

Jewish Spiritual Strategies

Many who have been exposed to spiritual disciplines have requested more information about existent Jewish spiritual practices. Perhaps it's hard for Jewishly identified people to be at peace with exclusively non-Jewish spiritual methodologies. This is especially true when such practices elicit from us intuitive memories with Hebraic symbology.

For your convenience we are listing here a mini-catalog of Jewish methodologies you can use to satisfy the longings of your *Neshamah* (soul). (Your *Nefesh*, *Ruakh*, *Khaya* & *Yekhidah* [self, psyche, spirit, etc.] may also be interested.)

3 Empirically Refined (i.e.older) Strategies

The following paths have been empirically refined down the ages and many strategies have developed within each one. Often, practitioners of these ways have associated together a number of sub-strategies. Feel free to combine together a few *Kavvanot* (intentions, meditational angles) to constitute your principal *Kavvana* (major spiritual direction).

(1) DO THE MITZVOT STRATEGY-- the Halakhic orientation:

This path may be called 'Realistic Transcendentalism': By doing real physical (though ritualized) acts you make some kind of impact beyond the knowable world. Some sub-strategies are as follows: by following the laws discussed in the Bible and Talmud and defined in the Shulkhan Arukh (and all the subsequent commentaries, etc.), you obey God the commander (traditional historic biblical). In addition, you perform positive acts which balance good and evil in the world (Maimonidean philosophical), you purify the sparks of holiness hidden in the world (Lurianic Kabbalistic), you connect with the Source (Hassidic devotional), and through the mirroring of above and below you cause a flow of power from beyond the physical to enter into the physical (Hassidic metaphysical). By living the *Mitzvot* in the context of family, we manifest the *Pamalia shel Maalah*, the celestial family. (Kabbalistic relational).

(2) DAVVEN YOUR HEART OUT STRATEGY-- the Hassidic orientation

This devotional path is knit out of some orientation to verbal praying, chanting or singing. By the daily repetition of the set prayers (traditional historic, post-biblical), one acts as a priest making offerings to God in the Temple (Talmudic). At the same time, you cause your soul to be nourished by refreshing her experience of the four worlds which are latent in the four parts of the daily morning prayer (Kabbalistic). This exposure to the four worlds is seen as occurring non-consciously and takes place whether or not one actually experiences anything while running through the words of the set prayers. This often leads to a rapid mumbling. The Baal Shem Tov restructured prayer around a more experiential model, instructing his students to pray every word as if it were the last they would utter (*Hassidic Imagistic*), and appointing the more passionate *davveners* to lead the services, usurping this post from the scholarly who had previously monopolized this leadership (*Hassidic revolutionary*). Later *Hassidim* saw the *davvenen* as an opportunity to practice the two essential spiritual feelings of *Ahavat Hashem* and *Yirat Hashem*, Attraction to the Divine and Astonishment at the

Divine (love and fear/respect). They instituted meditations to help prepare for the prayers and *davvened* at length, sometimes for most of the day (*Habad*, historical). In our time, Reb Zalman Shachter-Shalomi ז"ל, has popularized methods of *davvenen* in English and showed us how to introduce creative forms into Jewish worship. These new forms include expressive movement, dyadic encounters, group imagery meditations, and ecstatic retranslations of standard liturgy (Liturgy as experiment).

(3) STUDY YOUR TORAH STRATEGY-- the Yeshiva orientation

By studying the *Torah* one learns what the *Torah* is about and what to do while interconnecting one's mind with the divine's mind (*Hassidic devotional*). Even through study alone one causes a flow of energy into the worlds from the divine blueprint of the world thus maintaining all of the creation which flowed from it (*Hassidic metaphysical*). Those who study the outer and inner *Torah* simultaneously go through a process of learning that the mystical and simple interpretations of the (multi-layered, purposely ambiguous) *Torah* text are equally valid. This process supposedly calls all of one's interpretive faculties, (e.g., tolerance of paradox, discrimination, ability to accept history, inner vision, etc.) into synchronous operation. This practice of reality layering begins to carry over and inform each ordinary activity and, in this way, one comes to see every act as being as infinitely multivalent as every line of *Torah* text (Kabbalistic integrative).

3 Newish Jewish Spiritual Strategies

(1) THE BAAL SHEMSKI STRATEGY-- Local Action Mitzvot

This path is exemplified by the Baal Shem Tov who would extend himself to perform outrageous good deeds, often helping pitiful unknown individuals who never realized by whom they were being helped. This path is said to open the heart and is practiced by personally doing good deeds to help individuals, rather than say, writing checks to charitable institutions. The anonymous aspect of these acts highlight the purpose of the act as being more than an attempt to become better liked. Mirroring the divine by acting lovingly, reflects one's recognition of creation and all life as being an inherently 'giving' enterprise. Usually the individuals being helped live in one's own community (often the hardest ones to offer help to), but can include strangers in far off places.

(2) RECONSTITUTING THE JEWISH FEMININE -- Loving the SHEKHINA

To many, the feminine symbolizes a more feelingful and absorbent approach to life experience, an accepting, receptive encounter with the realities of ordinary living and ordinary sisters and brothers. This approach involves loving people as they are with their flaws, of neutralising the societal emphasis on abstractions of experience as the only paths in life. It involves valuing relationships with real people, family and community, and so is a natural ally to the Jewish tribal sensibility. Men and women attempt to restore the female experience of each era in Jewish history, researching the past for references and giving voice to the female prophets where only the male voice has been



recorded. Many of us name and image the divine as mother, sister and daughter and see how the traditional prayers sound using these alternate metaphors.

(3) KEEP THE HOLYDAYS STRATEGY-- Khagigi Khabibi--Planetary Judaism

The path here is to get to a place where sensitivity to the energies of each successive season (hour and moment) are known in an altered state of subtle nuance. This state is attained through a process of increasing sensitivity and honesty wherein one matches one's honestly felt experience against the expectations of experience suggested by the traditional themes of *Shabbat* and the Holydays. These holydays have supposedly been refined through the millenias so as to occur on or near seasonal events such as harvest, spring, etc. (and also equinoxii, full moons, yearly cycles in sevens, and aligned solar and lunar calendars). One either experiences these windows in time, which develops one's spiritual sensitivity, or one does not have the expected experiences, in which case one's honesty becomes strengthened. Appreciating the Jewish holydays as seasonal events works best in places like Israel and California, and may not be as plausible a spiritual strategy in places such as Russia, New York City, or Antarctica.

7 Hybrid Spiritual Strategies

Although the Torah forbids some hybrid plants and the wearing of garments made with linen and wool, we are told that the first word of the ten commandments is of Egyptian origin, that Moses took counsel from his father-in-law Jethro who had studied every spirituality available at that time in his known world and that Maimonides wrote philosophical works in Arabic while acting as Chief Doctor to the Egyptian court. Nowadays many Jews have begun to mimic the Creator (and our ancestors) by creating spiritual hybrids which blend the best of Judaism with what have you. Here are seven approaches some of us have used in attempting to bridge our multiple realities in order to better receive the message.

(1) TORAH THERAPISTS

Tikkun Ha-olam, fixing the world (Lurianic Kabbalistic) begins with healing the psyches of the people who live in the world, who perceive the world as needing fixing. Variants of this widely practiced path attempt to unite modern theories of psychology with some kind of Torah. To those therapists who know equally as much Torah as psychology, the seasonal cycle of Judaism is the grid into which the wisdom of psychology is seamlessly interwoven. Psychological techniques then ally with seasonal *Mitzvot* in the process of unfolding of one's soul-mission by freeing up of rigid emotional patterning, healing childhood traumas, reexperiencing past developmental processes, finding the joy in living, etc. (Hassidic psychological).

Those practitioners who know more psychology than Torah use psychology as the grid on which the Torah is explained. The Torah is then seen as a compendium of psychological wisdom couched in difficult-to-unravel myths.

(2) ZEN JUDAISM

The ultimate expression of this was practiced by a group of Jews on Long Island who sat crosslegged in silence through the whole night and day of Yom Kippur. They called it their Zen

Kippur. In this form of spirituality, Jewish customs are practiced but silence is accented more than usual in the worship, underscoring the first word of the *Sh'ma*-Listen. The accent on doing physical ritual (*Mitzvot*) is seen as a way to come to accept the reality of the world as a door to beginner's mind. 'True original nature' is seen as a synonym for the divine. All the stories and laws of the Torah are seen as messages to bring one to the threshold of the present.

(3) NATIVE AMERICAN HASSIDIM

One sign that Jews and the American Indian peoples have something in common was our mutual naming of our children with animal names- wolf and bear and deer and lion and bird are common amongst Jews as well as Indians. Although the vision quest's moment of brilliance lies in the hemispheres of the new world, it is also reflected in the voices of the Jewish prophets, in Moses' forty day fasts on the desert mountain. The sense of tribe, of ritual, of interaction with the Divine, of an immanent God responsive to human call are more clear to many contemporary Jews in Indian surroundings than in polished suburban temples. The American Indian's vision of the divine as being like a collage of nature is becoming more and more important for the spiritual inspiration of many city dwellers.

(4) GAIA SHEKHINA --

the Planetary Redeemers-- Elohimites

The sense of the earth as our mother who may be dying and needs to be saved is a powerful theme only recently emerging. Jews on this globally Messianic path find similar themes in our culture such as the legends of the *Shekhina*. 'Shekhina' denotes the feminine part of God who dwells amongst us, who lives and suffers with us, who is in exile- the part of God who sometimes cries forlornly and needs to be rescued from those who shortsightedly pollute. Followers of this path relate to the peer element that humans have with God, see themselves as co-creators of life on this globe and interpret the *Torah* as an inspiration to redeem the world rather than as an infantilizing document to be blindly obeyed.

(5) SCIENTIFIC HALAKHA

Experimentally and pragmatically defined rather than moralistic, science inspires awe of the elegant beauty of the divine order. Being untainted by value judgements is seen as a clarity, a strong point which can balance ego righteousness. In this way science corrects the overmoralising and "better than" aspect of Judaism by providing a picture of an orderly functioning universe based on the multiplicity of mutually supportive elements. The scientific approach provides a complement to the value-based religious approach and enhances the appreciation of the wonders of the world which is the origin and basis for the primal realizations which led to the Abrahamic vision.

(6) HEALING WITH JUDAISM

The Jewish healer seeks to harmonize contemporary healing methodologies directed chiefly at the individual person's body with the energies of the person's spirit and life dedication (karma). Healers often look at a symptom as if it were a welcome early warning message from the organism about the future outcome of the individuals' lifestyle (driving in a car too much, watching TV at night as a habit, etc.). Seen in this light,

it is only natural to see Judaism as a powerful force in the attempt to adjust the lifestyle of the person.

Tzaddikim (saints) in the Hassidic dynasties are known as healers able to see to the root of illness and effect miraculous cures with a few words, a glance, a smile, the wave of a hand. Being in contact with the Essence of all would probably not be an impediment to a healing profession (Tzaddik story-lore). There are lost traditions in Judaism which saw the path of the Torah and Mitzvot as being a gift from the Divine to purify and heal the human system. Each of the blood vessels and organs of the body were said to be matched with one of the 'do's' or the 'don'ts' of the Torah. (Medieval Medrashim)

(7) SOMATIC JUDAISM

Somatic Judaism sees the body as more than just a Temple for the soul, to be kept clean while the soul (usually seen as something bracketed off from the body) does all the spiritual work. The body is recognized as being a central participant in every religious experience. "The body's transformative potentials simply haven't been appreciated in most religious traditions." (Michael Murphy, quoted in *Yoga Journal*). One way to apply this approach is to examine the layer of body consciousness implied by every Jewish custom. The morning blessings, for example, are related to motions dramatising the blessing of one's eyesight, one's feet, flexibility, wakefulness, etc. Basic

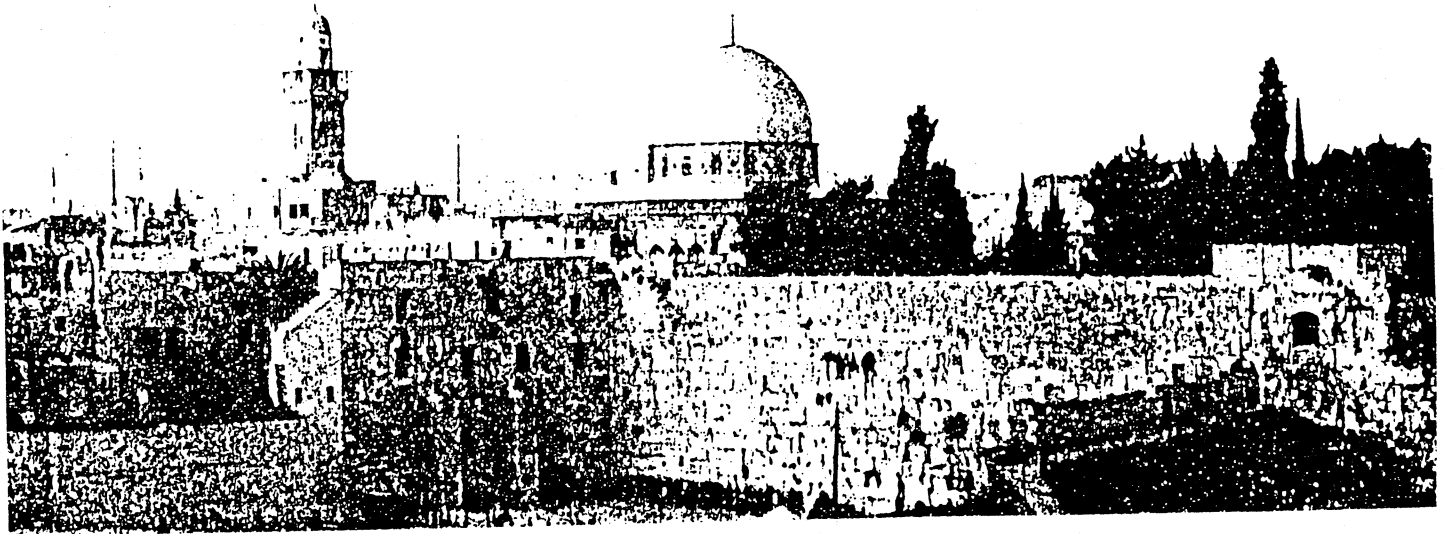
Jewish customs like these are reworked so as to amplify their existing somatic components which may then be respun into creative ritual. Covering ones' eyes when blessing *Shabbat* candles or saying the *Sh'ma*, which is usually performed perfunctorily, may become an active meditation of attuning to the subtleties of light and shadow. A new *shul* is envisioned where congregants emerge after prayers feeling physically better coordinated and brighter-eyed than when they entered.

Going Beyond Strategies

Is our choice of how we approach God a crucial determinant to how much our heart will open? To whether or not we will serve our purpose here on earth?

To paraphrase the Nishmat prayer: "Even if we had found the most appropriate spiritual practice for ourselves, we would still yearn to be closer to God". Perhaps our spiritual path should be seen as only the foreground against a much greater background of possibilities, as Isaac Newton said: "I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than the ordinary, while the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered around me.."

Rabbi David Blank



Special High Holyday Preparation Workshops

These workshops are intended for those who wish to take part in the planning, preparation, and leading of the High Holydays services. Committees responsible for the different services will be formed at the first meeting, and then meet regularly to develop their visions for the services.

Monday (Labor Day), September 4, 1-8 pm, An Introductory Meeting with potluck supper at Miriam Stampfer's, 7290 Sayre Drive, Oakland. 339-2032. Discussion of our expectations and visions for High Holydays, 5750; review of the contents and flavors of different services; formation of committees. If you cannot make this meeting but want to take part in leading services, please contact Miriam, Emanuel at 524-6730, or the Goldfarb's at 848-0965 before this meeting.

Sunday, September 17, 1-5 pm Committee Meetings at Redwood Park. (Tentative weekend retreat- call 339-2032 to confirm location). Sunday afternoon the committees will meet separately and together to discuss their plans. The meetings will include sharings of songs, prayers, and discussion of Makhzor content.

Sunday, Sept. 24, 1-6 pm, Group High Holyday Planning, at Reuven & Yehudit Goldfarb's, 2020 Essex St., Berkeley. 848-0965. Group meeting with all the committees present to coordinate final plans for the Rosh Hashanah services.

Monday October 2, 7-10 pm (tentative), Yom Kippur Planning Committee Meetings.

Thursday October 5, 7-10 pm (tentative), Yom Kippur Planning Meeting Group meeting with all the committees present to coordinate final plans for the Yom Kippur services.