

My Jewish Journey

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It is with great humility and some trepidation that I stand before God and this holy community in this sacred space “as the gates are opening” to share my spiritual journey. I pray that, though I be of little merit at this awesome moment for Jews everywhere, that something of what I share may enhance the depth of even one soul’s experience here.

For me, my spiritual journey, the journey of my spirit, is the journey of my soul. My soul is God-given and pure. It is that part of my being that transcends superego. It does not wholly belong to me, but in fact is on loan from God. It is what connects me to the best of myself, my-God-like attributes. When I am connected to my soul, I am close to God, linked to our people and a blessing to my world.

Then to recount my spiritual journey is to tell the story of my journey to connect with my soul. For like God, the soul hides, waits to be found and is often ignored, save for moments of desperation.

I was blessed to grow up in a Jewish home in a nurturing Jewish community. My parents loved Judaism, were temple goers, active in temple life and celebrated the holidays in our home. We belonged to a Conservative temple. The Rabbi, Cantor and Choir were inspiring, and it was with a sense of awe that I actively participated in both youth and adult services on most Shabbats from ages 7-13. The Torah was read each Shabbat, and the Rabbi’s D’var would bring the stories to life, make me feel like I was there – this was my story. I was not thinking much about my soul then. I believe that as children we are more about being in our souls than trying to connect to them. But it was early that I learned to love and honor Torah, that these stories could somehow inform the fabric of my life and that the script for living, for living Jewishly, for living Judaism was in that sacred scroll. That was the way I was going to live.

My Hebrew school teachers were mostly Orthodox rabbis. One in particular taught me very early about the importance of correct and sincere prayer. Preparing for it by getting in the right frame of mind. Keeping one’s eyes on the words and letters, and lifting one’s heart and soul to God. These foundations were to become an important part of my spiritual life.

It was in those critical early years that I also developed a deep soul connection to the Promised Land, and a habit of Tzedakah, both of which have been with me for life.

Alas, secular life and assimilation intervened after Bar Mitzvah, and just as my older sister went off to Hebrew College, then called Hebrew Teacher's College, I turned to idol worship. From ages 14 through to my mid thirties, depending on the phase, the idols I worshiped were sports, studies, training and career. Oh I went to high holyday services each year, but that was it. Looking back I am saddened for the lost opportunities to grow spiritually during that time. I did not study Torah, pray regularly, nor seek to be in and build the world as God wants it to be.

During the latter phase of those years, I deemed myself agnostic. I was not about to dismiss God entirely, but so much of my training, education and practice revolved around data and proof, that I somehow felt that God too should be

Subject to that same scrutiny. Clearly I had traveled far from my Jewish roots, was wandering and spiritually parched, and not appreciating the presence and the source of the blessings that were all around me. Life itself, birth, nature, the human heart - - all proof enough of God's creative power.

In my readings, I explored ego-centered spiritual belief systems outside of Judaism. A sampling of books read during those years includes The Heart of Wisdom, The Laws of Spirit, The Book of Practical Faith, A Quiet Strength, Other Lives/Other Masters, A Guide for the Advanced Soul, I Ching, A Spiritual Warriors' Handbook, Spiritual Growth/Being Your Higher Self, Warriors of the Heart. All interesting and probably kept me in the game, but each failing to unlock that potential energy, that spiritual connection quiescent since childhood, lying in wait.

My Soul.

Then 23 years ago we moved to Lexington and joined this synagogue community "for our children's sake". In a new member meeting with our beloved Rabbi Yales of blessed memory he asked that each couple make an individual appointment to meet with him so that he could more intimately tell us about "quote" a fantastic journey that we could take here at Isaiah if we chose to. In the group session I expressed my hope to make Torah, God and Prayer as integral to my life as they were when I was a child. Well, we never did have that individual meeting, but with Rabbi Yales' inspirational leadership and the strength of this congregation we took the fantastic journey anyways.

In this sacred space in prayer and meditation I have had intense moments of connection to my soul, often enhanced by the sacred music. In the sharing of love and affection, lifecycle events and the doing of Mitzvot I have had many moments of connecting to my soul. In the opportunity to lead lay-lead services, the healing service and Shiva services I have had powerful moments of connecting with my soul. Every Shabbat morning minyan service and/Torah study attended has been a spiritual happening.

There have been a few special spiritual experiences for me here. The Bat/Bar Mitzvahs of my son, daughter and wife. The carrying of the Kolin Torah. As I hugged it like I would a beloved injured child and moved through this congregation with tears streaming down my face, I felt that 6 million souls were walking with me, and very close to God and every Jew that has ever lived. It was a spiritual moment that defies mere words. Also, my trip to the former Soviet Union with Rabbi Wolfman representing this synagogue to bring needed supplies, love and hope to many Refusenik families will always be remembered as one of the spiritual highlights of my life.

Outside of Isaiah but catalyzed by it, my spiritual journey has included persistent attempts to consistently study the Torah portion weekly. Some level of Shabbat observance is something I aspire to. An epiphany for me some years ago was that given the complexity and demands of my life, in fact especially because of them, I needed to think of Shabbat as a space inside rather than simply a space in time. That cognitive awareness has helped me to celebrate Shabbat with active rest in a spiritual way despite what I may be “compelled” to do otherwise in the secular realm.

My readings related to spirituality have changed to Jewish books such as As a Driven Leaf, Entering Jewish Prayer, Walking the Bible, Zohar & Kabbalah, Jacob the Baker, To Mend the World, Abraham & Sons, I and Thou, Jewish Wisdom, The Gentle Weapon, The Way of the Jewish Mystic, Pirkot Avot, Thoughts for the Month of Elul.

Likewise, the primary art that beautifies our home reflects and nourishes my soul. Jerusalem Sunrise and One Flesh by Michael Bogdanow; Bereshit and Window of the Soul by Bonnie Yales. Similarly, in recent years I have acquired many CD's of Judaic music chosen to elevate my spirit.

With the loss of each parent I said Kadish daily for one year. I was not willing to go to a daily Minyan, so lest I forget developed the habit of saying it in the car during the A.M. commute. When the obligation was done, I thought it sad that I might not think of them at least for a brief moment each day. So I continued and expanded by developing my own little daily A.M. prayer service in the car. I have been faithful to that exercise for over 10 years. I added the basic elements of the blessings, the Sh'ma, the Benedictions, the Misha Berach and Mourner's Kadish. I have put in my own wrinkles, but it works for me. Kavanah may be difficult in the car, but I figure doing it is better than not, and it grounds my day spiritually.

None of this would have much meaning toward spiritual growth if I were not trying to translate it into the performance of Mitzvot and acts of loving kindness. With Torah as my guide, I have tried to live with humility, be slow to anger, show love, compassion and respect for others, give to those in need and

strive for justice. For the latter two, Temple Isaiah has afforded me most of my opportunities.

Somewhere on this journey my faith in God was restored and solidified. There is a certain element of aloneness that we all experience in this life that is both a blessing and a potential curse. For me, belief is so much more comforting and sensible than doubt. It keeps aloneness from ever becoming loneliness. It is hopeful and peaceful. It is a frame of reference for good and right. It keeps me on task, directed, responsible, holy. How else to live in a broken world otherwise impossible to comprehend? How else to be ever grateful for our endless blessings. I find optimism, hope and strength in faith in God, God's light, the covenant, Mitzvot and Tikkun.

I have been blessed with 60 years. God, Torah, this community and especially my beloved family are my spiritual underpinnings.

The gates are closing and there is so much more to do to be God's partners in re-creating the world as God originally intended. May this Yom Kippur be a springboard for us all to keep in touch with our souls, to evolve spiritually, to take the fantastic journey, to be holy and to create Shalom for ourselves and our world.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon

Be it God's will.