

## Developing A Daily Spiritual Practice (RH2)

A story is told by author and minister Steve Goodier, about a determined little turtle that once climbed a tree. He somehow made it to the first branch. Then he jumped into the air waving his front legs and crashed to the ground. After a while he slowly climbed the tree again. And again he jumped. This time he flapped all four of his limbs, but still plummeted to the hard ground. The persistent turtle tried again and again with the same results. **A couple of birds** perched on a branch nearby watched his futile efforts. One of them turned to her mate and said, *"Dear, don't you think it's time to tell him he's adopted?"* There are simply some things (*in life that*) we cannot do. Turtles can't fly.

But much of the time, our innate abilities and talents have less to do with our successes in life than our ability to employ one simple tactic, to embody one simple character trait- *discipline*. American caricaturist Al Hirschfield once said: "I believe everybody is creative and everybody is talented, I just don't think that everybody is disciplined. I think that's a rare commodity." (Goodier, <http://stevegoodier.blogspot.com/>)

I happen to agree. Discipline is hard. Continued practice, of anything, takes a great deal of effort, and a great deal of patience. As our son's third grade teacher likes to say to her students: "How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice."

Rabbi Jack Reimer shares a story about the great violinist Isaac Stern. Someone once came up to him at a reception and said, *"You play wonderfully, Mr. Stern. I would give anything if I could play as well as you do."* Stern answered, "Really? Would you give twelve hours a day?" (Reimer, *Why On Earth Did They Start Children On Vayikra*)

When I was younger, I wouldn't even give a half an hour a day. Piano was a big deal in our house growing up. My sisters had to take lessons, and when I came of age, so did I. The key, for our mother, was practice. So much so that my sisters used to have to get up at 5am before school to practice each morning (not sure that our neighbors appreciated that very much). I would have nothing to do with it. I had trouble sitting still and I just didn't want to practice. Eventually, I wore my mother down. I stopped taking lessons at around age eleven-and guess what? My piano playing today is ok but certainly not great.

From a very early age, whether through piano lessons, sports practices, or school work, we learn that to do anything well we need to be willing to put in the effort. If we want to be good students, we have to put in the work. Sure, some kids "get" material faster than others, but we all know that "brains" will only get you so far. Even those we might consider to be child prodigies, such as Mozart, for example, actually had to work quite hard to gain mastery in their particular field. Author Anders Ericsson, who co-

authored a book on the science of expertise shared that he has: *“made it a hobby to investigate the stories of such prodigies...and can report with confidence that I have never found a convincing case for anyone developing extraordinary abilities without intense, extended practice.”*

Apparently, Mozart’s father was a pioneer at designing training for young children to master musical instruments. Consequently, he worked with Mozart intensively from age three- so that by the time Mozart started to perform, he had already been training and practicing for a few years. Did he have talent? Most certainly. But he achieved his level of mastery because of his willingness to practice.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2016/06/01/479335421/practice-makes-possible-what-we-learn-by-studying-amazing-kids>

My kids all know the story of my tenth grade honors Chemistry teacher, Mrs. Emerson. I maintain to this day that honors chemistry was one of my hardest classes in high school. I was the kid who helped his friends study, only to watch them get A’s, while I struggled to get a B. Well, the end of the term came and I missed the A on my report card, by one point. I had worked tirelessly in that class, done all the extra credit and put hours and hours into studying. I was disciplined in my studying, but the “A” just wasn’t happening. I went up to Mrs. Emerson’s desk after receiving my final grade- not to challenge the grade, but to count up all my points. I couldn’t believe I was so close to

that ever elusive “A.” No computers back then calculating grades- maybe there was a mistake, I hoped. As I was mid-counting and flipping through all of my tests, Mrs. Emerson put her hand on mine, stopped me, and said: “No one in this class worked harder than you. You deserve the A and you can have it.” I was, of course, ecstatic. But more importantly, as a life lesson, it was on that day that I began to understand what I had not when I was 11 sitting at the Piano. *You get out of something what you are willing to put into it. Really, it’s just that simple.*

Our willingness, and ability, to practice, to maintain a discipline in life is the secret to our success in every aspect of our lives. This is true during our formative years in education. It is true in our lives as athletes, or musicians, or artists. It is true when it comes to our marriages, our lives as parents, and our lives as grandparents. We get better at something, we get more out of an experience, the more we are willing to practice.

*Why should our spiritual lives be any different?*

The key to feeling a sense of connection in life- to ourselves, to our community, to our fellow human beings, to God, lies in our willingness to practice, daily- developing a routine that might work for us as individuals who are searching for a greater sense of

meaning, purpose, or belonging in this world. How exactly does this work- you might wonder? I know how to practice an instrument, or a procedure at work, or the way I respond in certain situations. How do I practice when it comes to nourishing my spirit, nourishing my soul?

First, let's take a step back to define just what exactly constitutes a spiritual practice.

You might be surprised that the definition is broader than what you might think. Rabbi Helen Cohen, the co-founder of the Tucson Center for Spiritual Direction gives a beautiful explanation, teaching us that:

A spiritual practice is something we do that focuses and settles our mind. A spiritual practice connects us to that which is larger than ourselves. A spiritual practice helps us discover what is truly important. There is a difference between a spiritual practice and relaxation. Listening to music or being in nature are ways we relax and refresh, and even at times gain a new perspective on some important issue. But to be in the category of spiritual practice, one crucial element must be present: *that which we call. commitment, intention or discipline.*<sup>1</sup>

As I mentioned yesterday, there is a Hasidic concept of *pezirat ha-nefesh*, a scattering of the soul. The Hasidim coped with this through effort as *Yishuv ha-da'at*, literally settling the mind. A spiritual practice is something that helps us settle the mind- but not just for the purposes of relaxing. The difference between a spiritual practice, a discipline that is

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.dropbox.com/s/rel7tcm2m7m9s59/helen%20cohn%20-%20do%20you%20have%20a%20spiritual%20life%20-%20yk5761.pdf>

settling and something that is relaxing is that a **spiritual** practice helps us connect to something greater than ourselves- to a sense of our place in the larger context of our lives, our communities, our world, and even the universe. *A spiritual practice* is something that we intentionally engage with, routinely - to gain that sense of connection; to deepen our connection to our souls, our lives, and, if we are lucky, the divine presence that runs through every moment.

Are you talking about prayer rabbi? Are you talking about doing mitzvot?

Well- yes, and no. At least, not only.

Stay with me for a moment.

I always find it interesting that when I am speaking with people about their religious lives, they will often say to me something along the lines of: "Oh rabbi, I am a deeply spiritual person, but I am not all that religious." I am not always sure what they mean; and my sense is that people often say this in a kind of defensive way, as if they think I am going to "judge" them for their level of ritual observance, or lack thereof (in case anyone was curious- I am not). But even more than that, my sense is that people are also trying to explain to me that while they may feel a sense of connection to Judaism,

or perhaps even to a greater spiritual power, they do not feel a strong attachment to Jewish “observance,” to ritual practice, to living a life of mitzvot.

They are not alone in making this claim. Indeed, in 2017, a Pew survey came out about the religious lives of Americans saying that about one quarter of U.S. adults consider themselves to be “spiritual, but not religious,” a trend that had steadily been increasing in previous years.<sup>2</sup> But here’s the thing- I don’t actually think that one can separate the notion of a spiritual practice from a religious one. At least not according to how I understand religion. Religion is not just about ritual, it is not just about observance, or what we would call “mitzvot.” Being a spiritual person, being a person who yearns to have a more settled mind, a more settled spirit; being a person who yearns to connect to their deepest, most authentic, and best versions of themselves; being a person who yearns to connect to their fellow human being, to all of creation, and perhaps even to the One Whom we refer to every Shabbat morning as Nishmat Kol Chai, *The Spirit That Runs Through All That Lives*, means living a life committed to a practice that helps us foster, deepen, and maintain those connections.

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>

There are many ways to get there. Ritual observance is one path- and important one to be sure- but/and there are also others.

Let's take a closer look at what some of these spiritual practices might actually look like.

We will start with some of the ritual ones, the ones that folks who see themselves as "spiritual, but not religious" may want to reconsider.

Let's start with a classic, the berakha, the blessing. As many of you know it is a tradition to say at least one hundred blessings a day (Menachot 43b). While in some circles this can become rote and mechanical, done without thought or intention, the original thinking behind this practice was to help us develop our spiritual selves. Instead of grabbing for the piece of produce, I give thanks for the fruit that has come from a tree, or the vegetable that has come from the ground. *Barukh Atah Adonai Eloheynu Melekh Ha-Olam, Borei Peri Ha Eitz. What an incredible apple this is. Bright Red, coming directly from the earth, grown from that tree over there, the tree that is purifying the very air that I breathe.*

Okay, so usually, if we say a blessing, we just rattle it off. But originally, the practice of saying a blessing, was to get us to pay attention to the miracles, big and small, that are all around us. From our ability to eat, and the earth's ability to produce food, to the abilities of our bodies to function, to the recognition that we are grateful for any and



every particular moment in life- these blessings are so numerous and specific, not because we are obsessed with minutia, but because we are trying to train ourselves to pay attention to the smallest of details which are really quite miraculous when we stop to think about them. *This takes practice.* And it's something you can try at any moment of the day, without a prayer book. Just say: Barukh Atah Adonai.... Thank you, God, source of life, ruler of the universe for \_\_\_\_\_. Try it later today. Try it tomorrow. See if you can find three different moments to practice. And then repeat that practice each day of the week to see how, or if, you are changed.

Another classic, again in the realm of ritual observance. Pick any Jewish holiday, or the weekly occurrence of Shabbat. Again, a spiritual practice is meant to help us focus on that which is truly important in our lives. When we intentionally make time to sit down with our family, friends, partners, each week- we are deepening our connections with those who are most important to us. When we stop, weekly, to light candles, we are given the moment to focus on all that has happened to us during the past week, on what we have accomplished, and on the recognition that we, as we are in that very moment, are enough. We are blessed to be a part of God's creation. We are loved by others. We are loved by God. And we are blessed by the light that both bring into our lives.

When we stop to practice any given holiday on the Jewish calendar, we also connect ourselves to the universe in a broader way, especially since our celebrations follow the lunar cycle. Immediately, by orienting ourselves towards the moon, by looking up in the sky at a half full moon and knowing that it is Passover, or seeing a moon that is a sliver and knowing that it is Rosh Hashanah, we have placed ourselves in this universe in an entirely different way. We have connected to something greater- through our practice.

Engaging in any of these Shabbat or holiday observances once in a while is *meaningful*, but if it is done only occasionally, is not a practice. Taking on the entirety of Shabbat observance and Jewish holidays may seem entirely daunting- but you can start somewhere, regularly. Light candles on a Friday night. Pay attention to the moon and take a moment to give thanks each month when a new cycle has begun. Consider keeping kosher in some way. Consider saying some blessings each day. You never know what this level of observance, what this type of paying attention, what some of these ritual practices might open up for you in your spiritual experience.

A healthy spiritual practice is also something that helps us strengthen our connections to ourselves. As many of you know, over the past couple of years I have begun a practice of meditation. The truth is that for the first two years I was finding it difficult

to meditate regularly. Even though I was a part of a program through the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, engaging regularly in the practice was not always so easy.

Mechanically, I understood “what to do.” Sit, quietly, in a posture that helps us to pay attention. Breathe in and out, and focus on my breath (at least for a breathing meditation). Don’t worry about anything else. Notice my thoughts as passing clouds, and then bring myself back to the breath, return and return again. But understanding, and internalizing are two different things entirely. It was not until I began, in recent months, to practice, for five minutes minimally every day without fail, that I began to notice more regularly, to connect more deeply, to feel, in my body, that something was different because of the practice.

If sitting and breathing is not your thing, try a walking meditation. And here I don’t mean just going for a regular walk, but rather going for a walk while paying attention to exactly what you are doing. Paying attention to the way your feet hit the ground, to the way your body is moving, to the sights, sounds, and smells all around you. To walk with heightened attention and intention takes practice. To walk in a way that connects you to the miracle that is your body, to the miracles that are all around you each and every day-that is a spiritual practice. Who knows, if you see something incredible on a walk- you may even add a *braukh atah*.... again, to train yourself to live your life with intention.

Singing can also be a spiritual practice. Anyone who loves to sing knows how deeply we can connect to our inner souls through song. Often, people who come to services, for example, connect to the melodies and music much more than they connect to the meaning behind the words. That is true in secular music experiences as well. What would it look like if you took some time each day to sing for a few minutes. Not for any reason other than connecting yourself to your voice, to sound, and to the miracle that is a body that can produce such sound. If you are in a circumstance where you can sing with others, and you practice this regularly- you will also learn what it means to be connected to people beyond yourself. By listening to the voices of others, adding your voices together in song and harmony; and doing this regularly; you will come to know what it means to be one small part of a much larger collective.

What about doing acts of *chesed*, kindness, as a spiritual practice? What would it look like if you made sure to do one act of kindness, every day, for at least one other person. Not for the recognition. Not to impress anyone. Not to show others “what a nice person” you are. But rather as a practice, as a discipline, as a way to connect both to the best part of yourself and to your fellow human being. As a way to remember that everyone on this planet is indeed connected, and that God put us together to care for each other, to care for the world that we share, to build one another up and not tear one

another down. Talk about a spiritual discipline as being something that helps us discover, or remember that which is greater, that which is truly important in life.

I will give you two more.

The first is a commitment to Jewish study. What would it look like if you committed yourself to ten minutes of Jewish study each day? Between podcasts, books, youtube videos- there is no shortage of material spanning wisdom from three thousand years from which to choose. I am happy to help any of you get started. Why is study a spiritual practice? Because the subject matter is all about helping us connect to our people, our God, our collective wisdom, and the values and beliefs that our people have grappled with throughout the centuries. Jewish study invites us into a conversation that has gone on for millenia and will continue long after we are gone. It is not about gaining wisdom alone, but about learning how to navigate, appreciate, and exist in a world that can seem complicated, confusing and challenging. It is about grounding us in the present through the wisdom of our past. But that takes work, it takes practice. How would your life be different if you gave it ten minutes a day?

One more spiritual practice to consider, especially during this time of year. The practice of regular and active forgiveness. It is taught that the great mystic Rabbi Isaac Luria, used to say the following each night before he went to bed:

*Ribono Shel Olam,  
I hereby forgive  
whoever has hurt me,  
And whoever has done me  
any wrong;  
Whether it was  
Deliberately or by accident,  
Whether it was  
Done by word or by deed,  
In this incarnation  
Or in previous ones.  
May no one,  
Be punished on my account.*  
(Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi translation)

What would it look like if, before we went to bed each night, we took a moment to end our day with forgiveness. How might that practice change the way that we interact with others? How might it change the way that we open our hearts to others? How might it change the way that we understand the ways that we are so interconnected with others day in and day out?

As you can hopefully begin to see, the vehicle for this type of spiritual practice can take many forms. There is not just “one way” to develop a spiritual practice. Practice does

not necessarily make “perfect” in this case, but that’s okay. *Because the goal of spiritual practice is not perfection. It is connection.*

Connection to ourselves, to our loved ones, to our fellow human beings, to God’s creation, and to the Holy One of Blessing, the mystery that runs through all.

The great spiritual master Rabbi Nachman of Breslov used to teach that:

It is of great merit when a person can settle one's mind [for some period every] day, and be able to think about their path: what did they do yesterday and what might they do newly today? There are people for whom life passes away; they do not take even one hour of leisure for calm reflection. Therefore it is necessary to be strong and to set aside for oneself some time for reflection and searching the soul. In this way, we will know and understand what deeds we have done in the world, and if these deeds are a worthy way for us to spend our days."

A new year is upon us. A chance to do *teshuvah*, a chance to return- to that which is most important in our lives; to that which is most sacred; to that from which, we have become distracted. This takes practice. It takes effort. It takes discipline. It takes an open heart and an open mind.

May each of us be blessed to discover a regular spiritual practice that works for each of us. And may we find the sense of peace, healing, wholeness and wonder that will accompany each of us along our journey. Shanah Tovah.