

## Practicing Spirituality

Rosh Hashana, 5775

Rabbi Jason Rosenberg

May you be safe.  
May you be happy.  
May your body be strong.  
May your life unfold with ease.

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May you be happy.  
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In late July, I found myself sitting in a makeshift retreat center, carved out of the Westchester Hilton hotel, repeating those words, over and over.

May you be safe.  
May you be happy.  
May your body be strong.  
May your life unfold with ease.

Sometimes, under the instruction of our leader, I would be saying those words while picturing someone who loved me, endlessly and unconditionally. Someone who, when I thought of them, it would be sure to evoke an equal response of love from me.

May you be safe.  
May you be happy.  
May your body be strong.  
May your life unfold with ease.

Sometimes, I would instead be picturing someone whom I didn't know very well. Perhaps the regular clerk at a store that I frequent. Maybe a congregant who I haven't had a chance to get to know deeply, yet. Could I find in my heart a spark of that larger, closer love for those people?

May you be safe.  
May you be happy.  
May your body be strong.  
May your life unfold with ease.

Sometimes, I'd be picturing myself. May *I* be safe. And then, once or twice, we were told to instead picture someone who we did not love, at all. Quite the opposite — someone who evoked feelings of anger, resentment. Maybe even, if we were up to it, hatred. Could we find it within our hearts, could I find it within my heart, to picture them and, with at least a fragment of honesty say,

May you be safe.

May you be happy.

May your body be strong.

May your life unfold with ease.

Why was I doing this? Why was I joined together with a few dozen other rabbis and cantors, repeating this like a mantra, over and over? I was doing it as part of the Clergy Leadership Program, run by the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. It's a program intended to help clergy deepen our own spiritual lives under the assumption that only then — only if we have rich, meaningful spiritual lives of our own — can we possibly hope to be decent spiritual leaders for others. And so, for the second time so far, I spent four days, mostly in silence, working on my own inner life. I meditated. I chanted and prayed. I studied spiritual texts. And, like probably all of us on that retreat, and here today, I struggled with understanding precisely what spirituality is.

“Spirituality” is one of those words. One of those words which we often use so easily, without thinking about what it really means. We refer to our synagogue as “our spiritual home” and talk about making it a “spiritual community.” We seek spiritual moments. But what is all of that, exactly? What does it mean to be spiritual?

For a long time, my preferred definition of spirituality has been, “an awareness of standing in the presence of God.” But, I also know what a fraught, ambiguous, confusing, resistance-inducing word “God” can be. So, I often substitute “something greater than yourself.” Spirituality is “an awareness of standing in the presence of something greater than yourself.”

It's not a bad definition. Most of us, maybe all of us, have had at least a moment or two in our lives like this. Not necessarily a moment when the heavens opened up and the light of God shined down on us. Just a moment when suddenly, something ordinary unexpectedly seems to be infused with meaning. Something which has always been beautiful is now something more — something we can't quite define, but feel deep down in that place that we call our *kishkes* — our guts — or maybe we call it our soul. A moment when we sense... something.

Try this with me. Close your eyes and try to remember one of those times. It might be something fairly obvious, like the birth of a child or an extraordinary sunset at the beach. It might have been less expected, something which happened on a walk you've taken 100 times before, but never quite like this. A poem or song lyric which struck you

with greater force than anytime before, or since. The simple, gratitude-filled pleasure of being alive on a beautiful day. Think of one. Remember how it felt. Remember how powerful it was and, this is important, remember how real it was. Remember how, at that moment, there were no questions and no answers, only the presence of the moment itself. And, perhaps, a hint or an echo of something Other.

And now, ask yourself a simple question: would you like to have that feeling, again? Would you like to have that feeling, or feelings like it, or perhaps even feelings greater than that, more often? Because that hints at the problem with my favored definition of “spirituality.” Spirituality isn’t just an awareness. Spirituality is a practice. It’s a discipline. It’s something at which we can get better.

Everyone here has a natural, baseline athletic ability. Some of us were gifted with quite a bit of it; some not so much. But, whatever our natural capacity for hitting a ball or running a mile might be, one thing is universal — we can get better at it. With practice, I can hit the ball further and run that mile faster. It’s totally irrelevant whether I am or ever will be better or faster than you. What’s relevant is that if I want to be better or faster than me, the path is fairly clear. I have to practice.

The same rules apply to spirituality. We all have a natural capacity for spiritual moments. I honestly believe that we are not all equal in this respect; some of us are more naturally spiritual than others. But, we all have some sense for the spiritual. We all have times, maybe one you just thought of a few moments ago, when a spiritual moment forces its way into our life. It’s what my friend, Rabbi Ethan Franzel, calls “accidental spirituality.” But, far greater he would argue, and I would agree, is “intentional spirituality.” Finding something — and, really, there is an endless array of possibilities — which helps us access the corner of ourselves which naturally connects to the spiritual, and then helps to build it, like we build a muscle in the gym.

Some of you know that that’s my favorite metaphor for spiritual practice — the gym. Because here are a couple things I’ve come to believe, quite strongly, about spirituality and spiritual practice. First of all, you don’t *need* to do it. By which I mean, I’m not trying to tell you that you *have* to be more spiritual, or to make you feel guilty if you’re not. If someone truly, honestly doesn’t want to be able to run further, or faster, or doesn’t want or need to lower their blood pressure or get any of the myriad other benefits which come with regular exercise, then they don’t have to work out. Not going to the gym does not, in any way, shape or form, make you a bad person. But, if you want to be physically healthy, you’re almost certainly going to have to do something about it. I’m as sad as anyone here to tell you that sitting on the couch isn’t going to get you there. And that’s the second thing I’ve come to believe about spirituality — if you do want more of it, then it’s going to take some work. Just sitting on that chair isn’t going to get you there.

So, what does it look like? What *is* spiritual practice. Well, of course, it isn't just one thing. There are lots of ways to engage in spirituality. Probably every religion in history has come up with its own forms, and Judaism is no exception. Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, a spiritual master, believed that focusing on the breath was often all of the practice that we needed. Quietly breathing, while repeating the line from Psalms (150), "Let all that breathes praise Adonai," and with each breath imagining that God is giving us new life. Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav recommended what he called *hitbodedut*—alone time with God. Basically, going to a private place and talking non-stop to God—just letting the thoughts and feelings pour out. I was pretty uncertain, and not a little resistant, the first time I tried this one. But, I can tell you that there's a power in hearing yourself say something that, until that very moment, you didn't know you were thinking. Many sages have taken one favored line from sacred text—"There is nothing but God," "Adonai is our God, Adonai is One," or "God was in this place and I, I did not know it," to name just a few examples—and meditated on those words, very much like a mantra, and just waited to see what thoughts and feelings the repetition can evoke. Here on Shabbat mornings, especially when we have our Making Prayer Real workshop, we repeatedly chant a simple line or a niggun—a wordless melody—and try to experience the sense of flow when we stop thinking, and simply do. One of my personal favorites is spiritual study—using the insights of other Rabbis, particularly the great, early Hassidic masters, to give us spiritual reinterpretations of well known passages of the Torah. Studying in a way which moves our hearts, not just engages our minds. And, of course, these are just a sampling of possible practices.

So, let's try one. Together, right now. I promise — it won't take very long, and it won't hurt at all. [*Here's the practice I led everyone through. First, pick that person that you love, and that loves you back, unconditionally. Take a few slow, deep breaths, concentrating very hard on your breath—how does it feel? Does your stomach or your chest feel as you breathe? Put all of your concentration on your breath. Now...picture that person again, and slowly say, "May you be safe, may you be happy, may your body be strong, may your life unfold with ease" 3 times. Breathe a few more times, with just as much concentration on your breath. Let the final silence stretch out.*]

It's that moment, just after I've done some spiritual practice, that I've come to cherish. Because it's in those moments of silently fading echoes that I come closest to understanding. Understanding what I just experienced, and what I didn't, and what I want, and what I need. Spirituality, to me, anyway, isn't about giving up my rational faculties and God-given sense of discernment. It's about learning to appreciate and understand the parts of my mind, and the parts of my soul, which speak to something larger than logic and rationality.

It's that false dichotomy and created conflict between spirituality and rationality which engendered so much resistance in me, for so long. I'm sure at least a few of you felt more than a twinge of that same resistance a few minutes ago, when we tried out that practice. "This is weird. This is flaky. This isn't my thing." It seems so darn

unsophisticated, in a world filled with easy cynicism and enormous, tragic horror, to sit, breathe, and just think loving thoughts. Who does that? It's so easy to write it off as some flighty thing that other, less serious people do. Trust me — I understand. I've said those things myself. And, at times, I guess I still do. But, I'm here to tell you, in no uncertain terms, that this stuff works. And, I'm not just talking about anecdotal evidence, although there's plenty of that, obviously. Even good old science backs this up.

We now have decades worth of serious research about meditation, mindfulness and other spiritual practices. And, that research is as conclusive as can be — this stuff really does work. Ongoing practice results in measurable increases in our ability to handle stress. In our ability to handle pain. In our energy, focus and creativity. It can improve our sleep patterns. It can lower our heart rate, our respiratory rate, and our blood pressure. There's even strong evidence that, perhaps tied to its stress-reducing ability, these practices can reduce cardiovascular disease and the rate and severity of heart attacks. And, the only side effects you have to worry about are increased happiness and a general sense of well-being. Those may even last longer than four hours.

People love to pit science against religion but they're going to have a hard time of it when it comes to spiritual practice. The more scientists look at it, the more they confirm what religious practitioners have known for literally thousands of years. Spiritual practice works. It makes our lives better. It makes us happier, and it makes us more content. It makes us more caring, and it makes us more open. All we have to do, is do it.

And, as I mentioned before, there isn't only one way to do it. Part of the joy of the spiritual world is finding the form and the practice which works best for each of us. For some it might be meditation, although even that isn't only one thing; there are many types of meditation. For others, regular prayer, although probably with more focus and *kavannah* that most of us are used to, can work. Yoga and other "embodied practices" speak to many. There is spiritual study. Spiritual eating. Spiritual walking. There's an endless menu of spiritual practices. You can find one which speaks to you, and which you can fit into your life. All you need to do is to decide to start.

Some of these are already happening here. These kinds of practices are precisely what we explore in our twice-a-month Making Prayer Real workshops and services on Saturday mornings. It's the basis of our new, occasional *Kavannah* Shabbat services on Friday nights. More and more, it's influenced how I teach, especially during Torah study on Shabbat. And, for those who want to try something right away, we're having a 2<sup>nd</sup> day Rosh Hashana meditation service, tomorrow morning at 9:00. And, if nothing that we're doing here resonates with you, but you still want to find something that does, we can sit and talk, and find something that does sound like it will work. There are no single paths, but there are more and more people who are looking to take this journey. You should really think about being one of them.

Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, the *Sefat Emet*, teaches that each and every person has within them a divine spark. A small piece of God, buried down, deep inside of us. And, every moment of every day that spark is struggling, striving to rise up and reconnect with its source. To reconnect with God. That spark, he teaches, is our soul, which was given to us only so that it could reconnect with holiness. All that we have to do is let it. Give that spark a chance to rise, and it will bring you with it.

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