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Encouraging Jewish Choices & A Welcoming Jewish Community

JEWISH SPIRITUALITY RESOURCE GUIDE

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Introduction

Many people have noted that Jews seem less concerned with belief in God, and therefore less spiritual, than Christians. Writing based on data from the Pew Forum Religious Landscape Survey, Steven M. Cohen and Lauren Blitzer wrote in "[Belonging Without Believing](#)" about the US Jewish population, that it is one of the most secular in US society. Many Jews feel uncomfortable talking about their spiritual experiences in a Jewish context. Whether you grew up in another religion or in Judaism, if you're in an interfaith family raising Jewish children, you may already be engaged in Jewish life, and in a position to seek spiritual fulfillment in Jewish contexts--and that can work.

You want to create a spiritual practice, but the Judaism you've experienced in synagogue services may not work for you. It seems to require so much back story, so many linguistic skills, how could it introduce you to Jewish spirituality? The long, totally unrepresentative synagogue service on the High Holidays is a particularly hard way to engage with Judaism if you're new to it. It is a sort of spiritual practice to put yourself through an ordeal with a fast once a year--but it isn't one that takes advantage of what Judaism has to offer interfaith families in their spiritual lives.

Jewish spiritual practice is both easier and more difficult than the yearly prayer-athon. It has a rhythm of daily, weekly and monthly observances that can encourage mindfulness and appreciation of the natural world and human relationships. Traditional Jewish spirituality elevates ethical questions by placing them into the personal relationship that the individual has with God. It's an opportunity to become part of an ancient tradition and to experience a satisfying sense of engagement. It can even make synagogue services into something spiritually compelling. It's something people sometimes find hard to talk about in person, so consider this a personal welcome to take part in a long and rich spiritual tradition.

Making Holiness

When people use the word spirituality instead of religion, sometimes they are trying to evade the rigid categories and classifications of Western religions. First the bad news: Judaism is a Western religion and it's all about those categories and judgments. If you've ever prepared a kosher meal, you know what I mean: there are foods that should never be eaten, foods that can be eaten all the time except on Passover, foods that can be eaten but only if prepared in a certain way, and foods that are fine but only if eaten separately from each other. Judaism is part of the tradition of good actions and evil actions, sacred behaviors and non-sacred behaviors and sins. There are a lot of rules. There is a lot of hierarchy. But there is more, too.

Jewish spirituality is intense, an expression of the power of the individual to connect with God through the elevation of ordinary things to holiness. Through ritual and our individual consciousness of participating in a community that crosses time and space, we are part of a circuit of tremendous energy. That spiritual experience gets a further charge from striving for ethical improvement. Everyone can participate in the modes that Judaism offers of enhancing mindfulness of the beauty of the natural world, and the mutual connections of human beings. Judaism creates a sense of holiness through the act of blessing, the study of Torah and the performance of mitzvot.

Blessings

Blessings in Judaism are an opportunity to acknowledge and recognize the holiness in everyday things. For most in the Jewish community today, blessing everything doesn't come naturally, and it feels like a complete reframing to think of blessings as a built-in process to ensure mindfulness. The Jewish day envisioned by the authors of the traditional prayerbook, the siddur, was structured by blessings, thanks and praise.

On arising, the morning service begins with thanks to God for bringing our souls back into our bodies. Every meal or snack can be framed by traditional blessings, appreciating the food. Even using the bathroom has a traditional blessing in Judaism. Throughout the day, blessings call the divine presence to mind, and bring our attention to what we're doing. Some think of Judaism as a way of being God's partner in creation, and blessings express that idea.

There are blessings of witnessing, for the things we see in nature and for once-in-a-lifetime events. There is a blessing on good news and one on hearing that someone has died, one on seeing a rainbow and one on hearing thunder. When we eat a new fruit or put on a new piece of clothing, we can say the blessing on God who has kept us alive and sustained us into this season.

Everything one could witness or experience, every ritual action, has a brachah, a blessing. When we perform mitzvot, commanded actions, like lighting Shabbat candles or affixing a mezuzah to the doorway of a house, there are blessings to recite on having the opportunity to these things.

The secret of Jewish spirituality is that it doesn't happen in silence, but in a flood of often-whispered words.

Finding and Creating Ritual

It is always exciting to find out that blessings already exist to commemorate the events of your life. From the dedication of your new house to putting on a new shirt, naming a new baby or recovering from a bad dream, you can find a Jewish blessing or ritual for nearly everything you want to make into a spiritual experience. As Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman puts it in this article, ["All the World is a Place for Prayer"](#),

But God's presence was likely to become evident not just in the moment when a divine commandment was being performed but at any time or place, like the breathtaking surprise of coming across a desert landscape or a redwood forest, for which one says, "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, who created the universe." The thinking behind these blessings that celebrate nature--not just its extraordinary manifestations but even such ordinary beauty as a tree in blossom--is especially instructive.

You can find a lot of the blessings you need in the back of a siddur, a Jewish prayerbook--check table of contents. The multi-denominational Jewish organization CLAL has a listing called [This Ritual Life](#) with ancient and modern Jewish rituals for everyday events. (They have a great one for quitting smoking.) Another great source is the feminist Jewish website www.ritualwell.org, where you can find Blessings for Daily Life.

There is a lot of room for creativity with making rituals and blessings, although in Jewish culture there is some preference for using older liturgical and scriptural ones. By using Hebrew or Aramaic, Torah text or older prayer book language, we can connect our spiritual experiences to those of the people who came before us. That's a strong value in Jewish spirituality--ritual as a means for connecting us to other people, including people who lived before us in other times and places.

Torah Study

Jewish spirituality can sometimes be quiet, but more often it's wordy--blessings and prayers are usually recited out loud, if in a murmur, or sung. More than merely wordy, Jewish spirituality is narrative. We can connect our everyday lives to God through blessings and set prayers; we connect them to Jewish history through the study of Torah. This happens in more than one way.

We compare our lives with the stories of the great and holy, the patriarchs and matriarchs, prophets and leaders of the Hebrew scriptures. In synagogue, when we read the Torah portion of the week, we wonder what we would have done in their places. Comparing our lives to theirs, we join with those who came between them and us who did the same.

The practice of Torah study extends past the narrative of the ancestors to learning the ethical principles of Jewish law, principles by which we guide our lives today. When ethical questions arise in current events or in our communities, even the most mundane issue can be held up to these principles. We can ask ourselves, does this action promote peace in my home? Is this thing that I'm about to say, gossip or unethical speech? Is this thing that I'm about to do an act of hesed, of lovingkindness?

We can deepen the natural human desire to do right into a spiritual connection. This is the big advantage to Judaism for spiritual growth--all these every day things we do in relation to other people can have spiritual meaning. There are no great tests of faith--the test is what you do.

The Performance of Mitzvot

In some spiritual traditions, the spiritual seeker has to perform difficult tasks, beyond the bounds of normal human beings. Judaism, too, has stories about saintly people who went the extra distance to do mitzvot, God's commandments, and treated people with extreme kindness. An ordinary person can fulfill these same commandments, however, and can endeavor to live according to their ethical principles.

Becoming Conscious of Time

Jewish spirituality is rooted in the present time and in physical experience. The best example of this is Shabbat, a day whose holiness is defined by time. Traditionally, Shabbat begins 18 minutes before the setting of the sun on Friday evening, and ends with the appearance of three stars in the Saturday night sky. Lighting the candles on Shabbat suggests all kinds of symbolic meanings of light, and these do infuse people's experience of the day with holiness. On the other hand, you can think of these lights as the last fire kindled to be able to see and eat together and read on a long evening of not getting up to tend a lamp, as people in ancient times experienced it. We are connected to the natural world through the experience of day and night, and to each other through our history together.

Even in our own day, people observe Shabbat through physical action--drinking wine, eating bread and delicious food, walking outside in nature, being together with our families. The prosaic experience of taking a nap because you aren't working--in Judaism, this is a taste of the world to come. The entirely achievable delights of a nap, a nice meal and some time with your family are like heaven itself--there's no better example of the ordinariness of the spiritual in Judaism.

Even practices that were once the province of learned elites have been adopted by ordinary Jewish communities. The Friday evening service begins with Kabbalat Shabbat, original the most arcane of practices of the 16th century kabbalists of Safed in Israel. They were the ones who personified Shabbat as a queen or bride. Kabbalah means reception, and Kabbalat Shabbat has more than one meaning. It's the kabbalists' Shabbat, the Shabbat of people who have received mystical wisdom from their teachers. It's also a reception of Shabbat like the reception after a wedding--like a big party. It's also reception in the sense of a transmission like radio waves, where we're tuned in to a universal wavelength.

Beautifying the Performance of Mitzvot

One way Jews have classified the commandments is by breaking them down into two groups: mitzvot bein adam l'makom, commandments governing the relationship between the person and God, and mitzvot bein adam l'havero, commandments governing the relationship between human beings. Ritual actions like prayer, affixing a mezuzah to the doorpost and keeping kosher are all examples of the mitzvot between the individual and God. Donating to charity, providing for the needs of a wedding and comforting mourners are examples of mitzvot between people. Both kinds of mitzvot can be opportunities for spiritual experience.

The concept of beautifying a commandment, hiddur mitzvah, elevates every mitzvah to another level. If you are making blessings on Shabbat and you use a beautiful Kiddush cup or a challah cover that your children made in preschool, you know what I mean. It's a special thing, to feel connected to one another through ritual objects when we act out these rituals that are between us and God.

The best thing in an interfaith family is when you can incorporate the cultural traditions of the non-Jewish side of the family in these mitzvot. What could be more beautiful than using the Greek or Portuguese grandmother's recipe for challah, or making the Italian wedding soup in honor of Shabbat? It's a double mitzvah, because honoring culture is like honoring our parents, which is a very important commandment.

The Mitzvah of Hospitality

A good example of a mitzvah that a lot of people perform frequently is hachnassat orchim, welcoming guests. It's a mitzvah found in Torah, first described in Genesis 18, when Abraham and Sarah run to extend hospitality to three strangers. In Talmud, [reaching out to guests is more important than study or prayer](#). The act of opening your door and offering someone food is integral to Jewish spirituality, and you're probably doing it a lot already. If you get up and walk your guests to the door, you are performing a mitzvah, because you escorted them into and out of your house--and you have treated them like the Divine Presence.

It's difficult to capture the religious mentality of wanting to do what one is supposed to do, and therefore creating additional opportunities to do it. If what you think you are supposed to do is to be a good person, to treat your parents and your children well, you're ready for this. If you are the person who makes a casserole whenever anyone gets sick or has a baby, or who asks behind the scenes if someone needs financial help and gives it, who helps people move house, who cries at weddings and who cares what happens in your neighborhood, Jewish spirituality is all about that.

Synagogue Services

Synagogue services belong at the end of a guide to Jewish spirituality. Formal prayer in congregation is important--it roots individuals and families in their community and allows people to connect with each other around birth, death and coming of age, and the holidays that come every week, month and season. But synagogue services are not the easiest avenue to spiritual fulfillment in Judaism. They're probably the hardest.

A great challenge to feeling spiritual in synagogue is the tension between having a set prayer service and the spontaneous inner feelings of the individual worshipper. Jewish people have held on to the old liturgy as a means of maintaining cultural integrity over a long history and in geographically disparate communities. The practice of praying in Hebrew rather than in the vernacular made it possible for Jews to travel to foreign communities and pray together, with only minor variations in the order of the service or the customs around it. For people who worship daily, the rhythm of the prayers creates a meditative state, like the chanting of a mantra in other traditions.

Nevertheless, Jews have long recognized the need to invest the set prayer service with individual meaning. The prayers are kavua, are set, and the worshipper must bring his or her own kavanna, intention, to them. This is such a well-known feature of Jewish life that many rabbis and other Jewish leaders will talk about the tension between keva and kavanna.

Hebrew Language

The first problem for many interfaith families is that the set liturgy is in Hebrew, with a few prayers of the traditional liturgy in the related Semitic language of Aramaic. In some synagogues, the congregation chooses to read many of the prayers in translation, while in other congregations more or all of the prayers are in the original language. There has been a trend in the Reform movement toward re-incorporating more Hebrew. As Hebrew has become a vital every day language for Jews in Israel and around the world, the biblical and medieval Hebrew of prayer has become more intelligible.

For anyone who didn't grow up praying in Hebrew, the foreign language can feel challenging, though some who are new to it also find it beautiful. For people who were raised Christian, it might be exciting to say, in Hebrew, some of the psalms Christians say in church. The few prayers in Aramaic, like the Kaddish, are in the same language that the historical Jesus probably used in daily life. The use of Hebrew language has advantages and disadvantages. It brings a feeling of

authenticity to the service, but it may also be alienating if everyone is singing along and you are having trouble following.

There are several ways to cope with Hebrew. The most elegant but also most time-consuming solution is to learn the language. A more usual choice is to read the prayers in translation while others read in Hebrew. A third way is to get the Hebrew prayers transliterated in English letters, and learn to sing along. Many Jews and non-Jews alike go to services and don't know Hebrew, so there's no reason to feel bad or isolated about it. Even some who grew up with Hebrew school learned only enough to decode the letters, and struggle with what they mean. Most of us English-speakers are on the same page--so to speak--praying in a different language than we use for everyday life.

Ways of Adding Meaning to the Set Service

A lot of the current set text of the siddur is liturgical poems or piyyutim that various communities introduced as occasional pieces over the centuries and gradual integrated into the set service. Poems like "L'Cha Dodi" (Go, Beloved) and "Yedid Nefesh" (Dear Soul) are examples of these. The High Holiday liturgy is full of alphabetic acrostic poems that were added to make things more exciting. The Reform movement, starting in the 19th century, began to add similar poems in vernacular language. Your current prayer book may have many examples of these additional poems, either in Hebrew or in English.

Another way people have added meaning to the set prayers is by writing melodies that invest certain lines of the text with additional meaning. The tunes at your synagogue may speak to you. It's fun to get to know the prayers (or to get to know them again) by listening to recordings of them in settings from different countries--super formal and Western and classical, or funky acapella Hasidic, or tunes from African or Mediterranean communities. If you don't find the tunes beautiful or enhancing, and you are musical, participating in bringing new tunes may help you to find spiritual fulfillment in the services.

Some find that they get more out of Hebrew prayer when they understand it better. Knowing the history of prayers, how old they are, who said them first, touches me and speaks to me. I liked reading Ismar Elbogen's Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History, and I frequently hit the footnotes and back pages of the various siddurim. I love a good Biblical Hebrew dictionary and I enjoy seeing alternative versions of Hebrew prayers--and I know I'm not the only one writing for this website who is a liturgy geek. You don't have to start with a high level of Jewish education to enjoy studying the traditional prayers.

You may be different. Many people don't like to know what the prayers say. They find comfort in the fact that they're saying what their grandparents said. They don't want to know what it all means. That is fine! It's a connection. I don't think it

will work as well for partners who are not Jewish and people new to Judaism, but it might. It might be a way to connect with the Jewish people. Connecting without intellectual understanding is a valid way to get something out of the set prayers. You may feel the most emotional response this way.

Some Jewish congregations make small changes to the Hebrew liturgy so that it better reflects their current beliefs. It's become standard in many communities in North America to recite the names of the Mothers of Israel as well as the Fathers in the Avot prayer. The Reform movement has always omitted prayers for the restoration of Temple sacrifice in Jerusalem. Most congregations, including Orthodox ones, add a prayer for the State of Israel, one that couldn't have existed before the state itself. This is another way to approach the issue of set prayer.

There is also an esoteric tradition of meditation on the prayers from kabbalah that some today have reclaimed as a method of engaging spiritual with set liturgy. Late 20th-century Orthodox scholar Aryeh Kaplan's book, *Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide* provides a brief introduction for a popular audience to some Jewish meditation techniques. Organizations like [Nishmat Hayyim, the Jewish mediation collaborative](#) provide in-person retreats and classes with people who are reclaiming Jewish meditation or integrating meditation from other traditions with Judaism. Nishmat Hayyim offers [a page of links to texts on Jewish meditation](#).

The siddur--traditional prayerbook--is not completely static, and we are not the same each time we come to pray from it. The book constitutes a record of other people's spiritual experience, from the period of the Torah until today, and you may find their words resonate with you. It is OK if it doesn't speak to you right now, since Jewish spirituality isn't only about prayer experiences. Sometimes it's enough to be there to support other people in their happy and sad times and to be part of the community.