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# THE JEWISH VISION OF SPIRITUALITY I

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## The Quest for an Authentic Spiritual Connection

When people think of and try to define “spirituality,” their references may be from a Christian or a Far Eastern perspective rather than a Jewish one. In Christianity or Buddhism, for example, a holy person is an individual who strives to separate himself from the world, living a hermit-like existence, in complete abstinence from all things worldly. In contrast, Jewish spirituality is achieved primarily through our involvement in the physical world and through our dealings with people, which imbues our experiences and interactions with meaning.

Jewish spirituality is the development and strengthening of an eternal relationship with God – the absolute One Source of transcendent meaning, values, truth and goodness in the universe. God created, sustains, and guides the universe to its destiny and established a framework for mankind to actualize their potential by using free will through Torah study and mitzvah observance. This framework is absolutely comprehensive, for Judaism sees an opportunity for spiritual growth in everything that we do to fulfill our collective and personal missions in life.

Judaism sees enormous spiritual potential in all of mankind, in time itself, and in the physical world. However, Judaism does not subscribe to Pantheism, the notion that “God is everything and everything is God.” Not everything is inherently holy. Rather, there are both instances of intrinsic spirituality, such as Shabbat and the Land of Israel, and there is potential for spirituality through our thought, speech and actions.

Four Morasha shiurim address spirituality. This first class offers a definition and framework for Jewish spirituality. The remaining classes describe the pathways for spiritual development, expression and connection in mankind, time, space, within structures (e.g., synagogue) and through certain objects (e.g., Torah scrolls, mezuzah). As such, we will see how immeasurable spiritual potential can be harnessed at every moment during our journey through life, and even beyond!

One important caveat: we cannot expect that by studying these four shiurim alone we will achieve total clarity and understanding of Jewish spirituality. It is in fact a lifetime endeavor! For Judaism is a way of life based on continuous study and action to strive to integrate Jewish ideals. A truer introduction to the depth and breadth of Jewish spirituality can be gained by studying the following Morasha classes as a series: Introduction to the Purpose of Man in the World, Caring for the Jewish Soul, Free Will, Hashgachah Pratit, The Jewish Vision of Spirituality, Prayer, The Jewish Vision of Happiness, The Mitzvot and Why They Are Detailed, Shabbat, The World Was

Established for Chesed, The System of Halachah, Personal Growth and Development, Dating and Marriage, Defining One's Role in Life, Kabbalah, and the World to Come.

This class we will address the following questions:

- ✧ How did the first Jew discover God and what can we learn from his journey?
- ✧ What is the Jewish definition of spirituality?
- ✧ What are the means to actualize a person's spirituality?
- ✧ Is Jewish spirituality only for Sages and Rabbis?

### **Class Outline:**

- Section I.        Following a Boldly, Thoughtfully Blazed Path
- Section II.      Defining Jewish Spirituality – Forging a Connection to God
- Section III.     Torah Study and Mitzvot are the Spiritual Connectors
  - Part A. Intellectual & Volitional: Torah Study and Mitzvot
  - Part B. Prayer - Tefillah
  - Part C. Emotional: Ahavat Hashem
- Section IV.      Developing a Spiritual Attitude – Becoming Holy

## SECTION I. FOLLOWING A BOLDLY, THOUGHTFULLY BLAZED PATH

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How does one approach finding or enhancing one's spirituality? Books, internet sites, and TV offer a limitless amount of advice for seekers of spirituality. Depending on one's taste, there is an abundance of opportunity to begin a spiritual search: new wave spirituality, traditional organized religions, Far Eastern philosophy, meditation and retreats. The following incident sheds light on how a Jewish person can relate to the search for spirituality.

*What would happen if one of the greatest violinists alive, playing on a Stradivarius worth several million dollars, was plunked into the sterile environment of a Washington D.C. metro station at the height of morning rush hour? Would anyone stop to listen? Would anyone recognize the genius, the soaring beauty of the playing?*

*Gene Weingarten, a Washington Post staff writer, was determined to find out. The idea was born two years ago, when Weingarten left a crowded metro station and noticed a ragged-looking man playing the keyboard. The musician was quite good, but he was receiving virtually no notice. Looking at the amorphous mass of humanity rushing by, Weingarten felt a surge of anger. The thought crossed his mind that even the greatest of musicians wouldn't be able to touch these rushing creatures. But he decided to test his hypothesis before indicting the public.*

*The result was an intriguing social experiment. Weingarten approached Joshua Bell, one of the finest classical musicians in the world. Bell, 39, is a consummate violinist who plays before awe-struck crowds across the globe. His instrument is a violin crafted by Antonio Stradivari in 1713, at the end of the Italian master's career. Bell purchased the violin at an auction several years ago, for 3.5 million dollars. Bell and his violin are musical mastery at its absolute height.*

*Bell acquiesced to the request with surprising ease. Finding a venue proved more difficult, as metro laws forbid busking, but Weingarten overcame this obstacle when he discovered a station with an indoor arcade owned by a private company. The owner graciously agreed to allow the experiment to take place. The stage was set.*

*On Jan. 12, 2007, at 7:51 on a Friday morning, Bell, dressed in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt, and a Washington Nationals baseball cap, opened his violin case, threw a few dollars in as seed money, and began to play. The pieces he performed were not popular, well-known ditties. They were complex, breathtaking masterpieces that have endured for centuries. Bell put his heart and soul into his music, coaxing pristine, resonant notes from his instrument. He played six pieces in 43 minutes. During that time, 1,097 people walked by the virtuoso. Only seven stopped to hear the music for more than a minute. Twenty-seven tossed in some money while hurrying on. The rest rushed by in oblivion.*

*Weingarten wrote up the results of his experiment early April in the Washington Post, two days before Joshua Bell accepted the Avery Fisher Prize, the greatest honor a classical musician in America can receive. And the reactions poured in. "This story got the largest and most global response of anything I have ever written, for any publication," remarked Weingarten. Over 1,000 comments came from around the globe. More than ten percent of the readers wrote that the article made them cry. Cry for the deadened souls that couldn't stop to appreciate the beauty that surrounded them. Cry for the lost moments, the opportunities that slip through our hands never to return. Cry for the rush of life which sucks up the essence of life itself.*

*Like the vast majority of readers, I found myself contemplating how I would have reacted had I been at the L'enfant Plaza station in D.C. that Friday morning. Surely, I thought, I would have noticed the brilliant music, even if I was rushing past on my way to work. How could I not have been one of the select few who grasped that this musician, this music, was different? (Oblivious to the Music by Bassi Gruen from [www.aish.com](http://www.aish.com))*

How would you have reacted? Do you think you would have noticed the virtuoso in the metro? Are there other things we aren't noticing because life is moving so fast?

In Judaism, the search for spirituality starts by developing an appreciation for the obvious things a person can observe in his or her world. The first Jew, Avraham, started his journey toward God by making these observations, and then asking a very simple question: whose world is it?

**1. Bereishit (Genesis) Rabbah 39:1 – Avraham looks at the world and realizes that the order he sees is a sign of intelligent planning.**

Rabbi Yitzchak said, “There was once a person who was traveling from place to place when he saw a palace that was illuminated. He wondered, ‘Is it conceivable that this palace is without a caretaker?’ Thereupon, the ruler of the palace appeared to him and said, ‘I am the ruler of this palace and its caretaker.’”

Similarly, because Avraham our father wondered, “Is it conceivable that this world is without a caretaker?” therefore, the Holy One, Blessed be He, appeared to him and said, “I am the Master of the universe and its Caretaker.”

אמר רבי יצחק מושל לאחד שהיה עובר ממקום למקום, וראה בירה אחת דולקת אמר תאמר שהבירה הזו בלא מנהיג, הציץ עליו בעל הבירה, אמר לו אני הוא בעל הבירה.

כך לפי שהיה אבינו אברהם אומר תאמר שהעולם הזה בלא מנהיג, הציץ עליו הקב"ה ואמר לו אני הוא בעל העולם.

How was it that Avraham was able to perceive what anyone else could have noticed had they been paying a bit more attention? First, Avraham was objective in his search for spirituality and was prepared to accept the conclusions of his exploration. Second, Avraham recognized that God’s very creation of humanity – that He gives us life, and empowers us with the faculties and resources to live independently with free will – is the greatest possible *chesed* (kindness). Since our “Host” is God, we are all guests in “His home” every second of our existence. Third, Avraham’s discovery of God led him to a revolutionary conclusion: that God set up the world in such a way that we are His creation partners in *tikun olam* (completing the world) by emulating his attributes, and one paramount way to accomplish that is for us to practice *chesed*. (Based on Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz, Jerusalem Kollel and Rabbi Avraham Edelstein, Ner Le’Elef – see below Section III. C1.)

**2. Adapted from Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz, How Torah Nourishes the Soul, audio class from [www.classicsinai.com](http://www.classicsinai.com) – Avraham asked the question with a willingness to accept the answer.**

Everyone saw “the palace” and benefited from its light. They looked at this world and harnessed its power for the betterment of their own quality of life. The novelty in Avraham’s approach was that he did not look at the world as a tool for the fulfillment of his own wants and desires. He recognized that the world has an Owner, and he wanted to know what that Owner wants. Avraham wasn’t in it for himself; he wanted to do God’s will no matter what the cost. Spirituality begins with the selfless motivation of benefiting the other even at one’s own expense.

In every other religion, the founder of that religion is credited with some kind of supernatural grasp of the truth. But in Judaism, the forefather associated with truth is not Avraham but Yaakov (Jacob), Avraham’s grandson. Avraham himself is associated with the trait of *chesed*, loving-kindness. “Grant truth to Yaakov, *chesed* to Avraham” (Micha/Micah 7:20).

One might have expected the founder of the religion to be the one associated with the truth. After all, it is Avraham who is credited with arriving at the truth of God’s existence all on his own. But Judaism

doesn't begin with *the* truth; it begins with *a* truth – that if one wants to find God then he has to be committed to following in His ways, come what may, committed to benefiting others, committed to God's vision instead of one's own.

Avraham might not be known as the unique representative of the Divine attribute of truth; that is Yaakov's distinction. Still, the kindness of Avraham is the *foundation* of truth and the starting point for all those who seek it.

**3. Rabbi Yaakov Haber and David Sedley, Sefirot – Seeing the world as God's world requires stepping out of the egocentric perspective.**

Avraham's first and primary *chesed* was that he discovered God, while surrounded with idols and falsehood, and began to proclaim His existence to the world. To do so he had to escape from his preconceived notions, from the way he was nurtured and the comfort of familiarity. He had to see things as they really were, without the filters of ego and self.

To discover the "artist" one must remove oneself from the picture and seek truth. Irrespective of the consequences or result of discovering it. This process requires *chesed*.

The starting point, then, in our quest for exploring Jewish spirituality is the willingness to go beyond one's personal self-centered needs as demonstrated by *chesed*, and being objective, willing to accept the consequences of one's search. And the entire process takes serious effort.

**4. Rabbi Avraham Twerski, MD, The Spiritual Self, Hazelden Press, p. 32 – The crux of spirituality is to roll up our sleeves and get to work.**

In the search for purpose we must be brutally honest and frank. If we are searching for truth, we must be prepared to accept the consequences of truth. The fundamental difficulty in the search for purpose is that if we do find an ultimate purpose, we feel ourselves committed to fulfill it, and that is indeed a responsibility. It is much more convenient to avoid the entire concept.

This is the crux of the issue of spirituality. Spirituality and comfort are often at opposite poles. If the way to spirituality were comfortable, most of humankind might have chosen it. It is, however, a long and challenging path, often requiring a basic reorientation of one's character, with patience, perseverance, and preparedness for whatever comes.

When I travel through the countryside, I often begin to reflect on the various aspects of spirituality, and it has occurred to me how much calmer and more tranquil life would be if we were free of such turbulence-causing thoughts. Then I pass by a field where cows are out to pasture, and I see how tranquil they are, lying in the warm sun, chewing their cud. At this point I take pride in being a human being and conclude that I am willing to pay the price of turbulence rather than have bovine tranquility.

An additional explanation of the Midrash above relates that Avraham did not see a palace *lit up* but rather a palace *in flames*.

**5. Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Morasha Jerusalem – The Midrash teaches that the world is a struggle between good and evil, and mankind is responsible for both.**

Most commentators translate this Midrash as, "a palace ablaze." And then the whole recognition of Avraham assumes another depth: he saw that the world is a struggle between good and evil, and he

asked; “How can it be that no one extinguishes the fire?” And to this question he answers, “I am the one responsible for both the good and the evil.”

That is, Avraham discovered a world that contains both good and evil and he was responsible for both – actualizing the good and subduing the evil (extinguishing the flames).

**6. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Radical Then, Radical Now*, pp. 54-55 – Avraham’s mission was to make the world resemble God’s plan for it.**

Avraham sees a palace. The world has order, and therefore it has a Creator. But the palace is in flames. The world is full of *disorder*, of evil, violence and injustice... If God created the world, then He created man. Why then does He allow man to destroy the world? How are we to resolve the order of nature with the disorder of society? Can God have made the world only to abandon it?

From time immemorial to the present, there have always been two ways of seeing the world. The first says: There is no God. There are contending forces, chance and necessity, the chance that produces variation and the necessity that gives the strong victory over the weak... There is no palace. There are only flames.

The second view insists that there is God. All that exists because He made it. All that happens transpires because He willed it. Therefore all injustice is an illusion... There is a palace. Therefore there are no flames.

The faith of Avraham begins in the refusal to accept either answer, for both contain a truth, and between them there is a contradiction. The first accepts the reality of evil, the second the reality of God. The first says that if evil exists, God does not exist. The second says that if God exists, evil does not exist. But supposing both exist? Supposing there are both the palace and the flames?

Judaism begins not in wonder that the world is, but in protest that the world is not as it ought to be. It is in that cry, that sacred discontent, that Avraham’s journey begins. At the heart of reality is a contradiction between order and chaos, the order of creation and the chaos we create. There is no resolution to this conflict at the level of thought. It can be resolved only at the level of action, only by making the world other than what it is. When things are as they ought to be, *then* we have reached our destination. But that is not now: it was not now for Avraham, nor is it yet for us.

This does not mean that Avraham’s vision of God was dualistic. He understood that God is in control of both good and evil, and he was initially confused as to why God permitted evil to happen. His conclusion was that God wants *us* to reveal His goodness by ridding the world of evil. Therefore, this is the deeper level of our spiritual journey: to recognize that God created the world with the possibility of evil in order to ultimately reveal His unity by the triumph of good over evil. (See further Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Daat Tevunot* [The Knowing Heart]) Consequently, in our search for spirituality we recognize that: 1) We live in a world that reflects the *chesed* of God, which calls for being objective and accepting the consequences of our search; 2) The pursuit of genuine spirituality requires hard work and often requires a basic reorientation of one’s character; 3) It is mankind’s actions that lead to a world characterized by either good or evil, where we need to take responsibility for our actions. This is the expression of our spirituality. In this context, we can now proceed to explore the Jewish definition of spirituality.

## KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ≈ We begin our search for spirituality by retracing the steps of the first man to discover God on his own, Avraham Avinu. To our surprise we find that Avraham's central characteristic is one of kindness, not truth, as we would have expected for the founder of our faith.
- ≈ Avraham discovered God not despite his focus on kindness but because of it. In order to follow the spiritual path, he needed to go beyond his own ego and see the world as God saw it; and he needed to be committed to following God's path no matter where it may take him.
- ≈ Avraham was motivated by the altruistic desire to fix the world for the sake of God and mankind. His path to spirituality is one of action, not thought.
- ≈ The pursuit of genuine spirituality requires hard work and often requires a basic reorientation of one's character.
- ≈ Avraham discovered a world that contains both good and evil; mankind is responsible for both – actualizing the good and subduing the evil.

## SECTION II. DEFINING SPIRITUALITY – FORGING A CONNECTION TO GOD

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*A young man once came to Rabbi Noach Weinberg (the founder of Aish HaTorah) complaining that he had come to Jerusalem looking for spirituality. But after a few weeks he hadn't found any of the spirituality he was looking for, and was planning on going to India instead.*

*"You know, I wanted something kind of, um, you know, holy and spiritual, like. Like, there's no holiness here or something."*

*"I admire your pursuit, and I'm sorry you didn't find what you were looking for" said Rav Noach. "But tell me, before you move on, have you ever seen a bafoofstick?"*

*"A what?" asked the young man, smiling and wondering at the relevance of the rabbi's nonsensical question.*

*"I said, have you ever seen a bafoofstick? You know, a bafoofstick!"*

*"I don't know what you're talking about. And anyway, how could I tell you if I ever saw a bafoofstick when I don't know what it is? Maybe I saw one, and I didn't know I was looking at one!"*

*"Ah!" exclaimed the Rav Noach. "How can you tell me you never found any holiness when you don't have a definition for what it is? Maybe you found holiness every day in Jerusalem but you didn't know it was in front of your eyes! Let's define holiness, and then set out to find it!" (Heard from Rabbi Yitzchak Coopersmith, Aish HaTorah, Jerusalem)*

How do we define the term "spirituality"? If we don't know what we're looking for, then we're certain not to find it.

The essential path to Jewish spirituality is connecting to God, the Source of all existence, Who created, supervises and directs the universe.



### 1. **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 4:4 – Closeness to God is true life.**

And you, the ones who are attached to God your Lord, are all alive today.

ואתם הדבקים ביקוק אלהיכם חיים כלכם היום:

### 2. **Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto), Mesilat Yesharim (The Path of the Just) Ch. 1 – Closeness to God is the only thing of value in this world.**

When you look further into the matter, you will see that only union with God constitutes true perfection, as King David said (Psalms 73:28), “But as for me, the nearness of God is my good,” and (ibid. 27:4), “I asked one thing from God; that is what I will seek - to dwell in God’s house all the days of my life...” For this alone is the true good, and anything else that people deem good is nothing but emptiness and deceptive worthlessness.

וכשתסתכל בדבר תראה כי השלמות האמיתי הוא רק הדבקות בו יתברך, והוא מה שהיה דוד המלך אומר (תהלים עג:כח) ואני קרבת אלקים לי טוב. ואומר (שם כז:ד) אחת שאלתי מאת ה' אותה אבקש- שבת בבית ה' כל ימי חיי וגו', כי רק זה הוא הטוב. וכל זולת זה שיחשבוהו בני האדם לטוב, אינו אלא הבל ושוא נטעה.

What does it mean to be “attached” to God? How can one be “close” to Him? In reality, since He is everywhere, aren’t we always close to Him in that sense? The theological belief that God is everywhere does not mean that each of us experiences God’s presence in the same way. As Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, the Kotzker Rebbe, was fond of saying, “Where is God? Wherever you let Him in!” Our closeness to God is not up to Him; it is up to us. He is only as close to us as we are to Him. Yet the potential for a close connection is innate since the essence of our being is our Divine soul.

### 3. **Rabbi Jeremy Kagan, The Jewish Self, Feldheim Publishers, pp. 22-23 – The soul is the life-force that connects each person to the Divine Source.**

Man was initially formed from the earth. This gave him existence with mobility, sensory experience, and rudimentary emotions. What the Torah considers life however only came with the addition of a Divine soul. God blew His breath into man’s nose, and he came “alive.” The Hebrew term for soul, *neshama*, reflects this origin for it comes from the root *neshima*, meaning breath. The soul is the “breath” of God.

The Torah clearly wishes to convey the fundamental nature of the relationship between God and man. Breath is the basis of life. The breath of the Creator connotes the basis of His “life.” Such a concept seems odd when applied to the Creator, the source of all existence. The meaning becomes clear when we realize that the Torah specifically associates the term “life” with physical expression of spiritual essence. The breath of God refers to the basis of His expression and connection with physical reality. When the Torah states that God breathed a living soul into man, it means that, as the Creator took on physical expression through the act of creation, man became the focus of that expression.

This definition of life also explains why man came to “life” only with the infusion of a Divine soul. This soul gave the man the ability to speak. Speech is the most rarified form in which spiritual essence takes on particular physical expression, and as such is the bridge across which the spiritual realm actually enters physical reality. God “breathes” through man, for man is the one through whom the Creator connects with His creation. We are man only when we fulfill this role, and every dimension of human experience offers its own unique opportunity for doing so. Whether in prayers to the Creator, contemplating the Divine root of our own being, relating to the image of God which is everyone, [or through *halacha* (Jewish law)], we must always strive to connect the finite physical world to its Infinite Source.



Judaism teaches that developing a closeness to God is the very purpose of our existence. This precept is so central to our religion that the Code of Jewish law, the Shulchan Aruch – a work not normally given to philosophy and ethics – opens by telling us about it.

4. **Rabbi Moshe Isserles (Remah), Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 1:1 – Awareness of God's immediate presence is fundamental to Jewish living.**

Scripture says, "I placed God before me always" (Tehillim/Psalms 16:8). This principle is fundamental to the Torah and to the virtues of the Righteous who walk in the way of God. "For the way in which a person sits, moves around, and carries out his daily activities while he is alone in his house is not the same way he would engage in these activities while standing before a great king. Neither is the way one speaks while amongst those in his home and converses with his relatives the same as the way he would speak while in the presence of a mortal King" (Rambam [Maimonides], Guide for the Perplexed 3:52). All the more so then when one considers that the mighty King, The Holy One blessed be His name, of Whom the whole world is filled with His glory, stands before him and sees his deeds!

שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד (תהילים טז, ח), הוא כלל גדול בתורה ובמעלות הצדיקים אשר הולכים לפני האלהים, "כי אין ישיבת האדם ותנועותיו ועסקיו והוא לבדו בביתו, כישיבתו ותנועותיו ועסקיו והוא לפני מלך גדול, ולא דבורו והרחבת פיו כרצונו והוא עם אנשי ביתו וקרוביו, כדבורו במושב המלך" (רמב"ם, מורה נבוכים ג, נב). כ"ש כשישים האדם אל לבו שהמלך הגדול הקב"ה, אשר מלא כל הארץ כבודו, עומד עליו ורואה במעשיו.

Rabbi Chaim Friedlander spells out for us Rambam's metaphor of conducting oneself as though in the presence of royalty.

5. **Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Siftei Chaim, Midot ve-Avodat Hashem, Vol. 1, pp. 406-407 – Actions done in the presence of royalty carry more weight; how much more so those done in the presence of God.**

When a person speaks to his family in his own house, he speaks freely, saying whatever comes to mind. The speech flows, and he does not think about his words, seeing no need to watch them. But were he "in the residence of the king," where the king is found with all of his advisors, he would weigh each word that leaves his mouth.

When a person finds himself in the palace of a king, and must conduct himself in the presence of that king and his entourage, knowing that the king will be examining his actions, then he realizes that each of his actions has importance. As such, he will certainly deliberate well regarding each thing that he does, whether or not it will be pleasing in the eyes of the king.

כאשר אדם מדבר עם בני ביתו הוא מרחיב את פיו ומדבר ככל העולה על רוחו והדיבורים שופעים ואינו חושב על מילותיו ולא רואה צורך לקצר בהם אבל בהיותו ב"מושב המלך" שבו נמצאים המלך וכל שריו הוא שוקל כל מילה היוצאת מפיו.

כאשר אדם נמצא בארמון המלך ועושה את פעולותיו בפני המלך ופמלייתו וידע שהמלך מתבונן במעשיו, מכך הוא מבין שלכל תנועה שעושה יש חשיבות א"כ בודאי יחשוב היטב על כל מעשה שעושה איך יהיה לרצון בעיני המלך.

In the next Section we will explore how to make that connection to God.

## KEY THEMES OF SECTION II.

- ≈ God's purpose in creating the world, and hence the ultimate good for us, is that we should develop a connection with Him, drawing ourselves closer to Him. Practically speaking it means developing an awareness of God's presence and appreciate that He is the source of meaning, and that He alone empowers us with the ability to accomplish.
- ≈ Each of us is created with a Divine soul, the life-force that intrinsically connects us to God.

## SECTION III. TORAH STUDY AND MITZVOT ARE THE SPIRITUAL CONNECTORS

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As we have seen, Judaism maintains that our purpose here is to build a relationship with God. For that connection to grow, we need to develop an awareness of God and establish a relationship with Him. Judaism's method for achieving this awareness of God and bringing Him into our lives is through Torah study and its mitzvot. By applying the range of our faculties through Torah study, fulfilling God's commandments, prayer and expressing our devotion to God, we achieve closeness to Him.

### 1. Rabbi Abraham Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav*, p. 71 – We use the range of our faculties to build a relationship with God.

There are four media through which man reaches out to God, transcending his finiteness and communicating with Infinity. These are the intellectual, *limmud* (Torah study); the volitional, *shemirat hamitzvot* (observance of the Torah commandments); *tefillah* (prayer); and the emotional, *ahavat Hashem* (love of God).

### PART A. INTELLECTUAL AND VOLITIONAL: TORAH STUDY AND FULFILLING THE MITZVOT

#### 1. Rambam, *Hilchot Talmud Torah* (Laws of Torah Study) 3:3 – Torah study is the most important mitzvah because it teaches one how to act.

There is no mitzvah that is equal to that of Torah study. Rather, Torah study is equal to all of the mitzvot together. The reason for this is that study leads to practice.

אין לך מצוה בכל המצוות כולן שהיא שקולה כנגד תלמוד תורה אלא תלמוד תורה כנגד כל המצוות כולן, שהתלמוד מביא לידי מעשה.

The goal of Torah study is proper action, while proper actions are impossible without intensive Torah study. The two are inseparable. A mitzvah is a concretizing of the Torah; it expresses and maintains the wisdom one absorbs through Torah study.

#### 2. Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene, *Set in Stone*, p. 31, Targum Press – Each mitzvah we fulfill intrinsically connects us with God.

Judaism is not as much a religion as it is a relationship. It is only through mitzvah observance that man can build a deep, enduring, and meaningful relationship with God ...

That a mitzvah is the very process of forging the bond [with God] is contained within the very word מצוה, “commandment,” closely related to the word צוותא, meaning a connection or a binding.

Let us note that God is inherently perfect, and it is therefore obvious that He did not give any of the commandments for His own needs. Rather, God gave the commandments for a purely altruistic motive, for the sole good of the recipients. The mitzvot were therefore given as a means through which God fulfills His altruistic purpose in creation, and are all primarily for the benefit of those who observe them.

### 3. Devarim 6:24 – God gave us the Torah for our own good.

God commanded us to perform all these decrees, to fear God our Lord, for our own good for all time, to give us life as this very day.

ויצונו יקוק לעשות את כל החקים האלה ליראה את יקוק אלהינו לטוב לנו כל הימים לחיתנו כהיום הזה:

### 4. Ramchal, Mesilat Yesharim, Chap. 1 – The mitzvot are the means through which mankind unites with God.

For a man to attain this good, it is certainly fitting that he first labor and persevere in his exertions to acquire it. That is, he should try to unite himself with the Blessed One by means of actions which result in this end. These actions are the mitzvot.

אמנם לכשיזכה האדם לטובה הזאת, ראוי שיעמול ראשונה וישתדל ביגיעו לקנותה, והיינו שישתדל לידבק בו יתברך בכח מעשים שתולדתם זה הענין והם הם המצוות.

### 5. Ramban (Nachmanides), Shemot 13:16 – All mitzvot reinforce Jewish belief in God, Divine Providence, and our appreciation for being created.

Our Sages taught that “One should be just as careful with a light mitzvah as with a grave mitzvah that people treat seriously” (Avot/Ethics of the Fathers 2:41), because all mitzvot are precious and coveted. This is because every time a person fulfills any mitzvah, he acknowledges God. And the purpose of all the mitzvot is for us to believe in God and to thank Him for creating us.

אמרו (אבות פ”ב מ”א) הוי זהיר במצוה קלה כבחמורה שכולן חמדות וחביבות מאד, שבכל שעה אדם מודה בהן לאלהיו, וכוונת כל המצוות שנאמין באלהינו ונודה אליו שהוא בראנו.

There are two general types of commandments: 1) positive mitzvot (מצוות עשה), proactive actions enhancing our spirituality (such as practicing chesed, honesty in business dealings, and prayer) and 2) negative commandments (מצוות לא תעשה), mitzvot which both protect us from undermining our spirituality as well as enhance our holiness (such as the prohibitions against stealing, harmful speech, and eating on Yom Kippur).

Halachah, Jewish law, translates Torah ideals and mitzvot into concrete behavior.

### 6. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Halakhic Man, p. 59 – Halachah translates Torah ideals into concrete action.

The Halachah, which was given to us from Sinai, is the objectification of religion in clear and determined forms, in precise and authoritative laws, and in definite principles. It translates subjectivity into objectivity, the amorphous flow of religious experience into a fixed pattern of lawfulness.

7. **Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Siftei Chaim, Midot ve-Avodat Hashem, Vol. 1, p. 406 – The mitzvot enhance one's awareness of being in God's presence.**

Fulfilling all the details of the laws written in the Shulchan Aruch should bring a person to a feeling of "I have placed God before me always," that whatever he thinks, does, or says is done in God's presence, and that every act should be a fulfillment of His will. As such, the feeling of being in God's presence is at once the reason for keeping the Torah and mitzvot as well as the outcome of doing so.

קיום כל פרטי ההלכות הכתובים בשלחן ערוך או"ח צריכים להביא את האדם להרגשה של "שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד", שכל מה שחושב ועושה ומדבר הוא מול פני ה', וכל תנועה צריכה להיות קיום רצונו יתברך. אם כן הרגשת נוכחות ה' היא סיבה לקיום התורה והמצוות ותוצאה ממנה.

See further the Morasha series on The System of Halachah.

## PART B. PRAYER - TEFILLAH

Through our prayers we communicate directly with God.

1. **Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Mesilat Yesharim, Chap. 19 – Prayer is a form of work because it involves a negotiation with God.**

The first [of three things that a person must consider in order to acquire a fear of G-d] is that he [must know that he] is actually standing in the presence of the Creator, Blessed be His Name, and is *nosei v'notein* [literally, negotiating or exchanging] with Him even though He cannot be seen. This is the hardest [of the three], namely, for a person to create a true picture [of this concept] in his heart while he is not at all aided by his senses. However, one who is of sound intellect will, with a little thought and attention, be able to implant in his heart the truth of how he is actually discoursing with the Blessed One; he implores before Him and entreats Him, and the Blessed One listens to him and is attentive to his words in the same way that a man, speaking to his friend, is heard and is listened to.

האחד שהוא עומד ממש לפני הבורא יתברך שמו ונושא ונותן עמו, אף על פי שאין עינו של אדם רואהו, ותראה כי זה הוא היותר קשה שיצטייר בלב האדם ציור אמיתי, יען אין החוש עוזר לזה כלל, אמנם מי שהוא בעל שכל נכון, במעט התבוננות ושימת לב, יוכל לקבוע בלבו אמיתת הדבר, איך הוא בא ונושא ונותן ממש עמו יתברך, ולפניו הוא מתחנן ומאתו הוא מבקש, והוא יתברך שמו מאזין לו מקשיב לדבריו, כאשר ידבר איש אל רעהו ורעהו מקשיב שומע אליו.

2. **Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Prayer: Creating Dialogue with Hashem, pp. 16-17 – Prayer is built on the understanding that God shares a common interest with mankind.**

What we see from the Mesilat Yesharim here is the description of prayer as a *masa u'matan*, an exchange or negotiation. Two parties enter into negotiations only when they share a common interest. A scientist who invents a new type of toothpaste is not going to enter into a *masa u'matan* with the owner of a shoe factory, because they do not share an interest in dental hygiene. The premise underlying any negotiation is that what is being discussed is of mutual concern. Out of this mutual concern flows an exchange, where each party presents his needs and, in turn, listens to the needs of the other.

Accordingly, when the Mesilat Yesharim describes prayer as a *masa u'matan* with Hashem, the clear implication is that He is not merely the Source of everything we receive, but He is also personally interested in the requests of *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish People). If we do not view prayer as such – meaning, with the understanding that all our needs are a matter of His personal concern – then prayer is no more than a person's expression of his dependency on the Creator, hardly a situation one would describe as a *masa u'matan*. Its only purpose, then, would be to uproot man's false sense of independence and self-sufficiency.

Prayer, however, is nothing like *hishtadlut* (effort) which may or may not prove fruitful. Prayer has a guaranteed outcome because God is interested in our needs, and wants to bestow His goodness upon us. God isn't just another "address" to approach in an effort to fulfill our needs. Prayer is engaging God in, so to speak, a face-to-face dialogue – a personal and dynamic encounter. We present God with our requests from our perspective. We discuss them with Him, we even argue with Him over them. In turn, God's presence is evident in our lives, and when we feel His presence, the outcome will definitely be the best possible bestowment of goodness upon us, because His ultimate desire is to bestow goodness upon His creatures.

### PART C. EMOTIONAL: AHAVAT HASHEM, LOVE OF GOD.

When we become aware that God is the source of all existence (including our own), that He intrinsically endows life with meaning, and that He empowers us with skills, attributes and resources (material and spiritual) to accomplish, we feel love toward Him. This is articulated in the Shema:

#### 1. Devarim 6:4-5 – Acceptance of God as the single Source of all existence, as well as the mitzvah to love God.

Listen, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד: וְאַהֲבַתְּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ  
בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ:

#### 2. Rambam, Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 4:12 – A person comes to love God by appreciating the Divine wisdom in creation.

When a man ponders these matters and understands all creation...and he becomes aware of the wisdom of God which is manifest in all creation, he feels additional love for God, and his soul and body desire to love Him.

בזמן שאדם מתבונן בדברים האלו ומכיר כל  
הברואים... ויראה חכמתו של הקב"ה בכל היצורים וכל  
הברואים, מוסיף אהבה למקום ותצמא נפשו ויכמה  
בשרו לאהוב המקום ברוך הוא.

#### 3. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Horeb, p. 25 – Recognizing that God is the Creator and Sustainer of all existence, infusing life with meaning, inspires one to love Him.

To "love" [someone] means to feel one's own being only through and in the being of another. To "love God," therefore, means to feel that one's own existence and activity are rendered possible and obtain value and significance only through God and in God. You exist and are something only through God; and therefore in all that you do, you have only to strive to reach God – that is, to perform His will. To love God and to love His Torah is the same thing; for to love God means nothing until you begin to love His Torah.

## KEY THEMES OF SECTION III.

- ≈ By applying the range of our faculties through Torah study, fulfilling God's commandments, prayer and expressing our devotion to God, we develop a relationship with Him.
- ≈ Torah study is viewed as equal to all of the mitzvot together. The reason is that study leads to practice. The goal of Torah study is proper action, while proper actions are impossible without intensive Torah study. The two are inseparable.
- ≈ Through our prayers we communicate directly with God. Prayer is built on the understanding that God is genuinely interested in mankind.
- ≈ When we become aware that God is the Source of all existence, intrinsically endows life with meaning, and empowers us with skills, attributes and resources to accomplish, we feel love toward Him. We articulate these feelings through the Shema.

## SECTION IV. DEVELOPING A SPIRITUAL ATTITUDE - BECOMING HOLY

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What does a person who embraces a Jewish spiritual path look like? Many may answer this question by pointing to a Sage. But this is misleading, for a spiritual life is a Jewish ideal for *every single person*. As we discussed in the Introduction, Judaism teaches that we engage the physical world, whether through our work, communal activities or hobbies – and strive to elevate it. Every Jewish person, independent of profession or status has the potential for holiness. The Torah provides a framework that guides us to be spiritual, and a manifestation of that spirituality is becoming holy. What does that mean?

### 1. Vayikra (Leviticus) 19:1-2 – God tells us to be holy.

God spoke to Moshe, telling him to speak to the entire Jewish people and say to them: You must be holy, since I am God your Lord [and] I am holy.

וידבר יקוק אל משה לאמר: דבר אל כל עדת בני ישראל ואמרת אליהם קדשים תהיו כי קדוש אני יקוק אלהיכם:

The Torah commands us “*kedoshim tiheyu* (Be Holy).” Rashi understands that “be holy” means that we should refrain from specific actions incompatible with holiness. We achieve some of this holiness whenever we observe any negative commandment. This type of holiness is called *tahara*, purity. For example, when one has the urge to use improper speech yet restrains himself, he is considered holy!

There is a second meaning of *kedusha* (holiness), one that involves actively bringing holiness into the world. This refers to dedication and participation in spiritual pursuits. This is true of all positive commandments. By these actions, we sanctify the physical world, directing it to towards spiritual goals such as by reciting Kiddush on Friday nights.

Rambam understood the injunction, “To be holy” as relating to both kinds of holiness, *tahara* as well as *kedusha*. This is manifest by marriage. When a couple marries, their very union is called in Hebrew *kedushin* – sanctification – which is the holiness of marriage. This means absolute dedication to one's spouse on the one hand, and total abstinence from anyone else, on the other.



2. **Rambam, Sefer HaMitzvot, Introduction, Shoresh 4- The primary method of achieving holiness is by fulfilling the mitzvot of the Torah.**

“You shall be holy” [Vayikra 19:2] and “And sanctify yourselves and you shall become holy” [ibid. 20:7/11:44] are instructions to fulfill the entire Torah. It is as if [the verse] is saying, “Become holy by doing all the mitzvot and avoiding all the prohibitions.”

...“קדושים תהיו”, “והתקדשתם והייתם קדושים”, הם צוין לקיים כל התורה. כאילו יאמר היה קדוש בהיותך עושה כל מה שצויתך בו ונזהר מכל מה שהזהרתך ממנו.

There is a third understanding of “Be holy.” Even within the framework of the Torah itself it is possible to undermine one’s spirituality! Accompanying one’s performance of the commandments must be an appreciation of the *spirit* of the mitzvot. Eat kosher food – sure...but take caution not to overindulge.

3. **Ramban on Vayikra 19:2 - Holiness requires that we sensitize ourselves to the spirit of the mitzvot, and not just to their technical definitions, because they are meant to turn us into refined human beings.**

“And sanctify yourselves, and you shall become holy” [Vayikra 20:7] – just as I am holy, so too you shall be holy; just as I am separate, so too you shall be separate...

The idea here is as follows: The Torah forbade illicit relations and forbidden foods, yet permitted marital relations and the consumption of meat and wine.

As such, the licentious person has an outlet to be lewd with his wife or to have many wives, to be gluttonous with food and wine, and to speak as he wishes with all manners of vulgarity, for these things are not expressly prohibited in the Torah. So one could be a repulsive individual within the confines of the Torah.

As such the Torah came along, after specifying which things are absolutely prohibited, and commanded us generally to have restraint when it comes to excesses [hence the verse which tells us to “sanctify ourselves and be holy”].

והתקדשתם והייתם קדושים כי קדוש אני, כשם שאני קדוש כך אתם תהיו קדושים, כשם שאני פרוש כך אתם תהיו פרושים...

והענין כי התורה הזהירה בעריות ובמאכלים האסורים והתירה הביאה איש באשתו ואכילת הבשר והיין.

א”כ ימצא בעל התאווה מקום להיות שטוף וכו’ נשיו הרבות, ולהיות בסובאי יין בזוללי בשר למו, וידבר כרצונו בכל הנבלות, שלא הוזכר איסור זה בתורה, והנה יהיה נבל ברשות התורה.

לפיכך בא הכתוב, אחרי שפרט האיסורים שאסר אותם לגמרי, וצוה בדבר כללי שנהיה פרושים מן המותרות.

There is a fourth connotation to “Being Holy.” Performance of the mitzvot can itself become routine; perfunctory actions do not automatically create a strong spiritual connection. Torah study is necessary to discover and understand the enormous depth and meaning of the mitzvot, inspiring us toward spiritual growth.

4. **Vilna Gaon, Mishlei (Proverbs) 19:2 – Studying the rationale of the commandments nourishes our soul and inspires us to observe them.**

“Without wisdom – it is not good for the soul”

“גם בלא דעת נפש לא טוב” – כלומר אם אדם עושה

– this means that if a person just performs mitzvot without accompanying it with Torah study, it will not be good for his soul. This is called doing mitzvot “without wisdom – it is not good for the soul.” His soul will not have pleasure from doing the mitzvot, since he does not know their rationale, and thus does them without enthusiasm.

מצות ואינו עוסק בתורה, לא טוב... כשעושה מצות בלתי דעת, ה"נפש לא טוב", כי אין נהנית הנפש מזה, מחמת שאינו יודע השורש ועושה בלא חשק.

Finally, opportunities for spiritual growth are ubiquitous, whether formally through the mitzvot or through informal actions infused with holiness.

## 5. **Rabbi Avraham Edelstein, Parsha Insights Kedoshim, p. 7 – Every act has spiritual potential.**

It cannot be that God intended that we wait until we have something that we formally call a mitzvah before acting with holiness. For most of our day is not mitzvah-defined! It cannot be that all that God demanded of the holy nation was that they punctuate their day with a few discrete actions and for the rest we are free to play in the playground that is Earth. Be holy! Infuse all your day, especially those things in the vast space between one mitzvah and the next!

The key, says the Ohr Gedalyahu (p. 51), is the tiny act. We have to regard nothing as trivial – nothing as incapable of being infused with holiness. The Jew sees everything as having potential – every smile, every thought, every morsel of food, every gesture honoring our fellow-man – all are fraught with cosmic implications.

*One day after Rav Yaakov Kulefsky, the Dean of Ner Yisroel in Baltimore, had finished delivering his daily shiur, he asked that a few students remain behind. The students gathered around their Rabbi's desk. "I have a special favor to ask of you," Rav Kulefsky began. What could it be? They all wondered. Perhaps he wanted to ask them whether a certain point in the class had been expressed clearly. Possibly he wanted their help collecting money for a worthy cause. Or maybe he needed a ride somewhere. Whatever it was, they were prepared to fulfill their Rabbi's request. However, they were all unprepared for Rav Kulefsky's next words.*

*"There is a liquor that goes by the name of Kimmel. I would like you to buy me a bottle as soon as you can," Rav Kulefsky told them. "This liquor will not be easy to find, I have already tried locating it in a few stores, and they do not carry that brand."*

*The students were more than surprised. They could not understand why a bottle of Kimmel was so important to their Rabbi. But when a teacher asks, a student does first and asks questions later, so the students lost no time to search for a bottle of Kimmel. They called liquor stores in Baltimore and then those in the neighboring cities, but, to their chagrin, none of the stores stocked the brand. Finally someone informed them that Kimmel was no longer sold in the United States. Their search was now at a standstill. Fortunately Rav Kulefsky's son R' Nosson, who lives in Montreal, became aware that his father was searching for Kimmel. He immediately bought a bottle and sent it to his father in Baltimore. Rav Kulefsky was thrilled, and he expressed his gratitude to the students for their efforts and to his son for sending the liquor.*

*The students were bewildered. Why was Rav Kulefsky so excited about getting a bottle of liquor? They finally built up their courage to approach their teacher. One student spoke for all of them. "Rebbi, what was so important about getting this particular brand of liquor?" he asked.*

*"One of the Iranian boys in the Yeshiva just became engaged to an Iranian girl," Rav Kulefsky responded, "and the engagement party is this Sunday."*

“So?” asked the students.

Rav Kulefsky smiled. “The girl’s last name is Kimmel,” he told them. “I felt that if I brought a bottle of this liquor to the party it would bring an extra smile to the faces of the engaged couple.”

*Rav Kulefsky’s life is centered on learning and teaching Torah. Yet, in addition to his yeshiva and family responsibilities, he concerned himself constantly with the plight of the boys and girls who had escaped from Iran, leaving their parents behind. Rav Kulefsky carried many responsibilities on his broad shoulders. The days were not long enough for him to accomplish all he had to do. Yet, to him, it was worthwhile to find a bottle of Kimmel for a simple l’chaim to bring some extra joy to a couple far away from their families. (Rabbi Baruch Bull, For Goodness Sake, Feldheim Publishers, p. 127)*

In summary, through Torah study, mitzvah observance, and infusing our time with meaningful thoughts, speech and actions, we build a relationship with God, become holy and actualize our spiritual potential. How this is practically accomplished is discussed in the next three Morasha shiurim: first by understanding the capacity for spirituality expression by man, and then by examining spirituality in time, space, objects, and even beyond – in the World to Come!

#### KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV.

- ≈ The system of mitzvot works to develop our connection with God by prescribing those acts that develop closeness with God and make us holy like Him, as well as prohibiting acts that draw us away from God. Hence the mitzvot develop both kedusha (holiness) and tahara (purity).
- ≈ Another expression of holiness involves limiting actions that are technically permitted, but bring a person to spiritual dullness, such as over-indulging in kosher food.
- ≈ Torah study is the essential cure for falling into banal routine. Through studying Torah, we discover and understand the enormous depth and meaning of the mitzvot, inspiring us toward spiritual growth.
- ≈ We have to regard nothing as trivial – nothing as incapable of being infused with holiness.

## CLASS SUMMARY

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### HOW DID THE FIRST JEW DISCOVER GOD, AND WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM HIS JOURNEY?

Avraham Avinu discovered God by asking himself what it is that God wants from mankind. Others had been aware of God's existence, but Avraham was the first to search to understand the purpose of our existence, and was prepared to accept the answer, no matter what it may have been.

What Avraham learned, and what he taught humanity, is that God is not interested in a selfish conception of individual perfection, but rather in self-perfection that involves all of humanity. Avraham therefore sought less to perceive God but rather to resemble Him in character, to become a giver and help the world become what God wants it to be. The Jewish path to spirituality, therefore, is one of action: character development and the performance of mitzvot.

### WHAT IS THE JEWISH DEFINITION OF SPIRITUALITY?

Judaism defines spirituality as a connection to God. God created this world to give us the opportunity to draw closer to Him. While He is everywhere, our degree of closeness to Him is a function of how much we bring Him into our lives, letting the awareness of His presence influence the way we act. Each person is created with a Divine soul, the life-force that intrinsically connects us to God.

### WHAT ARE THE MEANS TO ACTUALIZE A PERSON'S SPIRITUALITY?

Judaism's method for achieving this awareness of God and bringing Him into our lives is through Torah study and its mitzvot. By applying the range of our faculties to Torah study, fulfilling God's commandments, prayer and expressing our devotion to God, we achieve closeness to Him.

### IS JEWISH SPIRITUALITY ONLY FOR SAGES AND RABBIS?

It is a Jewish ideal for *every single person* to develop their spirituality, independent of status or profession. The Torah provides a framework that guides us to be spiritual, and a manifestation of that spirituality is becoming holy. The extent to which *any* person can grow spiritually is unlimited!

## RECOMMENDED ADDITIONAL READING:

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Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism

Rabbi Aryeh Carmel, Masterplan

Rabbi Jeremy Kagan, The Jewish Self

Rabbi Akiva Tatz, MD, Anatomy of a Search

Rabbi Avraham Twerski, MD, Generation to Generation