

**Jewish Spirituality: A Brief Introduction for Christians, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, copyright 2001
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Book Description

This book grew out of a series of meetings between Rabbi Lawrence Kushner and a Christian pastor. Kushner's book is an accessible, short, and thought provoking introduction the Jewish Spirituality, where the Christian faith finds it roots.

Jewish Spirituality – A brief Introduction for Christians
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Introduction

“Spirituality is religion experienced intimately.” P. 9

“Spirituality is where you and God meet – and what you do about it.” P. 9

“Spirituality is life lived in the continuous presence of the divine.” P. 9

“Our English word *spiritual* has its roots in Greek thought and implies a split between the material world and the realm of the spirit...For Jewish spirituality, there is only one world that is simultaneously material and spiritual.” P. 10

“The whole world is full of God.” P. 10

“We all can find the presence of God on a sunny Sunday afternoon when everything is going just right. But the evolved spiritual awareness taught by the Jewish Spirituality challenges us to try to find God's presence in increasingly less obvious and unlikely places.” P. 10

“Judaism seeks to raise ordinary people to the realization of holiness, transforming flesh into word. Then came Christianity, teaching that Jesus represented an attempt to understand the yearning from the other direction. Truth be told: Neither tradition has yet succeeded.” P. 14

“I must continuously seek to find God in every person.” P. 15

Introduction Questions

When have you experienced religion intimately? What was that experience like for you?

Is there a split between the “material world and the realm of the spirit”? If yes, what is it? If no, why not?

Where are the “less obvious” places to find the presence of God? Why might it be so difficult?

PART ONE CREATION

Chapter 1 Opening Your Eyes

“People see only what they’re looking for and what they understand, not necessarily what lies in front of them.” P. 20

“How sad when something is right before your eyes, but you are asleep to it.” P. 20

“Surely God was in this very place all along, and I didn’t even know it! (Genesis 28:16)” p. 21

“If I had known God would be here, then I wouldn’t have gone to sleep!” p. 21

“Jewish spirituality invites us to wake up and open our eyes to the myriad of beautiful, mysterious, and holy things happening all around us every day. Many of them are like little miracles: when we wake up and see the morning light, when we taste food and are nourished, when we learn from others and grow wise, when we embrace people we love and receive their affection in return, when we help those around us and feel good. All these and more are there for us every day. But we must open our eyes to see them.” P. 21

Chapter 1 Questions

When in your life have you been like Reuven and Shimon, whining and complaining when all around you a ‘miracle’ was taking place?

What do you think it is about our culture that causes people to close their eyes and fall asleep to the myriad beautiful, mysterious, and holy things happening all around us every day?

Suppose, right now, your eyes are closed. How do you wake up?

Chapter 2 – Paying Attention

“Perhaps the burning bush wasn’t a miracle but a test. God wanted to find out if Moses could see mystery in something as ordinary as a bush fire.” P. 24

“Once God saw that Moses could pay attention, God spoke to him.” P. 24

“Come up to Me on the mountain and be there (Exodus 24:12)” p. 24

“Not only did God want Moses to be up on the mountain, God also wanted him to pay close attention, to be fully present.” P. 24

“Often people are physically in a place, but because they are not paying attention they might as well be somewhere else.” P. 24

“Each time Jews recite a blessing, they are effectively saying, “Pay attention. Something awesome is happening and all around us.” P. 25

“Our everyday world conceals wonders and mysteries.” P. 25

Chapter 2 Questions

Have you ever understood the story of the burning bush in this way? What do you think of the story with this perspective?

When was the last time you felt you were fully present with God?

What does God do to remind you to pay close attention, to be fully present?

Chapter 3 – One Hidden Everywhere

“If you pay close attention, you will discover that wonders and mysteries are hidden everywhere.” P. 27

“More than anything else, the king wanted his people to come and be close to him. But the people were always too busy.” P. 27

“What if the walls and the gates of this castle are only an illusion?” p. 28

“Everything in the world – trees, animals, oceans, stars, even people – conceals the One who made it and reveals the One who can be found inside it.” P. 28

“There is nothing besides the presence of God...and the presence of the Creator remains in each created thing.” P. 29

“We are in what we make. And, because God made the whole universe, God can be found everywhere within it.” P. 29

Chapter 3 Questions

As in the story from the Ball Shem Tov about the king and the illusory castle, what are some of the illusory treasures that we often settle for, distracting us from finding the king?

How can you find God in trees? Animals? Oceans? Stars? People?

Do you believe that we can find God’s presence hidden everywhere in every created thing?

Chapter 4 Everything is Connected

“We depend on those who came before us, just as someday our children will depend on us.” P. 32

“For this reason, all the generations are connected to one another. In the same way generations are linked, we are also connected to all the people around us.” P. 32

“While building the mishkan [portable tabernacle], all the children of Israel worked as a team. Each person, contributing only one small part, felt as important as every other person.” P. 32

“After the mishkan was completed, they saw how their individual tasks fit together, as if one person had constructed the whole thing.” P. 33

“Realizing how they had depended on one another, they understood that the tabernacle was “one.” P. 33

“Nothing is ever detached, alone. We are all parts of one great living organism.” P. 33

“When two individuals realize, for even just a moment, that they depend on each other, that they are fully present for one another, that they are connected to one another, then they have come closer to God.” P. 33

“All human beings are joined to one another, and that “all-joined-togetherness” is an important part of God.” P. 34

Chapter 4 Questions

The carob tree takes seventy years to bear fruit, giving its gift to the next generation of those who planted it. What are you giving to the generations to follow you? What actions are you doing now to give these gifts in the future?

How have you seen or experienced connectedness between people? When was a time that you were part of a group that worked together as ‘one’?

Have you ever had an I-Thou experience? If so, what was it like? If not, what do you think is stopping you?

PART TWO TORAH

Chapter 5 A blueprint for Creation

“Blueprints are written instructions for constructing a building...our universe also has such a plan.” P. 37

“According to a midrash in *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* (one of hundreds of anthologies weaving stories and legends in and around the text of the Hebrew Bible), at the beginning of the beginning, God was unable to create the world.” P 38

“God said, “I need an overall plan for My world. I want it to be One, as I am One.” For this reason, God decided to use Torah, the handwritten scroll of the Five

Books of Moses, as a blueprint for creation and in that way all the parts of the world would fit together.” P. 38

“God created the world with Torah.” P. 39

“Torah is God’s blueprint for the world.” P. 39

“When God gave the Torah, no bird chirped and no fowl flew, the wind and the sea stood still, and the angels stopped singing “Holy, holy, holy.” Once there was complete silence, God’s voice went forth. An everyone could hear the words of Torah that had been there all along.” P. 39

Chapter 5 Questions

Do you think it is necessary to have a plan before you begin? Why or why not?

How can you see an intentional plan in the things all around you?

What are some of the things in our world that cause all the noise and distractions in our world, drowning out “the words of Torah [that] are spoken continuously from Mount Sinai without interruption”?

Chapter 6 The Silence of Sinai

“No one really knows for sure what happened on Mount Sinai. Some imagine that God dictated the whole Torah, word by word. Others believe that the Ten Commandments were carved in stone with the finger of God.” P. 41

“Jewish spirituality tolerates all these interpretations and more.” P. 41

“Jews all agree that what happened on Mount Sinai was a very important Jewish event.” P. 42

“If God had said only one word, it would have been anochi because it affirms the importance of the self.” P. 42

“Then Rabbi Medl Torum said ‘Not even the first word. All God said was the first letter of the first word of the first utterance – which in Hebrew is also the first letter of the alphabet, *alef*.’” P. 43

“At Sinai, all the people of Israel needed to hear was the sound of the *alef*. It meant that God and the Jewish people could have a conversation.” P. 43

“*The Zohar* teaches that *alef*, the first saying contains the entire Torah. But not everyone hears the gentle sound of *alef*.” P. 43

“People are able to hear only what they are ready to hear. God speaks to each of us in a personal way, taking into consideration our strength, wisdom, and preparation.” P. 43

“The divine utterance is filled with infinite meaning. It has as many interpretations as there are people to hear it.” P. 44

Chapter 6 Questions

Jews all agree that what happened on Mount Sinai was a very important Jewish event. However there is debate as to exactly what and how much God said. How much do you think God said at Sinai?

Do you agree that God speaks to each of us in a personal way, taking into consideration our strength, wisdom, and preparation? What ramifications can this have in our churches, communities, and lives?

If “the divine utterance is filled with infinite meaning” and “has as many interpretations as there are people to hear it” are different denominations helpful or unhelpful? Are different religions helpful or unhelpful?

Chapter 7 Infinite Understanding

“When Jews disagree or argue about the meaning of Torah, they are actually helping one another to become better Jews.” P. 45

“In Hebrew such an argument is called *l’shaym shamayim*: an argument for the sake of heaven, or an argument for God’s sake.” P. 46

“Trying to understand the Torah is an endless search.” P. 46

“No matter how many times we reread it, or how many times we reread it, or how many times we are sure we understand it, a new interpretation will arise to challenge our understanding.” P. 46

“Not even Moses himself understood everything in the Torah.” P. 46

“Every generation finds new meaning in the Torah.” P. 47

“Everything we learn and everything we are as Jews comes from Torah.” P. 47

“Study the Torah and study it again and again, because everything you need to know is in it.” P. 47

Chapter 7 Questions

In our culture, do disagreements or arguments about meaning help us become better people? Why or why not? Should they? Why or why not?

What are some topics that Christians easily disagree or argue about? With the proper posture, how could these disagreements and arguments help us all become better people?

“Every generation finds new meaning in the Torah.” Do you feel that this is also true with the Christian scriptures? Should new generations find new meaning? Or should we maintain the meanings from tradition and history?

Chapter 8 Orchard of Words

“How could everything you need to know be contained in the Torah, in only five books?” p. 49

“Jews became accustomed to understanding the Torah as if it were a beautiful orchard.” P. 49

“The Hebrew word for orchard is *pardes*, spelled *pey, resh, dalet, samech*. Each of these letters stands for a layer of the Torah.” P. 49

“The letter *pey* is the first letter of *peshat*, which refers to the simple, superficial story, the one you find if you just read the Torah quickly without much thought.” P. 50

“The letter *resh* is the first letter of *remez*, which means ‘hint’.” P. 50

“The letter *dalet* is the first letter of *derash*, which means ‘interpreting’.” P. 50

“The letter *samech* is the first letter of *sod*, which means ‘secret’.” p. 50

“Taken all together, *pey*, *resh*, *dalet*, and *samech* (the simple, the hint, the interpreting, the secret) spell PaRDeS, orchard; it conceals many wonderful and delicious surprises.” P. 51

“It is a tree of life to those who hold on to it.” P. 51

Chapter 8 Questions

How could everything you need to know be contained in the Torah, in only five books?

In this chapter, we see four layers within Torah (the simple, the hint, the interpreting, and the secret). How have you seen these four layers within Torah and the whole Bible?

Do you believe that the scriptures are like an orchard, concealing many wonderful and delicious surprises?

PART THREE COMMANDMENT

Chapter 9 Doing and Understanding

“Seeing the wonders of creation everywhere is one way to know about God...studying the words of Torah is another....There is a third way to know about God in Jewish spirituality: doing what we believe God wants us to do.” P. 55

“When God offers the Torah to the children of Israel, they do not say, ‘Let us hear what God wants, and then we’ll do it.’ Instead they respond in what seems to be the wrong order: ‘We will do and we will hear.’” p. 56

“One by one the peoples demanded to know the commandments in advance, and one by one they refused.” P. 56

“We will do and we’ll hear.” P. 57

"Some actions simply cannot be understood (or heard) until they are performed (or done)." P. 57

"We do *mitzvot* [keeping the commandments] because we believe God calls on us personally to do them" p. 57

"These holy deeds are Judaism's way of realizing the holiness hidden everywhere and repairing creation." P. 58

Chapter 9 Questions

This chapter says that "a third way to know about God in Jewish spirituality [is] doing what we believe God wants us to do." But how do we know what God wants?

Why do you think Israel responded to God, before God even gave them a single instruction, "we will do and we will hear"? What is significant about responding in this seemingly reversed order?

What are some actions that cannot be understood (or heard) until they are performed (or done)?

Chapter 10 Repairing the World

"How could God allow such terrible things to happen?' wondered Luria. 'Perhaps,' he suggested, 'it is because God needs our help'." P. 59

"When first setting out to make the world, God planned to pour a holy light into everything to make it real. God prepared vessels to contain this light. But something went wrong. The light was so bright that the vessels burst, shattering into millions of broken pieces like dishes dropped on the floor." P. 60

"Our world is such a mess because it is filled with broken fragments." P. 60

"When people fight and hurt one another, they allow the world to remain shattered. The same can also be said of people who have pantries filled with food yet allow others to starve." P. 60

"We live in a cosmic heap of broken pieces, and God cannot repair it alone." P. 60

“In Jewish spirituality, perhaps the most important task in life is to find what is broken in our world and repair it. The commandments in the Torah instruct us not only how to live as Jews but, in so doing, how to mend creation.” P. 60

“The stories in the Torah tell not only of what happened long ago but also of what happens in each generation...They are true, not because they happened but because they happen.” P. 61

“Jewish spirituality is eminently practical, even behaviorist: When you see something that is broken, fix it.” P. 61

“But for people to begin the great task of repairing creation, they must realize the awesome power God has put into their hands.” P. 61

Chapter 10 Questions

Rabbi Isaac Luria observed that in his world, like ours, many things seemed to be wrong. People suffered from hunger, disease, hatred and war. He asked, “How could God allow such terrible things to happen?” What would your response be?

Rabbi Isaac Luria’s response to his question, “How could God allow such terrible things to happen?” is to say, “Perhaps it is because God needs our help.” What do you think of this response?

“In Jewish spirituality, perhaps the most important task in life is to find what is broken in our world and repair it.” What do you see that is broken in our world? How can you help repair it?

Chapter 11 The Hands of God

Refer to the story that Rabbi Lawrence Kushner tells throughout this chapter.

“Each of you, look at your hands. Yours,” he said turning to the rich man, “are the hands of God, giving food to the poor. And yours,” said the rabbi to the poor man, “also are the hands of God, receiving gifts from the rich. God can still be present in your lives. Continue baking and continue taking. Your hands are the hands of God.” P. 66

“Indeed, not only are we all agents of God, we are, each one of us, present within the divine.” P. 66

Chapter 11 Questions

What do you think about this story?

When in your life have you been the rich man or the poor man, being the hands of God for someone else?

When in your life have you been the rabbi, pointing out the hands of God in the lives of others?

Chapter 12 Drawing Close

“Not only is God hidden everywhere throughout all creation, but we can also bring this concealed holiness out into the open through our performances of sacred deeds.” P. 67

“Indeed, doing so is the reason we were created – to be agents fulfilling the will of our Creator.” P. 67

“But in order to give yourself over completely to the sacred deed, you must be willing to lose – not your life, hopefully, but your self. You must be willing to allow it to dissolve like a drop of water fallen into the ocean, so that it is no longer recognizable as a separate or discrete thing. Such a spiritual loss of self and fusion with the divine is called *devekut*.” P. 68

“You realize that you are (and indeed have always been) present *within* the divine! It’s all God!” p. 68

“The idea is simply to serve God with all your heart, and sometimes, in devoting yourself to that holy service, you are rewarded with losing your self.” P. 68

“There are simply some things in life that demand such total self-absorption that you cannot even know it’s you who is there until it’s over. Being in the presence of God is such an experience.” P. 69

“We realize that we are part of what we seek to observe.” P. 70

Chapter 12 Questions

This chapter says that the reason we were created is to be agents fulfilling the will of our Creator. Do you agree or disagree with this? Why?

What would you say is the reason you were created?

“There are simply some things in life that demand such total self-absorption that you cannot even know it’s you who is there until it’s over.” What are some things in life that require this posture of total self-absorption?

PART FOUR THE HOLY ONE

Chapter 13 The Self of the Universe

“Talking about God can lead to confusion and contradiction: God is like a person but has no body. God is everywhere but dwells in heaven.” P. 73

“Just as God fills the whole world, so the self fills the body...?” p. 74

“We learn most of what we know about God from people.” P. 74

“The most important thing we can say about God is that ‘God is one’.” P. 74

“When we say the *Shema*, we remind ourselves that all of creation, in all its myriad forms – all are manifestations of one great underlying unity. The Holy One of Being.” P. 75

Chapter 13 Questions

What do you think it means that God is the “Self” of the universe?

Professor Richard Rubenstein once explained that God is like the ocean and we are like the waves. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Do you believe that God can be things that you do not like or understand?

Chapter 14 The Whirlwind

“If God dwells within all creation, then God is what life is made of. For this reason, when we are keenly aware of being alive, we also feel God’s presence.” P. 77

“The Book of Job teaches us about suffering and the mystery of knowing God.”
P.78

“Job realizes that he knows very little about the mysteries of creation and that it is awesome simply to be alive.” P. 78

“Now he [Job] understand that God is present in everything – even things he does not understand or like.” P. 78

“Becoming an ethically mature adult includes understanding that bad people often go unpunished and good people are often not rewarded.” P. 79

“But God is not in the reward-and-punishment business.” P. 79

“We emerge from an awareness of the presence of God with a heightened yearning to be better people.” P. 79

Chapter 14 Questions

“If God dwells within all creation, then God is what life is made of.” Do you agree or disagree with this? Why?

What are some other things that people think that life is made of? Why do they think that?

This chapter says that when we are keenly aware of being alive, we also feel God’s presence. What things make you feel alive? What things make you feel God’s presence?

Chapter 15 Praying God’s Prayers

“We can say prayers only because God moves through us.” P. 81

“Like God, the prayers are everywhere, but they need mouths and hands to give them melody and movement.” P. 81

“Sometimes the prayers seem to come from our own heart; at other times they seem to be whispered by the wind. But, no matter where we find them, the words of prayer are already present.” P. 82

“By giving them a voice, we come closer to God.” P. 82

“In prayer, we realize that our ‘self is not the hub, but the spoke of the revolving wheel’.” P. 82

Chapter 15 Questions

This chapter describes prayers as being everywhere but needing mouths and hands and people as the instruments that transform prayers into music and words. Have you ever thought of prayer in this way?

Where do you find most of your prayers: from your own heart, written in a prayer book, or whispered by the wind?

What do you think it means that our “self is not the hub, but the spoke of the revolving wheel”?

Chapter 16 Being Here

“Not only do we help God by caring for and repairing creation, we also join God on every Friday evening, the eve of Sabbath, by finishing our work. We say...”God, just as you finished your work of creation, so do we stop doing our own weekday tasks.” P. 84

“Every unfinished task...demands a piece of our attention.” P. 84

“Whenever we are back in yesterday or already in tomorrow, we are not fully here. Our bodies are obviously present, but our attention is somewhere else.”
P. 84

“To properly observe the Sabbath, therefore, we must either finish our work, as God did, or say to ourselves, “Even though it’s not done, I’m going to pretend it’s done anyway’.”

“On the Sabbath, I refuse to worry about what I didn’t finish yesterday or what I’ll need to do tomorrow; instead, I’m just going to be right here.” p. 85

“Each week, on the Sabbath I will remind myself to savor how sweet it is to simply be where I am, remaining in the present, opening my eyes to the wonder and miracle of creation.” P. 85

“What we are seeking is not in the past or in the future...It is exactly where we are.” P. 86

Chapter 16 Questions

Who were the “they” who finished the heavens and the earth?

Why is it so important to be finished?

In our culture, why is it difficult to practice Sabbath?

Chapter 17 Returning Home

“*Teshuva* is usually translated as “repentance,” but it also can mean “answer,” “apology,” and avoce all “return” -- as in going back to who you meant to be, returning home, returning to your Source.” P. 88

“*Teshuva* is the gesture of returning to God, of going home, or going back to your ultimate source.” P. 88

“Without *Teshuva*, the world could not endure.” P. 88

“*Teshuva* is also the means of the world’s salvation: to fully return to God would repair all creation and bring the Messiah.” P. 89

“Jewish spirituality teaches that the world endures because of this ever-present yearning and gesture of returning.” P. 89

“Through returning home all things are reunited with God.” P. 89

“Returning home is, in essence, an effort to return to one’s original statues, to the source of life and higher being in their fullness; without limitation and diminution, in their highest spiritual character, as illumined by the simple, radiant divine light.” P. 90

Chapter 17 Questions

How can you see the theme of *teshuva* (returning) in the story of scripture?

How have you seen *teshuva* (returning) in your life?

Which definition of *teshuva* do you most connect with (from pages 88-89)? Why?

Afterward

“This world and everything in it is a manifestation of God’s presence. Our challenge and goal is to find it and then act in such a way as to help others find it too.” P. 100

Afterward Questions

How have you seen the world and everything in it as a manifestation of God’s presence?

How can you act in such a way as to help others find God’s presence in all things?