

I like to think of myself as davening in a litvasher shul. That is, I like to think that I approach Judaism from the intellectual and rationalist side. At Hebrew Union College, Dr. Leonard Kravitz was one of my great influences and to me he represents the essence of what it means to be a Litvak. He is a profoundly religious Jew who approaches his Judaism through a strictly rationalist perspective and derides what he calls Yai Diddy Dai Judaism, referring to Hassidism and the non-rationalist approach to Judaism. As we went into services one morning we continued our discussion from class on how we teach about God to our congregations. "I'm not worried about it," I claimed in my naïveté, "I can teach about God because I've experienced God." "That's the problem," he replied bringing me up short, "how do you teach an experience?"

How do you teach an experience? How do you teach the cobalt blue of a stained glass window with light shining through it? How do you teach the sound of the opening trumpet from Mahler's Fifth Symphony? How do you teach the way velvet feels soft? How do you teach the sweet smell of slightly overripe pineapple? How do you teach what cinnamon's taste is? How do you teach an experience other than through experiencing it? Kal v'khomer, all the more so, how do you teach an experience that is neither sight nor sound nor touch nor smell nor taste?

I admit that, as a self-described rationalist, when the conversation turns to spirituality or being spiritual, I get the heebie-jeebies because it's so ... so non-rational. There are some who, as rationalists, deny the existence of the spiritual, that which we cannot quantify through sight, sound, touch, smell or taste - our five physical senses. Yet how logical is it to deny the experience of millions of people merely because the data they represent does not fit our rationalist theories? Wouldn't logic argue that, if we have millions of data points that our theory does not explain, then we need to at least reexamine our theory? So sit back, relax and join me in my discomfort as we rationally examine the non-rational.

To be spiritual is to become awake to the possibility of an existence beyond our own mere physicality. It is becoming aware of more than our selves, the sense that there is more to existence than our selves. It is a feeling of expansiveness that we can sense, but not readily describe. This awareness, this sensing of the beyond, leads to a feeling of wholeness, connectedness, and interconnectedness. And for those lucky few the sense of wholeness, connectedness, and interconnectedness leads to recognition of unity with the

universe, recognition of the Unity of God. To be spiritual is to sense the reality of *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*: Hear O Israel, The Eternal is our God; God is One.

I have been blessed to feel that sense of connectedness several times. I remember one time when I was on my day off from Crane Lake Camp in western Massachusetts. I had walked into town on a beautiful sunny morning of about 75° for breakfast and I ate a quiet meal of raspberry pancakes and excellent coffee. I remember feeling very satisfied and at peace for the first time in weeks. I began to walk home enjoying the warmth of the sun and then I realized that everything had become more intense. The sky was bluer than I had ever seen it before. I saw the detail on every leaf and blade of grass and it was all vividly green. I felt larger than myself, connected to everything around me; and then a car passed and it was all over.

Another time I was at Greene Family Camp in Texas serving on faculty. It was just after kfar time and I was standing outside the bunks with three counselors who were on duty and about ready to head back to their bunks. We started talking about what, I cannot remember. But I remember that it was an intense discussion where we lost track of time and when the moment passed all of our reactions were: “Whoa!” We had shared deeply with each other our thoughts and our feelings and felt a connection that extended our being beyond our selves, if only for a few minutes.

Both of these experiences were what Martin Buber would have called I/Thou moments. They were moments of mutuality and sharing. They were moments of connection where neither tried to use the other but rather simply were with the other. They were moments when I didn't try to analyze the experience while I was in it because analyzing the experience would have been to try to take control of the experience. I/Thou moments are specifically not about controlling, but about being and experiencing. To control is to place limits upon the other while you remain the same. Opening yourself to another and sharing a mutuality of experience is to expand the existence of both the other and one's self.

A second way to experience spirituality is a Litvak's delight: through study. The time was, when people wanted to communicate with God, all they needed to do was to ask a prophet what God's will was. However, the age of prophecy ended and we today are left only with Jewish texts. Only Jewish texts? *Khas v'shalom!* A cornucopia of

Jewish texts to last a blissful lifetime of study without repeating a one. Not that you wouldn't want to repeatedly study the texts. No! It is the repeated study of the texts that make them all the more delicious bringing nuance and meaning to the surface that you had never seen before. And as you lose yourself in the study and the words, you suddenly realize that you have experienced God as God tries to communicate through the text. I have felt deep connection and sudden insight into the universe when I study and realize what it is that God wants from me. Rational study too, is a path to the Spiritual.

One set of texts is even designed to assist the reader in experiencing the transcendent: Jewish prayer. I am sometimes asked about the *keva*, the fixed prayers we are traditionally supposed to recite daily. "Does God really need my prayers," I'm asked, "especially when I don't understand them since they're in a language I don't even speak?" I don't think so. I don't think God needs our prayers. I think we need our prayers. Prayer is a way of opening ourselves emotionally to the possibilities of the universe. Through prayer we expose our emotions and are more vulnerable, which can be frightening and uncomfortable, but it is only through that vulnerability that we can grow beyond ourselves.

Because prayer is about accessing our deep emotions, the music of prayer becomes essential. Music has the power to bring our deepest emotions to the surface, enabling us to deal with them. Before I went to Rabbinic School, I had an experience where I had had the worst day of my career at work. The next morning I remember driving downtown and being completely incapable of listening to NPR, which for me is saying a lot. I felt like I had this buzzing in my head and the talk was completely incomprehensible, so I turned it to a rock station. On came Chumbawumba: "I get knocked down, but I get up again, you're never going to keep me down." I did get knocked down, but I was getting up again. They weren't going to keep me down. I was getting up again and I felt great.

During prayer the power of music is even greater. During prayer we open ourselves emotionally and the music lifts us to transcend our surroundings. Think about it for a moment. How many of you have listened to the cantor or the choir and found yourselves feeling greater, more expansive, than you ever have before? When the cantor sings I lose my sense of self and join in singing, usually too loudly. But I can't help it because the music and the prayer move my soul and I lose myself. Music has awe-inspiring spiritual power.

The other aspect of the *keva*, the fixed prayer, that leads us on a spiritual path is the ritualistic nature of the prayers. These prayers have been uttered by millions of Jews over hundreds of years. Even when we do not understand the Hebrew we feel the connection with the generations who came before us and the generations who will go after us. All rituals, whether prayers or lighting candles or eating matzah, connect us through time and space to all other Jews from the past, from today or those yet to be. Through ritual we become part of a greater whole that spans time. The rituals become touchstones in our lives as we journey through the cycles of time, assuring us with a sense of solidity in an uncertain and changing world.

Some find prayer to be very personal and meditative. The repetition of prayers long since memorized frees the mind to make connections where it will. I have to admit, however, meditation tends not to work for me. Certainly I have slipped into a meditative state, but not through any intention. The other day when it was raining I decided to sit on my porch and watch the rain and listen as it came down. At some point I must have slipped into a meditative space because I found that time had passed without my noticing it and the sight of the rain had changed as I lost conscious focus. But I hadn't intended to meditate. Truth be told, I've always felt just a little silly sitting down to meditate, which is probably a direct result of my litvasher outlook.

At Brooklyn Heights Synagogue, where I taught 4th and 6th grades, part of the curriculum was God and relating to God. One class, I decided to teach meditation, so I turned out the lights, had us all sit on the carpet, and we began to sing: "*Kol ha-neshama, t'halleilyah, halleluyah. Kol ha-neshama, t'halleilyah, halleluyah.*" Note to self: never try to teach 4th graders how to meditate. For some, meditation is a powerful path to connection with God, a method to express one's spirituality. But not for me. Or most 4th graders.

In the 19th century, Reform Judaism was founded because of a curious combination of rationality and spirituality. It was founded in rationality because, as a product of the Enlightenment, Reform Judaism wished to practice a religion that made sense. Where the reason for practicing as we do wasn't "because Moses said so, that's why. And just wait until your father gets home." No, Jewish ritual and practice was examined rationally, and those rituals or practices that made no sense were abandoned. What's

curious is how we determined what made sense. The early reformers kept all practices that “elevate the soul”, a spiritual goal if there ever was one.

The Reform Judaism of the 19th century also became known as Prophetic Judaism because of the emphasis on the prophetic books of the Bible. Both Reform Judaism and the prophetic books of the Bible stress the importance of *gemilut hasadim*, acts of loving-kindness and social justice. Yom Kippur morning, during the haftarah, we will read from Isaiah:

To be sure, they seek Me daily,
Eager to learn My ways.
Like a nation that does what is right,
That has not abandoned the laws of its God,
They ask Me for the right way.
They are eager for the nearness of God:
‘Why, when we fasted, did You not see?
When we starved our bodies, did You pay no heed?
Because on your fast day
You see to your business
And oppress all your laborers!
Because you fast in strife and contention,
And you strike with a wicked fist!
Your fasting today is not such
As to make your voice heard on high.
Is such the fast I desire,
A day for men to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush
And lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast,
A day when the Eternal is favorable?
No, this is the fast I desire:
To unlock fetters of wickedness,
And untie the cords of the yoke
To let the oppressed go free;
To break off every yoke.
It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin.¹

Reform Judaism picked up this call to social action because we recognize that one way to elevate the soul, one path to God, runs through *gemilut hasadim*, acts of loving-kindness. That is, as we imitate God we become closer to God. The rabbis ask, how can we finite humans imitate God to draw near to God? They answer that just as God clothed Adam

and Eve, so too should we clothe the naked. Just as God visited Abraham as he was healing, so too should we visit the sick. Just as God blessed Isaac after the death of Abraham, so too should we comfort mourners. Just as God buried Moses so too should we bury the dead.² We imitate God by doing the same acts of social justice as God did and we draw near to God as we do our share to help perfect God's world. To perform acts of loving-kindness, *gemilut hasadim*, is to walk a spiritual path.

Behold this Rosh Hashanah, this beginning of a new year. We are filled with awe as we sense the spiritual power of this day. This day is the day we seek You, O God. We seek You down many paths: through prayer and song; through meditation and relationship; through acts of loving-kindness. We open ourselves to the mystery of being, seeking, asking, beseeching that You enter our lives this day.

May this day be a day of opening and seeking.

May this day be a day of returning.

May this day be a day of finding.

May this day be only the beginning.

Amen v'amen.

For more on the subject of spirituality I recommend the following:

Six Jewish Spiritual Paths: A Rationalist Looks at Spirituality by Rifat Sonsino

The Way Into Encountering God in Judaism by Neil Gillman

The Way Into Jewish Mystical Tradition by Lawrence Kushner

The Book of Psalms

¹ Isaiah 58:2-7

² See Babylonian Talmud, Sotah, 14a