century English nobility.

Sophie Barzilai, a communicator from Ma'agan Michael, is studying for a doctorate in education at the University of Haifa and writing a dissertation entitled "The Search for Meaning via Communication."

"It's an interesting phenomenon," Barzilai says, adding: "In Israel, lately, something has been happening. I have found 40 communicators for my study and each one gave me other names. Now I have a list of 100." Her first direct experience of it was extremely unsettling. "I thought I'd lost my mind. Now I've discovered that I'm not the only `psycho.' There are lots and lots of people involved in this field."

Barzilai's thesis adviser is Prof. Ofra Meisels, a psychologist in the University of Haifa's education department. "I communicate with beings and reconstruct incarnations," says Meisels. "And I'm not cuckoo. A study like Sophie is doing has never been done anywhere in the world."

Isn't it a little odd that the university is giving its patronage to such a study?

Meisels: "There's no problem with it - on the contrary. Part of what characterizes science and scientific research and the university as a truth-seeking institution is openness. Every human phenomenon is interesting and it's important that it be studied."

Has the University of Haifa started to believe in spirits?

Not the university, but people inside it. The same is true of other faiths or political views. There are people who believe in God and in the World to Come. There are researchers at the university who have different philosophies and beliefs, some based on facts and some axiomatic. That doesn't disqualify their research."

Doesn't the research of the phenomenon essentially imply a recognition of it as genuine?

"The objective of academic research is to identify a human phenomenon, study it and try to understand, without attaching to it a label of right or wrong. There are two or three studies that examined the phenomenon and their findings are surprising by almost any yardstick. The people who turn to spirit mediums or do it themselves are like everyone else, or even better - in the sense that they have less anxieties, they're calmer and less stressed. They're certainly not more psychotic or depressive, and don't have greater suicidal tendencies."

The Omega woman

As a child, Sigalit Schwartzman, 24, from Kibbutz Ein Carmel, used to talk with the dead. "It started from the time of my earliest memories of myself. Not in a dream, but while I was awake. I'd hear voices in the house, things would move, and then I'd know that it was coming. The dead who had just been buried would speak to me. I thought that it happened to everyone. When I came to understand the concept of death and the fear of death and I told the adults about it, they said it was impossible and made it into something scary and menacing that one should stay away from."

The reactions of the adults and of the secular, rational environment in which she was brought up, blocked her ability to be a channel with the other world, she believes. But this ability reemerged three years ago. "Suddenly the whole room became illuminated and I got chills throughout my body and a high power started to speak to me. For the first time in my life, I spoke to it directly and asked it about the meaning of life, about what we were here to learn in this world, and suddenly I felt vibrations and currents flowing throughout my body and then I heard a voice say: `We'll send you angels and spiritual beings to reveal the truth to you.' A few hours later, my mother died. That night, I felt that the time had come to start my spiritual process."

Today Schwartzman communicates with angels. Everyone in her family and on the kibbutz knows about her ability to communicate and accepts it - especially since they see her working at it from morning till night. She has helped many young people who are trying to find their way in life. "Even before the person comes to me, I consult about him with the angels. ... Even before he comes to me, and then when we meet I already know him."

Oriela Sde-Zohar, 51, from Kiryat Ono, starting seeing auras when she was 15. She was born in Tel Aviv as Moriela Rosenthal, earned degrees in journalism and communication, and worked as a research assistant in the Tel Aviv University school of education. She achieved her goal of working in advertising and public relations in the early 1990s. "I increased my `frequency' so that when I came to the [vocational placement] test, I was already on a smart frequency and in a state of inspiration," she recalls. The effort paid off, and Sde-Zohar became director of advertising and public relations at the Africa-Israel Company.

Eventually she became marketing director at the Givoni Company, which, at first, waslacking customers. "My boss said: `Do something,'" she recalls. "I went into the other room and did a magnetism exercise. In my mind I saw this thing that I wanted to happen and after five minutes, the phone started ringing and didn't stop for days. Orders were pouring in from everywhere."

Sde-Zohar then decided to work exclusively in the spiritual field. She got divorced, changed her name to "Oriela" and added the "Sde" to "Zohar" (her married name). She teaches and treats people with the Omega therapy method, a system she herself "downloaded" during a spiritual communication in 2000 in the presence of about seven people who had assembled in her home near Jerusalem.

Sde-Zohar: "I closed my eyes, raised my frequency, opened the channels to higher dimensions and made possible a connection to a type of guidance ... which is an energetic substance that comes from the First Creator. And then an amazing thing happened. My voice changed, I started to sway gently, I felt a prickling on the tip of my tongue and had this sudden feeling that certain words wanted to come out. I saw it all like a movie. And then a very powerful meditation occurred, a powerful connection to a magnetic energy."

How did you know that this was happening?

Sde-Zohar: "A certain `form' came down that most of the participants connected to. We were stunned. There was a verbal message that passed through me. In 2001, I assembled all the graduates of all my courses, I entered into a state of communication and I learned that this was a first encounter out of a number of encounters during which new knowledge of magnetic energy would come down. It developed into a whole philosophy that I teach, called `Omega.'"

What do you see there?

"It's like there's a forest with many paths that keep branching off and at every moment there's a crossroads where you have to decide which way to go. Imagine that I'm taking you in a helicopter and showing you this piece of the forest from above. And then you see how each path connects. That's what I do. I teach people to do this themselves - I give them the tools to create the reality that they want."

The Omega course consists of 22 three- to four-hour sessions and costs NIS 3,500. A self-taught version of the entire course is also available on 12 discs (29 meditations) for NIS 600. Ran Osher, Sde-Zohar's husband, is also in the spiritual field and gives workshops on strengthening the experience of happiness. He used to be a bank teller. Now he likens the world not to a stock exchange, but to a fitness room in which we train certain muscles and neglect others. Unless we train all the muscles and finally get rid of that paunch, we'll keep going back to the fitness room again and again, like Sisyphus. Thus, he says, in every incarnation, the souls return to earth and learn their spiritual lessons.

Beyond the scalpel

Dr. Edward Ram, 46, of Acre, is the director of the surgery department at the Scottish Hospital in Nazareth. Until recently, he worked at Hasharon Hospital and taught at the Tel Aviv University medical school. "On the one hand, I believe in scalpels, but I also believe in things that are beyond that," he says.

The "beyond" Ram is referring to is reincarnation. He arrived at this belief when he realized that medicine does not control who will live and who will die. "I started to ask why one person has a heart attack at age 35 and someone else at age 80, and why one person dies one way and someone else dies another way, and then I realized that even the most sophisticated medicine has its limits." He did the "Omega" course and began treating people with the method. And it worked, he says. "I don't know if it's because of my power of persuasion or because of something else, because in the course I didn't hear or see anything."

And now you know why someone who's 35 gets a heart attack?

Ram: "No. But I understand that a person has to have experiences in life and to teach things, and I believe that when he dies it's a sign that he finished his role on earth and has moved on to another role."

Did you believe in reincarnation before, too?

"I used to laugh at it. Now a lot of doctors are starting to realize that there are things beyond what we know and see every day."

Not only doctors; many psychologists are coming to share the same view. Many people ask themselves why it is necessary to spend years rummaging through the depths of the psyche if you can be done with the whole business in seven sessions and, within a month, solve all the soul's problems in this incarnation and, as a bonus - in several previous incarnations. In recent years, more than a few psychologists and social workers have become communicators and combine this with conventional treatment.

Dr. Erel Shalit, a Jungian psychoanalyst, has noted a decline in psychology's prestige since its birth in the late 19th century: "For some time now, people have been saying that our profession will soon have outlived its usefulness. It's no wonder that in a world of uncertainty ... people are searching for a connection with powers that can give them a sense of certainty."

Spiritual mediums don't have training in therapy like psychologists do. Does this mean they could cause damage?

Shalit: "In every profession, there are people who are good and people who are less good. In the psychoanalyst's encounter with the mind, he stays close to the dimension of the person himself, to the feeling (pathos) that the person expresses. In the alternative approaches, it all takes place from afar, through telepathy, or through supposedly distant beings, and this entails a removal of responsibility and an assumption of a freedom to touch on things that they do not understand and which can cause damage."

This is precisely the advantage, as Arik Magen and his wife, Dr. Carla Magen, a couple fromGivatayim who are both mediums. "People come to us who have despaired of psychiatrists and psychologists, people with emotional problems," says Arik. "And through spiritual communication I teach them how to cope. The psychologists failed because they work on the level of feeling. In two or three sessions, I ask the patient, `Why does this trait or behavior always return with you?' and we get to the level of the soul. There it is much easier for him to cope, because he grasps that he is not to blame, that it's a problem of his soul."

The `seventh sense'

The Atara association, whose name is the Hebrew acronym for the Foundation for Transpersonal Therapy and Developmental Regression (Reincarnation), has 54 members, the large majority of whom are psychologists and clinical social workers. It is patterned after the international organization known as Association of Past-Life Research and Therapies (APRT), an umbrella group for hundreds of therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, art therapists and practitioners of alternative medicine. Some follow the method of Dr. Nader Buto, a senior cardiologist at a hospital in the center of the country, who has written two books and has a third in the works.

Buto, 46, was born in Nazareth and lives in Petah Tikva. He explains his theory in detail in his book "Refuah vehahush hashevi'i" ("Medicine and the Seventh Sense"). "It's a revolutionary theory that says that the memory is not located in the mind, but in the magnetic field that the mystics called the soul and that it is measurable with scientific tools," explains Buto. "It sounded absurd to me that when we're born we start from zero every time and that nothing is left when we die."

So what is the "seventh sense"?

Buto: "Communication is the seventh sense, between the communicator and spiritual beings. In the seventh sense, there is no need for a mediator or a spirit. I communicate directly with the energy of the person sitting across from me. Every kernel of his energy contains all the information about him and I transfer it to my mind and then I can know everything about him, at every age, and in other incarnations, too."

Buto has developed a therapeutic method that emphasizes the connection between mind and body, and says that "from the ailment, I can tell what the emotional crisis is that the person is going through."

"I developed a therapy method called `energy rinsing.' I renew the energy flow that streams from my hands to the patient's head until his body starts to shake and he remembers crisis experiences from the past that caused energy blockages, and then he understands why he has a stomach ache or migraines or whatever. The goal is not to make the ailment disappear, but to understand its source and then not to `need' it, because the ailment is a need."

So the person doesn't need a psychologist?

"If I tell you that it's more than a psychologist can do, it will sound arrogant. But no psychologist will discover that a person underwent a crisis when he was a month old or in his mother's womb or in previous incarnations."

What is the source of your energy?

"I'm like a channel through which the energy passes. It's not a connection to a spirit or to some spiritual being that gives me the power. I don't need that. I open energy blockages in the same way that I'm a specialist in coronary stents - in opening blockages in the heart. There's no contradiction between the two, not at all."

Buto, a Muslim Arab, says that in his previous incarnation he was a Jew, and not just any Jew, but a kabbalist rabbi in Iraq named Yaakov Haim, the son of Rabbi Yosef Haim, who died in 1922 and left behind several holy books that Buto has read.

"Crystals and UFOs'

Dr. Brigitte Kashtan, 51, a clinical psychologist who was once the chief psychologist at the Mental Health Center in Tirat Hacarmel, currently teaches the developmental regression and transpersonal psychology method. This stream of psychology was developed in the United States in the 1960s and `70s by humanistic psychologists, with the aim of bringing people optimal mental health, on accordance with their own potential and stages of development - in contrast with Freud, who said that the purpose of psychoanalysis is to bring the person from neurotic misery to ordinary human suffering. Jung is the spiritual father of transpersonal psychology.

Kashtan is wary of the term "New Age" - "It's also crystals and UFOs" - and also doesn't trust mediums much: "There are good people among them and people with knowledge and powers and humility, and then there are those who don't use these powers in the purest way and are wrecked by ego. They could exploit human distress and cause damage or present things with unwarranted confidence. Our goal is to aspire to true human and spiritual development, so going to a communicator to get all sorts of answers isn't the same thing. Sometimes, like a radar, they pick up on all the desires and fears of the person sitting there and do all sorts of things with this." Nor is Kashtan crazy about the term "reincarnation," and prefers the concept of "developmental regression": a process that takes the person back to childhood, to birth, to pre-birth and finally, if necessary, to previous incarnations.

To reconstruct incarnations, you have to believe that such a thing exists.

Kashtan: "I became convinced that this was the most logical theory to explain why there is injustice and suffering in the world. The reason is in previous lives. A woman just left here who wanted to know why she feels lonely, why her mother treated her cruelly. I did a regression process with her and she ... went back to the scenario of a previous life in her imagination, with my guidance - I help the person communicate with himself and connect with his own database, his `hard disk.' In ancient Egypt this woman was a despotic princess who was cruel to her servants and subjects, and among her servants - she saw her mother."

Before the process, Kashtan begins each session with an interview. Then, through relaxationtechniques, she says she helps the person connect to their inner database. "And then I get from him the images that he's seeing and I tell him to go with it and not to worry if it's imagination or not, and to say everything that comes to his mind. Skeptics may continue to think that it's all just imagination, but most people who leave here are convinced they really did access a previous life."

As for Kashtan herself, she believes that in her own previous life she was a priestess who used music to heal people. In her current life, she has just released a disc, "Hit'alut" ("Elevation"), with 14 tracks. Seven of them were written via spiritual communication. Orion, one of the angels of music, dictated the notes to her.

One out of 10

Ten percent of the Israeli public (tens of thousands of people) attest that in recent years they have sought advice from various types of spiritual "advisers" - communicators, mediums, readers of coffee grounds and Tarot cards, etc.

The following findings are from a survey done this week for Haaretz on the subject of spiritual communication. It is a representative statistical survey conducted by the C. A. Marketing Information research institute, run by Noam Raz and Merav Shapira. The population that was surveyed was over the age of 18 and Hebrew-speaking.

The researchers found that those who most commonly sought advice from (nonreligious) spiritual advisers were women age 18-49, parents, and both secular and traditional people. No connection to socio-demographic indicators was found, or to differences in levels of income or education. New immigrants showed a greater tendency to seek spiritual advice (12.3 percent) than veteran Israelis (10 percent). The most prominent reason for seeking advice was curiosity (47 percent); this tendency was especially prominent among people with "average" (68 percent) and "high" (46.5 percent) incomes. Other reasons were crises (17 percent), economic situation (13 percent), marriage and family-related difficulties (12 percent), fun (10 percent), seeking direction for the future (9 percent), and health problems (3.3 percent)