

What is spirituality?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I often hear people say that sitting in a synagogue for a long time can be stultifying, boring, and the opposite of spiritual. My response is that they should take a break and go for a walk outside, in a park, along the coast, or the banks of a river—whatever is available—to look at nature and to wonder at the universe. This might well be therapeutic. Better than getting bored, distracted, or frustrated in a noisy synagogue. But is it really spiritual? I often recommend meditation, contemplation, deep breathing, and yoga. They are all beneficial. But not what I would call spiritual.

To me, spirituality means connecting to something. Prayer is the usual vehicle for connecting with God. But is that the only or the best way to go? Prayer in our tradition has several functions. One of them is to try to connect with God. The other is to express our own thoughts, needs, and anxieties. The Hebrew word Tefila has several sources that include praise, self-expression, self-analysis, and self-judgment, as well as intercession. Some of this is public, and some of this is private. We should not think of prayer exclusively as something we do in a synagogue as part of communal services. Even in services, part is devoted to reading Torah and study, which really has nothing intrinsically to do with prayer.

According to Maimonides in his Laws of Prayer, we all have an obligation in the Torah to pray, whenever we feel like it, at any time, in any language, and in any place (so long as it is clean). This personal obligation is quite separate from praying formally three times a day, which came much later to replace the sacrificial system after the destruction of the Temple. Personal prayer might indeed include standing in awe of nature, amazement at the beauty and intricacy of creation, a sense of wonder. But is this what spirituality means?

There is a remarkable opinion expressed in the Ethics of the Fathers 2:7: "Whoever is walking along and breaks off his study to say how beautiful is this tree or this furrow, has endangered his soul." I used to think that this implied that if one stopped in the middle of praying to look at the physical universe, this was a bad thing, a kind of pagan worship of trees and the spirits of the world. But it doesn't say that. It talks about breaking off from one's study to look at nature. I suspect this had something to do with the contrast between a Greek approach to beauty, perhaps epicureanism, and a Jewish one.

I take the rabbis to be saying that this is the modern equivalent of abandoning university to wander in a hippy-like, spaced-out haze, worshipping little birdies and flowers. In contrast to Torah study which came to be considered the most important feature of a religious life in rabbinic Judaism. Some even suggested in the Talmud that it took priority over prayer as a way of expressing one's commitment to God. Study requires discipline, whereas loving nature is an emotional experience, something you could always

indulge in. Abandoning study for that implied having different values and priorities. You could value both, but one was certainly more important than the other.

Nowadays I often hear people say that they are not religious, but they claim to be spiritual. What do they mean? Now in French the word spirituel need not have anything to do with God or religious experience. It simply means having wit or spirit in a very secular way, like team spirit, or a lively personality. Or the word spiritoso in Italian, likewise, means being a great guy or girl, not necessarily connected in any way to God. But in the English language I learned, it had and has very specific connotations to do with how we talk of God, or the Great Spirit of the universe, the Ein Sof, the endless energy of nature. Whereas in Buddhism or Spinoza's pantheism it can mean simply nature, in Judaism it means something more. It is the transcendent, an identifiable sense of encountering something, some force. It is when you shut your eyes and look out into the darkness and feel a presence, which could just be in your mind, but it connects you to something outside of yourself. It is like suddenly feeling the air you normally breathe all the time without realizing it is there.

It is true that it gives a sense of how insignificant one is, standing alone in the face of the universe. The great mystery. The awe that distinguishes an individual human body from its source. Yet it is somehow comforting to feel that one is part of this vast, eternal, endless expanse, even if we are only a speck in it.

The question is whether just looking at nature does in any way connect you with God. It certainly can give you a sense of wonder. And I think it need not at all. Nature is amazing in itself—but It is not what I mean by the spiritual. It is something else. Very significant indeed, but not God. So that if one stops praying, which requires focus, concentration and intent, then one is going into a very different area of one's mind and experience altogether. I am not undervaluing or negating it. Quite the contrary. I am validating it, but just saying that it is not a religious experience as such.

So many people want to feel what religious experience offers. They sense there is something of importance there; but they can't be bothered to discipline themselves with the rituals that are essential to achieve it. Perhaps they think the rewards are not worth the effort. It's like wanting to be fit without having to exercise. Wanting to be slim without eating less. It just can't work.

The religious experience involves withdrawing temporarily from everyday activity and preoccupations at various moments in the day and week. It is a structured way of life and commitment. It involves belonging to a community rather than just having an occasional individual experience. Religious spirituality requires a recurring series of little bites of time, occasions away from the rush and noise of daily obligations. If it's only rare or casual, then you tend to forget, get out of the habit, and become alienated, distant. The effect is lost. It's like all those self-help books that end up abandoned on your bookshelves, all the resolutions made and forgotten.

The other side of the coin is that so many religious people find themselves in a routine or way of life that too is mindless, going with a flow that doesn't involve conscious commitment or thought or discipline, just learned habit. That explains why so many outwardly religious people can behave so un-religiously, so unspiritually. But even they can be brought back into the realms of spirituality, because they have a social support structure. They come together to sing and dance or pray, and reinforce and repeat the experiences that draw them closer to God regularly. It is called Deveykut, similar to the Hebrew word for glue, coming closer. That too is the discipline one needs, the regular practice to succeed at anything, to master something.

There are no shortcuts. You cannot learn a new language overnight or by a quick injection, like Botox. Anything worth having requires effort. You can't have genuine spirituality without discipline. It is not a quick fix, feel-good, momentary climax. It is not a personal quality or characteristic you have, like intelligence or good looks. It is a way of living that constantly revivifies and reminds and repeats. It enriches and gives an extra dimension to the way you live your life, day by day. Spirituality without religious structure is too vague. Religion without spirituality is too dry. The ideal is both.