

LIVING A SPIRITUAL LIFE  
WHILE WORKING AS A TEMPLE ADMINISTRATOR

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## INTRODUCTION

Why this topic?

In 1992, I closed a retail business and had the unique opportunity to sit back and ask myself the question, “What do you want to do with the rest of your life?” While reflecting on this question, I came to the realization that one of the major pitfalls of owning a retail store was the necessity of being open on Shabbat. I began to understand that I wanted to live my work life and my personal life according to the Jewish calendar. One thing that I was passionate about that would help me achieve this goal was my involvement in my synagogue. I determined that I wanted to make a career change and become a Jewish communal professional. In 1994, I joined the staff of my synagogue as a part-time Religious School Administrator. In 1996 I was offered the full-time position of Director of Administration.

Many of the things that drew me to Jewish professional life immediately proved to be correct. The ebb and flow of the congregational calendar were in synch with living a Jewish life. My new position focused on Jewish holidays and celebrations. I was able to attend Shabbat worship not only on Friday night but Saturday morning as well. Another advantage was that my Jewish community and the people I cared about surrounded me. I loved the Beth Torah community and the people that were a part of it. Now I had daily contact with these people. I was happy.

As the old adage says, “Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it?” Well, it’s true. The thing that I loved, that had directed me towards becoming a Jewish professional, began to be a barrier to living a fulfilled Jewish life. Instead of a time of rest and renewal, Shabbat became work. The holidays became dreaded days on the calendar. I stopped

attending classes. I attended services but I did not pray. This was not the way I intended to live my life.

There were two solutions to my problem, get out of the business OR find a way to reconnect with my personal sense of spirituality and passion for living a Jewish life. I choose the latter. I use the present tense *choose* because this decision is an ongoing struggle for me and the reason I chose this topic for my thesis. My purpose in writing this paper is to offer a guide to my colleagues for finding a balance. My goal is to demonstrate that temple administrators can indeed be successful Jewish communal professionals and personally fulfilled Jews.

Based on the three pillars of Jewish life *Torah* (Study), *Avodah* (Worship) and *Gemilut Chasadim* (Acts of Loving-kindness), this thesis presents suggestions on how to find your spiritual self. In addition it looks at the specific cases of Shabbat and holidays, challenging times for many administrators. This thesis offers examples of administrators and other Jewish professionals who have found a way to balance their personal needs with their professional responsibilities. It looks at the different areas of our lives and illustrates small steps that can be taken to fulfill personal Jewish goals.

Forty administrators, or approximately 10% of the membership of National Association of Temple Administrators (NATA) responded to questions that I posted on NATA-SCHMOOZE, an e-mail discussion group for members of NATA. In depth interviews were held with half of these respondents. The administrators who participated work in congregations all across the United States. Synagogues ranging in size from 200 to 1800 member households are represented.

This thesis is a practical guide based on life experiences. It is a survey based on responses from these administrators. It is not a scientific study nor is it a statistical analysis. I hope that those reading this paper will take from it at least one small thing that they can do to live a more fulfilled Jewish life.

Thank you to all of my colleagues who took time out of their incredibly busy days to answer my questions and talk about issues that are not easy to discuss. Thank you to them for your openness and honesty in discussing not only our profession, but also your very personal spiritual goals.

L'shalom,

Jeannie Kort

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## WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

**Pirke Avot 3:18**

**Rabbi Akiva: How greatly God must have loved us to create us in His image; yet even greater love did He show us in making us conscious that we are created in His image.<sup>i</sup>**

Spirituality. It's a word that has been thrown about a lot in the last few years. You cannot walk into a bookstore without seeing volume after volume about spirituality. Some would say that this word has been overused. While everyone is talking about it, few can put into words what spirituality means to them. It means different things to different people. Modern Jewish sources have defined it many ways.

- “Spirituality is a dimension of living where we are aware of God’s presence. It is being concerned with how what we do affects God and how what God does affects us.” (Larry Kushner)<sup>ii</sup>
- “It is defined as our sense of connection to something larger than our own selves. A spiritual practice of Judaism strives for awareness of the moment, every moment, helping us to live life to its fullest.” (Michael Strassfeld)<sup>iii</sup>
- “A highly personal outlook about what is sacred about us; it is the expression of our most deeply held values, and it is that sense of higher purpose that guides our daily lives.” (David S. Ariel)<sup>iv</sup>
- “The highest peak of spiritual living is not necessarily reached in rare moments of ecstasy; the highest peak lies wherever we are and may be ascended in a common deed. There can be as sublime a holiness in fulfilling friendship, in observing dietary laws, day by day, as in uttering a prayer on the Day of Atonement.” (Abraham Joshua Heschel)<sup>v</sup>

While these definitions are different from one another, they have a common theme.

Spirituality is about awareness. It is about our connection with God and living our lives for a

higher purpose. While many people experience spirituality during the “big events” (i.e.: birth of a child, magnificence of nature), it’s true meaning is in the day to day, moment to moment. It is present when we conduct business, it is present when we interact with others, and it is present when we are alone.

In my interviews with colleagues, I asked them how they define spirituality. Here are a few of their answers.

- “Spirituality is being a part of a greater world.” (Gail Koop)
- “Reaching for the transcendental to find something beyond life’s experience.” (Gary Simms)
- “It is feeling connected to God and connected to fellow human beings.” (Missy Lowdermilk)
- “The feeling of connection to the presence of God in each of us.” (Sandy Voit)

Our definitions are not dissimilar to the definitions of great Jewish thinkers. We strive to reach the same spiritual goals: connecting to God and making a difference in the lives of others. Our work as Jewish professionals can both enhance personal spirituality as well as detract from it. Too often, those in our profession feel they do not have time to pursue personal, spiritual goals. They are surrounded by Jewish education but they do not study. They are a part of the daily/weekly rituals of prayer but they do not pray. They administrate Mitzvah Days and social justice projects but they do not volunteer because they “gave at the office.” For others, this profession enhances their ability to connect. They see what we do as “holy work”. They feel they are conduits for a larger number of Jews to connect through the synagogue, to learn, to pray, to find meaning in life. They have learned more about Judaism while working as an administrator. One administrator states he is a more active Jew since

taking on the position of executive director. Another states that while working in her position, she learned to pray.

So how do some synagogue administrators achieve spirituality in their lives while others do not? What are their secrets we all can learn from?

The information in this thesis is derived from interviews of over forty Temple Administrators. The information was gathered through both personal interviews and written responses to questions regarding personal spiritual practices.

## STUDY

### Pirke Avot 1.6

**Joshua ben Perachya: Get yourself a teacher; acquire a friend to study with you.** <sup>vi</sup>

The importance of study in the Jewish experience is expressed in the saying *talmud torah keneged kulam* (Torah study above all else.) The Talmud states that the study of Torah is more important than the *mitzvot* of honoring father and mother, performing acts of loving-kindness or making peace between two people. For many people, ongoing study is a spiritual practice, a practice that connects them to the Divine.

Gary is the executive director of a congregation of 1,100 households. He writes a *D'var Torah* on the weekly *parashah* and shares it with his colleagues on NATA-SCHMOOZE. Study is a priority in Gary's life. He makes it a point to study every day. "If it's 4 p.m. and I haven't studied yet, I close my door." Sometimes his study lasts for ten minutes and sometimes it lasts much longer. Gary uses study as a break from the ordinary, a way to enhance his life. He believes in lifelong learning and this summer he will reduce his hours in order to take a course in Biblical Hebrew. He states, "If you are going to work in a Jewish institution, you should improve yourself. It is important as Jewish professionals that we climb the ladder of Jewish knowledge."

I personally became involved in a *chevruta*, study partnership, over four years ago. Every other week, I take time out of my day and meet with my study partner. We have read and discussed books such as *God Was In This Place & I, i Did Not Know* by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner and *Seek My Face* by Arthur Green. We read the books together and discuss our own beliefs about God and life's purpose. This *chevruta* does several things for me. First, it forces me to study. Much like having an exercise or walking partner gets you up in the morning and out the door, having a study partner keeps study on my calendar and on my "to do" list. I study and read the material in advance because I do not want to disappoint my partner by coming unprepared to our meetings. It has expanded my base of Jewish knowledge through reading texts I would not have chosen to read on my own. It also gives me a safe environment to ask tough questions and discuss my deepest beliefs.

Many professional staffs study together on a weekly basis. Some begin staff meetings with study. One administrator for a mid-western Temple of 800 families states, "Our professional staff studies for fifteen minutes before beginning staff meetings. I find this stimulating. It encourages me to continue studying informally during the week. I also find that the more I study and read, the more 'connections' I'm able to make between my work and day-to-day living."

Some colleagues participate in more formal learning. Administrators are graduates of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School Institute and students of Judaic Studies Programs at local colleges. These administrators report that they pursue this type of study for their own edification and intellectual stimulation. In *A Book of Life, Embracing Judaism as a Spiritual Practice*, Michael Strassfeld describes study as "an intellectual endeavor with a spiritual

purpose. When practiced in this way, it is described as *torah lishmah*, Torah studied for its own sake. This kind of Torah study leads us to contemplate or even encounter the Divine.”<sup>vii</sup>

The administrators represented in this section all work in environments where study is valued. Each of these administrators felt they were supported by professional colleagues and lay leaders as they pursued a personal goal of ongoing Jewish study. Study is not viewed as just a personal goal, but an important Jewish value and one that should be sustained by all Jewish professionals.

## WORSHIP

**Pirke Avot 2:18**

**Rabbi Shimon: When you pray, let not your prayer become routine, but let it be a sincere supplication for God’s mercy.**<sup>viii</sup>

*Avodah* is the Hebrew word we commonly use for worship. *Avodah* can also mean *work*. Historically, before there was a fixed liturgy, there was a sacrificial system, also known as *avodah*. Following the destruction of the second Temple, fixed prayers replaced the sacrificial system. Without the Temple, synagogues became the center of Jewish life. Without the priests, rabbis/teachers came into prominence. The *Amidah*, the central prayer of our daily liturgy, although composed prior to the destruction of the Temple, was put into final form shortly after the destruction of the second Temple. Traditionally, Jews recite fixed prayers three times a day. There are generally three purposes for prayer: praise, request and gratitude.

In *The Way Into Jewish Prayer* Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman states, “Perhaps first and foremost, prayer is a delivery system for committing us to the great ideas that make life worth living, because ideas that are ritually construed empower us to do what we would otherwise never have the courage to do. Prayer moves us to see our lives more clearly against

the backdrop of eternity, concentrating our attention on verities that we would otherwise forget. It imparts Judaism's canon of great concepts and moves us to live our lives by them.”<sup>ix</sup>

For many Jews, prayer is the most difficult of rituals. Many struggle with the language, whether it is Hebrew or gender insensitivity. Many did not learn how to pray as children and do not know how to do it as adults. Many do not include prayer as an ongoing practice, so when the need arises they don't know where to start. In addition to all these stumbling blocks, administrators struggle with the challenge of praying while working. Is it possible to give your full attention to prayer when you are being tapped on the shoulder and asked to fix the room temperature?

Rabbi Deborah Pipe-Mazo is the Director of Services for the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Rabbi Pipe-Mazo states that rabbinic colleagues struggle with similar issues. How do you find meaning in prayer when prayer is work? Rabbi Pipe-Mazo refers to this as the “de-sanctification of the synagogue.” She has seen rabbis deal with this issue in various ways. Some go inward and find meaning in personal prayer and meditation. Some seek spiritual direction. Some attend retreat programs such as Elat Chayyim. Some find spirituality through study with a *chaver* or *chevruta* circle. “Unfortunately,” states Rabbi Pipe-Mazo, “far too many give it up.” Rabbi Pipe-Mazo says the key is to “find meaning on a daily basis.”

In my interviews with administrators, I found some who are able to find meaningful prayer experiences in their synagogues. One administrator states, “I have worshipped and prayed and felt truly spiritual in my own congregation at our services.” It is the sense of community, of knowing everyone and of having long-time connections that support her.

Other colleagues choose to work at one congregation but belong to a second in order to experience a powerful worship experience. These individuals believe they cannot center spiritually when “working.” Sandy is the executive director a 1,000-member congregation on the west coast. He states, “When I attend worship at the synagogue I work at, I’m always scanning the congregation and trouble shooting.” It is also difficult because congregants do not hesitate to interrupt during worship. Sandy’s most ongoing spiritual practice is worship at the congregation where he is a member. The separation of work and worship is necessary for him.

Most administrators agree that celebrating Shabbat is one of the biggest challenges to their Jewish life. It is the time that our jobs most interfere with living a spiritual life. For many administrators, our job requires us to work on Friday night and Saturday morning. This requirement detracts from family and personal Shabbat observation.

Marc is the executive director of an 800 family congregation on the east coast and makes Shabbat a priority in his life. Marc works for a Reform synagogue but is a member of a Modern Orthodox congregation. “My whole life centers on Shabbat. The weekly cycle has Shabbat in the center, both at work and at home.” Marc’s work commitments do not require him to attend Shabbat activities, except for special occasions. Marc spends Shabbat with his family and religious community. His advice to fellow administrators is to “train your staff, don’t be a control freak.” If the synagogue runs well, you can follow your personal spiritual practice. We can learn two potentially valuable lessons from Marc’s situation: first, perhaps working at and belonging to two different synagogues is a key to worship. Second, and more important, empowering others on your staff will allow you to achieve more meaningful worship.

My interviews revealed that in order to find a meaningful worship life, many administrators search outside of the congregations that employ them. Rabbis and lay leaders report similar difficulty in finding a positive worship experience. This is a severe roadblock for both professional and lay individuals and a loss for the congregation. We work for worship communities. Lay leaders volunteer in these same communities. We should not lose the opportunity to worship within these congregations. Clergy, administrators and lay leadership must work together to create an environment that encourages, supports and respects the worship life of both professional staff and lay leadership.

## **ACTS OF LOVING-KINDNESS**

**Pirke Avot 3:12**

**Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa: When deeds exceed learning, learning endures; but when learning exceeds deeds, it does not endure.<sup>x</sup>**

Which is more important, learning or doing? In Pirke Avot, the sages teach, “When deeds exceed learning, learning endures; but when learning exceed deeds, it does not endure.” The sages also teach, “the world is sustained by three things: by the Torah, by worship, and by loving deeds.” (Pirke Avot 1.2)<sup>xi</sup> It reminds me of the movie line, “Lights. Camera. ACTION.” The lights and camera are important; you cannot have a movie without them. But it is not until the action begins that you have a movie. It is not until acts of loving-kindness begin that you have a spiritual life.

Action is important to the Jewish people. God tells Abraham to go forth from the land that he knows. He must act. God tells the Israelites to mark the doorposts of their houses to escape the tenth plague. They must act. The midrash teaches that the Red Sea does not split until Nachshon walks in and the waters cover his head. Our actions show what we believe. The same is true of acts of loving-kindness. These acts tell people who we are and

what we believe. They are the fruit of study. They are our response to worship and connecting with God. We live the values and teachings of Judaism through action.

Gail is the executive director of an 800-member congregation in the east. Her synagogue is located in an urban area and sits just across the street from a public elementary school. Once a week, Gail walks across the street and works with one of the elementary teachers. It is a small thing, but it is Gail's way of giving a little to the community around her. This isn't her only volunteer activity. She also works with victims of domestic abuse. When her phone rings at two in the morning, it might be the temple's alarm company or it might be an abuse victim that needs her support. Gail has worked with Habitat for Humanity. She has participated in the Avon Breast Cancer Walk. Last February, she went to Israel on a Danny Siegel trip. (Danny Siegel is an author, lecturer and poet, primarily known for his *Tzedakah* teaching and work with the Ziv Tzedakah Fund.) Gail's spiritual connection is through the social justice work that she does. She says spirituality is "being a part of a greater world." She believes in living life to the fullest and seizing each day. The work she does makes each day more valuable.

Vicky, who works for a congregation in the Midwest, also has a passion for helping others. Vicky and her dogs, Shira and Tova, are trained in animal assisted therapy through Therapy Dogs International. They visit nursing homes on a regular basis. Vicky shared with me that "Shira and Tova brighten the day of some very lonely residents, and have even been known to ease depression. In one case their visits brought an Alzheimer's patient back to the present. People know my dogs don't care what they look like, or how old or sick they are. They only sense the good or bad on the inside of people." Vicky also has a Danny Siegel connection. She worked with Danny on creating the term "Mitzvah Dogs."

According to Michael Strassfeld, “A life of Torah or of prayer is not enough. A life of caring is necessary. Torah can help infuse difficult decisions with wisdom. Prayer can help remind us that we are on a spiritual path, and can give us strength to engage in the struggle for justice. However, neither can change the world. Only deeds of loving-kindness can help bring about God’s vision for the world.”<sup>xii</sup>

Finding a spiritual connection through acts of loving-kindness takes commitment. It must become a priority in life in order for it to have the profound impact it has had on the lives of the administrators illustrated here. These administrators each have a passion and act on an on-going basis. Not every administrator has the same passion or commitment to follow this road in order to find spiritual fulfillment.

## HOLIDAYS

**Leviticus 23:24—25: In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a day of rest, a memorial proclaimed with the blowing of the shofar, a holy convocation.**<sup>xiii</sup>

If you want to make administrators shiver, just whisper “High Holy Days” in their ears and watch the reaction. The pinnacle of the Hebrew calendar for many Jews is a time of stress, worry, sleep deprivation, nightmares and sore feet. It is the time of the year when the most demands are placed on us. We worry about our congregants, our buildings, our rabbis and cantors. It is up to us to make sure that everything is flawless; from bathrooms to parking lots to sound systems to tickets to security to chairs, and yes, to the temperature in the sanctuary. In the midst of it all, we try to find a way to experience these days as holy days for ourselves. It is one of our biggest spiritual challenges.

Missy is the executive director of a 500 family congregation in the east. She recently changed her expectations of the High Holy Days at her temple. She accepted that they were all work. She removed herself mentally from the idea of trying to worship while at work. She

did not, however, want to give up all hope for a meaningful experience during the holidays. Missy began a home practice of studying the *machzor*. Every night between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, she read the *machzor* and studied. If she had a question, she stopped her reading and looked up the answer. She worked bit by bit through the *machzor* during the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. She read and she studied and she learned. She also gave herself the gift of a meaningful High Holy Day experience.

I personally find that I am able to connect and participate in worship at the *Neilah* service. At the end of the ten days, when I have spent so many hours working and worrying, *Neilah* is an uplifting service that brings the High Holy Days to conclusion. The sun is setting. The service is joyous. My family comes to join me and we sit in the front of the sanctuary worshipping together as the “gates begin to close.”

For many colleagues, the second day of Rosh Hashanah has become a time to connect. Livia is the executive director of a large congregation in New York. She spends second day Rosh Hashanah with her parents and family in their congregation. Gail, who also works for a large congregation in the east, says that second day Rosh Hashanah services are her favorite. It is a time when she can actually sit and participate in the service. It is the closest she gets to “real worship” during the High Holy Day cycle. Gail often participates as a Torah reader. She connects spiritually when studying and preparing to read Torah.

The Hebrew calendar offers multiple opportunities for meaning and celebration at times when administrators are not as busy. One administrator states that Sukkot is her favorite. The connection to the harvest and history of the Jewish people is important. She also uses it as a time to give thanks for all she has. Another administrator also loves the festivals. The festival worship services that fall during the week are her favorite. She

appreciates the rhythm and cycle of the holidays that connect her to other Jews. Terry, who works for a congregation of 1,100 families in the southwest, puts it in very simple terms. “Worship, Shabbat and Holidays define my everyday living. You see, those are the activities that my family life is built on.” According to Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, “A prayerful person who is in touch with sacred time and attuned to seasonal messages knows the truths of Israel’s story and learns to be more fully human through the texture of changing time.”<sup>xiv</sup>

As illustrated here, administrators who become attuned to seasonal messages can share in the experience of learning “to be more fully human.” While the calendar poses many challenges of stress and overwork, it can also provide a meaningful way of anchoring your Jewish life and experience.

## **HOLY WORK**

### **Hasidic tale**

**A man lamented to his rabbi: “I’m frustrated that my work leaves me no time for study or prayer.”**

**The rabbi replied: “Perhaps your work is more pleasing to God than study or prayer.”<sup>xv</sup>**

When I began this thesis, my plan was to discuss how my colleagues build a fulfilling spiritual life through study, worship and acts of loving-kindness. As I talked to person after person, it became apparent to me that my colleagues and I have found another avenue for a fulfilling, spiritual life: our work. One person after another referred to what he or she does in the synagogue as holy work. When I asked the question, “What is your most spiritual ongoing activity?” one administrator stated simply, “What I do every day!” He infuses his daily actions and decisions based on what “God would want.” He concentrates on doing the right thing and believes he is healthier both spiritually and physically for making this conscious effort every day. Another administrator agrees. He sees his job as providing for the spiritual needs of others. “That’s spiritual to me,” he explained. Yet another administrator

stated it a little differently when she said, “The work we do as administrators brings out the spark of God in others.”

Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin writes in his book *Being God’s Partner, How to Find the Hidden Link Between Spirituality and Your Work*, “Letting spirituality and faith speak to us in our work will teach us to act on the basis of our better moral impulses and values. It will help us be more creative and socially responsible. It will also increase our enthusiasm for our work, especially when work becomes wearisome, and help us avoid burnout and stress.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Rabbi Deborah Pipe-Mazo recalls something taught to her, as she was about to leave rabbinic school. “We are *Klei Kodesh*, Holy Vessels. One’s spiritual life reflects his or her inner reality. If you believe you are a holy vessel, you will conduct yourself that way.” She refers to the psychology of worthiness. Do I see myself as a Holy Vessel? Can I honor the God within me? If I can, then it is easy to honor the God in others. If we can do that, recognize the God within us and honor the God in others, then we have achieved the goal of living a spiritual life.

## WHERE TO BEGIN?

**Rebbe Nachman of Breslov**

**In the early stages of your spiritual journey, it may seem that Heaven is rejecting you and spurning all your efforts. Stay on course. Don’t give up. In time, all barriers will disappear.**<sup>xvii</sup>

In December 2001 I attended the Union of American Hebrew Congregations Biennial in Boston. At that biennial, I chose to study with Rabbi Michael Chernick, Deutsch Professor of Jewish Jurisprudence and Social Justice at HUC-JIR/New York. For ninety minutes, Rabbi Chernick walked us through six lines of Talmud. It was the story of a Rabbi, a great scholar who lived his life studying Torah and every day prayed to God to save him from his *yetzer ha-ra*, his evil inclination. The problem was that the Rabbi’s fear of his *yetzer*

*ha-ra*, kept him from the more important *mitzvah* of living his life, most specifically, his life as a true husband to his wife.

How does this connect to our lives as administrators? Rabbi Chernick summed it up this way, "Due to the involvement that synagogue life demands of them, people in leadership positions, rabbis, cantors, educators, administrators and lay leaders, often find themselves in positions where they get caught up in the ideology of the institution and lose the sense of relationship that really makes the institution a living entity. Their "principled" commitment to the synagogue's maintenance and functions frequently becomes an unconscious excuse for sacrificing important aspects of personal and family life and a "real life with people" that an authentic Jewish institution would wish to foster. If a leadership does not model the values of Torah, how will it pass on Torah? If this talmudic story shows us how even a sage can delude himself into thinking that he is doing God's will by essentially abandoning his wife, then we ought to believe this can happen to any of us. Consequently, if a synagogue's mission is to bring people to a deeper spiritual awareness of who they are in relationship to their God and other human beings, and out of that awareness to create a sense of responsibility and caring, loss of the sense of direction that is the crux of the talmudic story of R. Hiyya b. Ashi is devastating to think about in relationship to Jewish organizational life."<sup>xviii</sup>

I began this paper with a personal story. It was a story of my own struggle with balance and priorities and the desire to live a meaningful, Jewish life. My story is not unique. My goal of living a spiritual life is shared by most, if not all of my colleagues. We are only unique in how we find and maintain that balance and meaning. We cannot allow the

synagogue to become “de-sanctified” for us. We cannot allow our profession to arrest our spiritual growth. We cannot allow our daily work to stifle our spirit.

Where should one start? I’m a believer in the philosophy of taking one small step at a time. First, one must ask themselves the following questions:

1. What is my definition of spirituality?
2. For what area of Jewish living do I feel the most passion? Study? Acts of loving-kindness? Worship? Holidays?
3. How could I find greater spiritual fulfillment in my most passionate area of Jewish life? Could I also find fulfillment in an area that I’m less passionate about?
4. What (or whose) support do I need to make a change?

Once you define spirituality for yourself and identify your passion, then you can choose one small change in your life to fulfill your definition of spirituality. Here are some ideas to get started.

## STUDY

- Identify someone you know and like that enjoys study. Ask him or her to be your study partner. It doesn’t have to be a friend. It should be someone that takes study as seriously as you do and is willing to stretch intellectually to attain study goals. You can start by discussing *parashat hashavua* on a regular basis. You might choose books of interest to read and discuss. Set up a regular study schedule with this person.
- Join a class. Many communities have a Florence Melton Adult Mini-School. This is an excellent avenue for study and for expanding your Jewish knowledge. Investigate

what your local colleges and universities offer in Jewish studies. Audit the class. This is a less expensive option and removes the stress of exams and grades.

- Go on an annual study retreat. There are many opportunities for study and worship sponsored by organizations such as the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and Elat Chayyim, to name just two.

## WORSHIP

- Find one point in the service that you will claim as your moment to pray. That might be the *Shema*, when you can close your eyes and concentrate. You could also choose the *Aleinu* when we are told to bow and give thanks. Even that small moment of gratitude can be meaningful.
- Begin a daily prayer practice. It can be done at home or at work. You can choose to pray the entire morning service or choose one part that is particularly meaningful. Since we work in synagogues, consider using the sanctuary for this practice. Let your staff know that you arrive at 8:00 a.m. everyday but from 8:00 until 8:20 you will be in the sanctuary and ask not to be disturbed.

## ACTS OF LOVING-KINDNESS

- Ritualize your personal acts of loving-kindness. Choose an activity that fulfills this goal and schedule it. Become a regular blood donor. Volunteer in a school. Cook for a local shelter or hospice. Whatever you choose, make it a regular habit and don't use the excuse of "I don't have time." Everyone has the time; we just need to prioritize it.
- Choose a particular activity that you can do with your family members. This will not only fulfill the important act of "repairing the world" but will also teach your children the importance of giving to others with our time and energy.

- Learn about different *tzedakah* opportunities through resources like Ziv Tzedakah Fund. The Fund is a fabulous resource for opportunities for getting involved.

## SHABBAT AND HOLIDAYS

- If work interferes with celebrating Shabbat on Friday night or Saturday morning, begin a practice of *Havdalah*. Invite friends and family to join you on Saturday evening. There is a tradition of *seudah selishit*, third meal, on Saturday afternoon prior to *Havdalah*. Make this a time to bring your friends and family together and say goodbye to Shabbat as we begin a new week.
- Live the Jewish calendar with home practices. Build a *sukkah* at home. Eating and or sleeping in that temporary structure puts you back in touch with how much we have to be thankful for. Host a *Tu B'Shevat Seder* for family and friends. This holiday connects us to the agricultural cycle in Israel and is a great way to bring joy into the still dreary winter months here in the United States. On Purim, construct and deliver *shalach manot*. This is a wonderful practice of giving to others. Include a charitable donation as part of this ritual.

## CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT NURTURES SPIRITUAL NEEDS

- Begin a discussion with your clergy and lay leadership. Rabbis, cantors and lay leaders share the challenges outlined in this thesis. Talk with one another about these challenges. Share with each other stories of your own spiritual journey. Ask how you can help them fulfill their spiritual needs. Ask for help in fulfilling your own. Become partners in creating an environment that nurtures spiritual needs.
- Ask your rabbi and president to address the issue of worship with the congregation. Perhaps an announcement can be made from the *bimah* that reminds people that

everyone is here to pray, rabbi, administrator, lay leaders and congregants. If the congregation is taught to respect this time then less business will be done on Shabbat. Board members refraining from discussion about synagogue business would enhance the experience for the lay leaders as well as the administrator.

- Study together as a staff. Make study the first item on the weekly staff meeting agenda. Do not expect the rabbis to do this, set an example for other staff members and prepare the text study yourself.

Make one change, stick with it and get comfortable with it. New rituals are not easy in the beginning and often it takes time for them to become meaningful. Ask for help. We are not alone. Most of the administrators interviewed here stated that their rabbis and lay leadership were supportive of their spiritual goals. And finally, recognize that you are a Holy Vessel and allow that belief to be reflected in the reality of your daily life.

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> Chaim Stern, ed., *Gates of Prayer* (New York, CCAR Press, 1975), 22.
- <sup>ii</sup> Lawrence Kushner, *Eyes Remade for Wonder: A Lawrence Kushner Reader* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights, 1998), 12.
- <sup>iii</sup> Michael Strassfeld, *A Book of Life: Embracing Judaism As A Spiritual Practice* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), xiii.
- <sup>iv</sup> Stuart Matlins, ed. *The Jewish Lights Spirituality Handbook: A Guide to Understanding, Exploring & Living a Spiritual Life* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001) 10.
- <sup>v</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Wisdom of Heschel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 228.
- <sup>vi</sup> Stern, 17.
- <sup>vii</sup> Strassfeld, 139.
- <sup>viii</sup> Stern, 20.
- <sup>ix</sup> Lawrence A. Hoffman, *The Way Into Jewish Prayer* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000), 104.
- <sup>x</sup> Stern, 21.
- <sup>xi</sup> Stern, 16.
- <sup>xii</sup> Strassfeld, 223.
- <sup>xiii</sup> *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 261.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Hoffman, 153.
- <sup>xv</sup> Jeffrey K. Salkin, *Being God's Partner, How to Find the Hidden Link Between Spirituality and Your Work* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), 29.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Salkin, 37.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Moshe Mykoff, ed., *The Empty Chair: Finding Hope and Joy* (Woodstock, Vt., Jewish Lights Publishing, 2002), 42.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Michael Chernick, *Looking for Torah in all the Wrong Places: Revisioning the Nature of Leadership* HUC Scholar-In-Residence, 2001 UAHC Biennial Convention. Edited by Rabbi Chernick, May 2003.