

## Mowlana Jalaluddin Rumi

“What is to be done, O Muslims? For I myself do not know whether I am a Christian, a Jew, a Jabr or a Muslim?”

Jalal al-Din Rumi (c. 1207-73) is a lodestar around which Sufism turns. A timeless thinker, he wrote the greatest amount of lyric poetry in the Persian language, as well as penning the massive epic, the *Mathnavi*, which has often been referred to as the “Quran-e Farsee” *i.e.*, “The Persian Qur'an.” Like Moses de Leon’s *Zohar* to medieval Judaism, Rumi’s *Mathnavi* became known for many as the most important book in Islam, after the Qu’ran. Rumi's poetry has had such universal appeal that he is today the best selling poet in the United States!

Rumi began his career as a preacher and theologian, but after the family was forced to flee the Mongol invasion, eventually settling in Turkey, he turned to Sufism. By the time of his death, he had become one of the most important Sufi practitioners in all of Islam. His followers formed the *Mevlevi* order, sometimes known in the West as the "whirling dervishes," after their dance that emulates the movement of planets on their journey of spiritual fulfillment.

Perhaps Rumi’s most important influence on the history of Jewish/Sufism was his open-mindedness to and respect for the belief systems of all religions, as evinced in the above quote. This attitude, which emanated from his teachings, helped permeate later medieval Sufism, further opening avenues between Sufis and Jews in Spain, Egypt and the Holy land.

In addition to this general legacy, there was specific influence between Jews and the teachings of Rumi. Shabbateans, 17<sup>th</sup> century Jewish heretics who had strong ties to Sufism, as well as strongly influencing the direction of the Baal Shem Tov, included certain Sufi poems and tales in their mystical litanies, such as those by Rumi, whose work was translated into Hebrew, helping

infiltrate these beautiful Sufi messages into the later medieval Jewish mysticism.