

Touched by a cabbalist

By Ruth Ostrow

THE planets are lining up. It is May 5, 2000, the day mooted by the great prophets as Armageddon -- the end of the world. Fires, floods, earthquakes are predicted as the rare astrological event is said to play havoc with gravity.

I am glad I've got some cosmic protection -- one of the great mystical teachers of Australia is coming for breakfast. Expert in the Jewish secret teaching of cabbala and spiritual teacher to thousands around the world, Rabbi Laibl Wolf is on his way up my driveway, and I feel fine. Amid predictions of a giant tidal wave heading for Australia, the man with good connections up high can't arrive quick enough for my liking.

But the rabbi is in very good spirits on the eve of the end of the world. Happy, smiling, he believes it is God's will that we always remain positive "even in the face of challenges, disasters, hard lessons" and that our purpose on the planet is to carry the message of hope.

So I don't want to let on that I'm feeling a bit unhinged by God's greater plan. I smile, put freshly cut fruit on the table (he is on the Fit For Life diet), and try to be as cheery as possible. Mind you, if this is to be my last supper, I couldn't have prayed for more stimulating company to share it with.

Wolf is a one-man spiritual band, taking on the big three monotheistic religions and throwing them some tough questions. Though ostracised by some of his peers, the orthodox Jewish rabbi, like controversial Anglican primate Peter Carnley, wants traditional religions to be more realistic about the changing needs of their flock.

He is of the view that if he and other leaders don't reach out to the new generations, to women, to young people, the Bible-based religions will lose their grip to the more trendy, accessible and easygoing New Age religions. Or to eastern disciplines such as Buddhism, that offer less onerous paths to spiritual bliss.

"I have sat with many spiritual leaders. I've met the Dalai Lama and talked to him about the appeal of Buddhism to so many Westerners," he says. "I am trying to find the common thread with which we can bring our people back into the folds, something rabbis and priests are going to have to do."

In keeping with his philosophy, the rabbi with his own website spends considerable time away from his wife Leah and seven children on the road teaching, mostly in the US. His workshops are an eclectic blend of religion, esoteric spirituality and personal growth -- the latter he believes is at the heart of all modern-day spiritual questing.

"People want to feel they are growing. It is no use teaching religion without showing its application to solving today's problems of anger, unhappiness and a growing sense of isolation."

Like ancient Tibetan masters, he teaches Zen-style meditation and breathing, but focuses on the Old Testament's God in the exercises.

He teaches how to activate the higher self but draws on biblical principles to get us there. He echoes the teachings of yogic gurus, but his tools are our daily

prayers and cabbalistic wisdom.

"As religious leaders we have to stop being so dogmatic and paternalistic with our followers and start listening.

"Today, people want to take responsibility for their own spiritual growth. They are increasingly less interested in having a God outside of themselves whom they worship through rules, regulations and rituals that they don't understand.

"People choose Buddhism because of its spiritual simplicity yet richness. But many similar principles exist in Western religions, we just aren't getting the message out."

True to his word, the New Age shepherd has come to seek me out. Having read pieces I have written about my growing relationship with Buddhism and shamanism, he contacted me on the internet to find out why I could not find the things I needed in my own Jewish faith. Which is why I invited him to breakfast.

"I respect your quest for enlightenment. I want to hear what you are looking for," he says with surprising tenderness.

I put the case of my generation. Women of all faiths are feeling let down by traditional religion. We feel our innate wisdoms are not respected. We've been burned as witches for our midwifery, healing capacity and intimacy with the cycles of nature. We want a spiritual pathway that acknowledges the goddess and honours us for the sacredness of our bodies, our sexuality and fertility, not makes us repent for them.

Modern men, too, are seeking a more personal relationship with the natural and spiritual worlds. They want meaning, to find the God within.

Wolf understands, which is why he is challenging Jewish custom by openly teaching women and young men cabbala -- the secret Jewish mystical texts -- once reserved for men over 40. Cabbala embraces the concept of both male and female God energy, and mirrors many eastern and yogic philosophies.

Wolf's latest book, *Practical Kabbalah*, was published recently by Random House. He says that in times of moral crisis, the world can't afford to wait for cabbala's spiritually enlightening concepts.

And he believes that religions have to evolve to keep pace with the times. "In the early years, Judaeo-Christian religions focused on survival. Keeping the traditions alive, protecting beliefs. But world consciousness has changed, and in a time of relative stability religious leaders have to focus on the deeper, sacred meaning behind the rituals if they want to maintain the interest of followers.

"I'm not saying we should modify our essential teachings or traditions, merely put them in a spiritual context that modern people can relate to."

For instance, he says certain dietary laws practised by Jews and Muslims have their origins in compassion, respecting the animal and thanking it for giving its life.

"There are many beautiful rituals that display the same humanism and kindness you are seeking in Buddhism," he says, smiling gently at me. "But that spiritual ingredient, that wonderful spark, is not getting across. And it's people like you who religious leaders like me need to be reaching."

Breakfast finishes. I have been reached. The New Age shepherd promises to put a good word in for me above, in case of Armageddon.

The world is still in one piece as he heads off down my driveway. But it's a better world, I'm left feeling, for the likes of Wolf and his tolerant, lively, open mind.

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