
inherent dangers are of course, anti-intellectualism and anti-nomianism, both abhorrent to Judaism. I detect the first in a generalized impatience with the hard work of text-study, with rigorous theological inquiry, and with the sharp, critical analysis of the central ideas in Jewish thought. I detect the second in the casual way some of our congregants dismiss those ritual practices which don't speak to their personal emotional needs.

The Broader Perspective

The impulse behind the new spirituality is the primacy of feeling, an emphasis on personal emotional fulfillment which dictates everything that is to be appropriated or discarded from Judaism. But what about Judaism's classical emphasis on structure, on *mitzvah*, on discipline, on communal norms, and on the study of Torah as the gateway to fathoming God's will for us?

What I plead for is a margin of self-awareness, a sense of history, an appreciation of the dynamics that have always governed Jewish religious expression, and a critical understanding of the tensions that contemporary culture exerts on the shape of our Judaism. I plead also that our rabbis and teachers understand that we are the heirs of the entire Jewish past, that we must serve as advocates of Judaism at its richest.

History will have its say, whatever we do. Generations from now, Jewish thinkers will bemoan the lack of spirituality in the Jewish community, and look nostalgically to the role models of our day. But we, at least should not be slaves to the culture of the contemporary. ✦

What is the question?

Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer

"Is spirituality good for Judaism?"

Having just published a book with spirituality in the title, I should be able to answer that question. Yet, I find myself unable to respond. I wonder, "What is wrong with this question?" It seems to presume that I, a rabbi, am primarily an upholder of The Tradition. As a guard stationed at the gates of "Judaism," I must judge new trends like spirituality and decide which are authentically

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Jewish, which can be co-opted, which must be viewed with concern. But I come to this question from a very different perspective. I approach it as a chronicler of the lives of parents. After spending a year of my life sitting at kitchen tables talking to mothers and fathers about their spiritual lives, the question seems as sensible to me as, "Is breathing good for Judaism?" I would rather ask the opposite question, "Is Judaism good for spirituality?"

I believe the answer is yes. In this article, I will share what I learned about spirituality from listening to parents, and then I will make the argument that Judaism, like many other religious traditions, can provide individuals with sturdy vessels for the spiritual in their lives. First, however, a definition is in order. What do we mean when we talk about "spirituality" or a "spiritual journey?" When I first began my interviews, I discovered that the word "spiritual" was difficult for many parents to understand.

"Spiritual life?" the woman shrieked when I innocently bounded in to my first interview, laptop in hand, and boldly asked her to tell me all about her spiritual life as a mother.

"I'm up to my elbows in peanut butter and have three kids crawling around below my knees. I don't have *time* for a spiritual life. Check back in ten years."

Being a slow learner, I persisted in this line of questioning for a few more interviews. The responses were not encouraging.

"Spirituality? I'm planning to take a course on that when the kids are older."

"When people talk about spiritual experience I don't know what they're talking about. It is like listening to someone describe an orgasm if you never had one."

I soon realized that I would have to ask the question differently.

The One And The Wonder

So I began questioning parents about their lives. What did they do all day, all week, on special days, on ordinary days? And parents began to talk. I heard about weariness, whining, wet diapers, worry and work. And that was not all. I heard stories. Stories of love, of awe, of hope, of growth, of separation and reconciliation, of sacrifice, or redemption. I heard about creation, revelation, grace, forgiveness, power. The spiritual dimension of parenting wasn't something huge and distant and elusive; it wasn't something "out there" to be discovered on a silent retreat in the desert. It was in the midst of life with small children, actually tucked into the moments of waking, eating, dressing, telling stories, taking baths, and bed-times.

And it was all part of the spiritual journey. Long before I worked on this book, during a particularly difficult period in my parenting life. I came across a statement in a "spirituality" book that spoke to me with great power. It said, "Everything that has happened in the past is an illusion. Only the love given and the love received are real." But as I interviewed these parents, I realized it was actually heretical both to Judaism and to my "parenting faith" as it grew through my work.

It was all real. The walks in the woods, the spit up. The birthday parties. The nights in the emergency room. The anger at the kids for growing up too slowly, for growing up too quickly, for *never* putting the tops back on the markers. The separations, physical and emotional, premature and long overdue. The drudgery. The exhaustion is real too. And then there is the sheer wonder of it all.

Spirituality, as I understand it, is noticing the wonder, noticing that what seems disparate and confusing to us is actually whole, that the nights and the mornings, the sorrows and the joys are all part of what we sign on for as parents. One of the Hebrew names for God is The Place. The place, I believe, where it all comes together. Spirituality is finally about believing in that place and letting that belief illumine our daily routine.

The Blessing Of Rituals

The book I ended up writing turned out to be less about the extraordinary stories of parents than about the ordinary daily acts: the little rituals and traditions, prayers and songs and stories that parents inherited, borrowed or invented to enliven their journeys. It turned out that what mattered most was not the "big talk" but the daily walk, beginnings and endings: the first hug in the morning, the bedtime prayer and tucking in.

And here is where Judaism enters the picture. Parents must cobble together out of their past and present a world of images and gestures and acts to express their intuitions about life's meaning and unity, to communicate those intuitions to their children, and to recover them during the dry spells.

Take, for example, bedtime. When I began to talk to parents about bedtime, I discovered that I had chanced on the last frontier in secularism's conquest of modern life. Even parents with no religious practices told me about ritualized back rubs, kisses, storytelling, songs and other stylized good nights that had the quality of holy time. Even the most simple routine transforms what could be a frightening moment of separation into the seed of a happy memory.

When the parent learned a piece of the ritual from her own parent, she affirms the linear bond, the sense of

security in being a link in a chain. When the ritual comes, in part, from an ancient tradition like Judaism, the chain grows longer and sturdier.

In our home, we bless bread before we eat. One evening my eight year old was having a bad time with her violin and she threw it down in anger. Near tears, she noticed a piece of bread on the table, grabbed it and stuffed it in her mouth, but not before blurting out, grudgingly, "*Barukh ata adonai elohaynu melech ha olam ha motizi lechem min ha aratz*" (the blessing for eating bread). Watching this scene, I couldn't help laughing. "Life isn't so bad, after all. You still can be grateful for the blessing of food on the table." Ritual can cut against the grain of the moment, reminding us to be appreciative not only when we are full of a sense of fortune but also when we are least moved to notice how lucky we are.

Generic Spirituality Doesn't Work

There is no doubt that spirituality is a "hot" topic. When I went to the bookstores to check out the competition, I discovered shelf after shelf of books on spirituality. I bought all the books about parenting, learned something from each, but never could recognize myself in any of them.

There seemed to be two kinds of books. The first kind was written by people who know just who God is and what He (as they invariably call God) wants of them. These books helped parents learn how to instill their faith (a known entity) into their children, like a seed planted in the soil. The second kind of book was by people whose spirituality was only tenuously connected to any historical religious tradition. In those books, I sense a great yearning. But "generic spirituality" does not seem to work. Trying to create a spiritual path without the "stuff" of any specific religious tradition is like, in Santayana's words, trying to communicate without speaking any language in particular.

Judaism, is an "Old Age" tradition. As a practitioner, I am grateful for the language I have inherited. As a progressive, I believe we are making it up as we go along. But, thank God, we do not have to make it up out of whole cloth. In this way, Judaism is good for spirituality.



Spirituality is not a trend to be labeled good or bad. It is the consistent subtext of our days. We as human beings are spiritual creatures, aware at key junctures that our lives are surely connected to something bigger than ourselves. Judaism is a vast and deep resource for us as we seek to nurture our spirituality and especially to pass it on to our children. †

Spirituality in productivity

■ Saul J. Berman

As we struggle to achieve some greater degree of spirituality in our lives and consult with our spiritual guides to gain direction, we are more than likely to be told that the enhancement which we are seeking is to be discovered in intensified prayer and intensified study of Torah.

It would be fascinating to discover that the highest form of spirituality is accessible through an act which, according to the vast majority of rabbinic opinion, is not even Divinely mandated—through prayer. Even according to Rambam for whom individual prayer is a *mitzvah deoraita* (law grounded in Torah), the Divine mandate requires only a daily moment of verbal communication with God consisting of words of praise, petition, and gratitude.

As for the study of Torah as the highest good, how are we to understand the following language of Rambam in Laws of Talmud Torah 3:10,

“Whosoever sets his heart on the study of Torah and on not doing any productive labor, expecting that he will be supported by charity—such a person desecrates the Name of God, disgraces the Torah, extinguishes the torch of our religion, causes evil to himself, and deprives himself of his share in the world to come....”

Is the *summum bonum*, the most direct path to Jewish spiritual wholeness, not worth self-impoverishment and casting oneself upon the good will of the community? And, should the community not be overjoyed at the opportunity to support a scholar out of charitable funds rather than requiring him or her to compromise the total devotion which he is prepared to give to the study of Torah?!

Or is it possible that these two paths are not sufficient

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Ta sh'ma

We invite you to send us your favorite text and comment. Submissions should not exceed 200 words. Be sure to include proper citation of sources. Hebrew will appear in transliteration.

■ Ed Levin

Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and upon the children's children.

EXODUS 34:7

Every act we make causes a ripple not only through our lives and those around us, but also through the generations that follow. Read this verse not as unfair divine retribution but rather as divine recognition that evil acts have adverse effects on generations to come. Those abused as children are more likely to abuse their own children. Our pollution of the environment will be felt by our children and grandchildren. The actions of the Palestinians toward us and our actions toward them will have effects through succeeding generations. When we act, we must not only consider the consequences of our actions to ourselves and those around us, but also to those who succeed us.

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unto themselves, and that some other path is both available and necessary for the achievement of wholeness in spiritual striving? Let's explore this particular idea further.

Spirituality Is Holiness

Firstly, what we nowadays are calling “spirituality” is, in the Torah itself, called “holiness.” It is in holiness that there is to be found intimacy of connection to the transcendent. It is through holiness that one is expected to actualize in the world God's values for humankind. It is through holiness that one achieves the transformation of the material in one's life to the spiritual.

The most complex setting for the achievement of holiness outside of the sanctuary, within normal existence, is the Shabbat. That is because on the Shabbat we engage in withdrawal from all forms of productive manipulation of objects for the purpose of evaluating whether we have, during the preceding week, maximized the potential for holiness in precisely those productive realms from which we now withdraw.