

**“Growing
God-ward”
Jewish
Spiritual
Direction**

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HASHPA'AH: JEWISH SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Contemporary Jews are looking for ways to bring back a sense of the sacred in the way we practice and live our Judaism...in an article by Rabbi Rachel Cowan z"l, titled "The New Spirituality in Jewish Life"; she traces American Jewry from the aftermath of WWII. By necessity, the generations immediately following the Holocaust focused on issues such as anti-Semitism, support for the state of Israel, building the infrastructure of synagogue life and Jewish organizational life that would assure the continuity of our communities here and abroad and assure our physical survival, but in the emphasis on those things, our spiritual survival was in many ways put aside. This idea is affirmed in a study by Rabbi Sidney Schwartz, who looks at the Jewish baby boom generation in particular, and concludes that this generation, which he coins as "the new American Jew", is looking for different things from Jewish life than the generations before them, that we are a generation of "seekers"... seeking a Judaism that is inclusive, empowering, provides opportunities for intimacy and deep connection, personal meaning, a commitment to justice in the world, and spiritual relevance. A Judaism in which they can live authentic Jewish lives that add meaning a sense of connection to the larger whole of life... They report a strong desire to find a sense of direction and ultimate purpose.

Alongside centuries old practices of Spiritual guidance/direction in the Christian and other faith traditions, Jewish tradition has from Biblical and Rabbinic eras on, encouraged a soul guide or spiritual companion to discern God's presence and how to "walk in God's ways" as the Torah and Prophets framed the path. In Hasidic lineages and then through Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi into Jewish Renewal, Rabbi Shohama Weiner, Rabbi Jacob Staub and Barbara Breitman and other contemporary trained Jewish spiritual directors- Jewish spiritual direction and training of directors evolved.

THE EMERGENCE OF JEWISH SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IS AN OUTGROWTH OF THIS KIND OF AN EMPHASIS AMONG SPIRITUAL SEEKERS ...ONE OF THE WAYS THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IS RESPONDING TO THIS SPIRITUAL LONGING.

WHAT IS HASHPA'AH / JEWISH SPIRITUAL DIRECTION?

Spiritual Direction is a process for exploring our connection with what we experience as God, Spirit, Truth, Ultimate Values, however we express and understand the sacred in our lives.

Unlike Psychotherapy, which may focus on a problem needing a solution, Spiritual Direction attends to the experiences of connection to, or distance from, God/Holiness/Truth/Core Values... during times we feel whole, as well as times we feel shattered.

The Practice of Holy Listening is the process used by spiritual directors to attend to the experiences shared by those who come for Spiritual Direction. Holy listening brings the sensibilities of prayer and meditation to the act of listening. While hearing the concerns of their directees, spiritual directors "listen with the directee" for ways in which what is expressed may reveal alignment or distance from a sacred, purposeful, and balanced life as each person seeks to discern what that is for them. . Holy Listening is a way of receiving what is shared while being attentive to the sacred as it is expressed through the sharing.

Judaism teaches that every person is created "b'tzelem Elohim"/in the image of G-d. IN spiritual direction, we see the sacred potential of each person and all the circumstances of their lives, as the director and the directee "listen" together for how God's presence is being revealed through what is being shared in the session. While the term spiritual director is used...the person in that role is not "directing"

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anything...rather they are there as a receptive listener...listening together with the directee for the **SACRED/HOLY/GOD/VOICE OF THE SOUL/HIGHER PURPOSE** and how THAT is revealing itself and perhaps setting a direction for a person's life as it unfolds...

Spiritual Direction Sessions may take place one-to-one, or in groups. In one-to-one Spiritual Direction, a trained spiritual director meets with a directee to explore life issues through a lens that seeks to reveal the unfolding presence of Holiness in the life of the Directee. The subject matter discussed may be the simple activities of every day or a significant or challenging event in the life of the directee. Through these explorations, those engaged in Spiritual Direction try to discern the presence of the Sacred, in their everyday lives, work, celebrations, and struggles.

A Typical Spiritual Direction Session is likely to begin with a shared meditation or with a prayer. From that contemplative space, the directee and the spiritual director reflect on issues of concern to the directee to invoke or reveal the presence of the Sacred in the current journey. For example, an individual may seek spiritual direction following a loss, which has caused him or her to question God's role or a sense of ultimate purpose and meaning in the situation, as well as the nature of and the existence of God.

The director will enable the directee to articulate their questions and find a healing path through them that represents the directee's unique experience. In addition, the director may share Jewish wisdom, spiritual practices, or personal or traditional stories with the directee, bringing them to bear on the situation under discussion. Together they may study a relevant text or reflect on the Directee's expressions through prayer, journal keeping, art, dance, or dreamwork. The session often ends with a blessing formulated in response to the sessions' **content, recognizing and deepening the sacred dimension of individual or communal life.**

TYPICAL QUESTIONS POSED THROUGH THE PROCESS OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION?

How do I understand and/or experience God's presence?

- What are my questions/struggles/resistances to the possibility of feeling like I have a "personal relationship" with God?

- How has my understanding or vision of the sacred/my higher purpose/my potential changed over time? What is it now?

- In what ways do I feel that I am living the life I am meant to live? How do I discern how to make choices that are in alignment with my highest self/my soul's journey?

- What am I being "called" to do and be in my life?

- How are the current circumstances of my life revealing to me something about what I need to learn, how I can grow, where I am going.... what will fulfill my soul's purpose, etc.

- How is Judaism a path that will help me feel connected to my inner life? What are the Jewish practices, prayers, teachings that will help me to understand God and what God is revealing to me?

Jewish tradition emphasizes Torah study and the observance of mitzvot as the way to be close to God. But there are many teachings from our tradition that also speak of a more direct and personal relationship with God...and even that allude to the idea that a human being's purpose is to find and live in alignment with the voice of the soul that is within each one of us.

While the term itself, spiritual direction, has been mainly associated with Christian traditions, our equivalent of spiritual direction has been practiced throughout the ages. From its inception Jewish tradition has acknowledged that seekers need spiritual companionship throughout life's journey. In antiquity, the role of spiritual guide was fulfilled by prophets, priests, sages and guides.

In Pirkei Avot, a section of the Mishna, there is a saying “**Asay l’cha rav, u’k’neh l’cha haver**”...**Make for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a friend**, which many be interpreted as a spiritual companion...and that acquiring this companion is so important that one may even pay someone for that spiritual companionship.

In Hasidism, the rebbe typically fulfills the role of spiritual companion or guide, and in Orthodox yeshivot, each student is assigned a mashgiah who serves the role of spiritual mentor and friend who specifically guides the spiritual and moral development of students.

Liberal Judaism in America also has, in some ways, a modern, scientific, cultural bias that has been “distrustful” of any emphasis on overt spirituality and/or on that which transcends the mind’s rational ways of understanding our lives. Increasingly, however, liberal Jews are calling for a form of spiritual companionship that is personal, intimate, contemplative, and provides a means of Jewish spiritual growth.

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL DIRECTION?

Spiritual direction is a contemplative spiritual discipline. Two people, or a group of people, come together in relationship with the intention of discerning God’s presence in the life of the individual. The director places him/herself in service to the seeker’s yearning to deepen their relationship with God/the sacred/their higher purpose/the soul within, and to discern the “kivvun” or sacred direction/dimension of the seeker’s life. Using wisdom, intuition, and openness to God’s presence in the moment, the director supports the seeker to become aware of moments, perceive patterns, recognize critical junctures, articulate insights, and/or overcome resistances in the relationship with God. The focus is on the seeker’s relationship with God (including nearness and distance) and how that is unfolding over time. Jewish prayer, meditation, texts, song or chant, ritual, etc...may be brought into spiritual direction as possibilities for shedding light on this unfolding relationship. (Barbara Breitman)

There are now several independent training programs for Jewish Spiritual Directors. The [Institute for Jewish Spirituality](#) and [Aleph Ordination Program](#) have 2–3-year Spiritual Director Training Programs and almost all Jewish seminaries are including spiritual direction as part of either their requirements or at least as options for future clergy.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Spiritual Directors International

Spiritual Direction and Spirituality and the Workplace articles: www.rabbizevit.com

http://www.sdiworld.org/what_is_spiritual_direction2/what-is-jewish-spiritual-direction.html

New Images of God and Prayer: The Reconstructionist, Volume 59, Spring 1994
<http://www.therra.org/Reconstructionist/Spring1994.pdf>

Seeking and Soaring: Jewish Approaches to Spiritual Direction (2009), Edited by Rabbi Goldie Milgram, NY: Reclaiming Judaism Press.

<http://www.amazon.com/Seeking-Soaring-Approaches-Spiritual-Direction/dp/1448604761/>

Jewish Spiritual Direction, A Guide from Traditional and Contemporary Sources, (2006). R. Avruhm Addison and Barbara Breitman, Co-Editors. VT: Jewish Lights.
<http://www.jewishlights.com/>

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