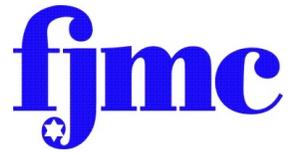


# **When Praying Doesn't Resonate – Construct a Spiritual Language**

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by Rabbi Charles Simon, Executive Director, Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs

*And the rabbi said, "If you are interested in Jewish spirituality you should read, Aryeh Kaplan or A.J. Heschel".*

*And the congregant responded: "Who?"*

*If prayer is the music of the soul then in order for prayers and prayer services to be meaningful do we have to be master musicians? Are there other ways to hear God's Voice?*

## **INTRODUCTION**

### Could we have gotten it backwards?

This essay was written for the people who don't like to pray and in many instances don't enjoy going to synagogue but are looking for a spiritual experience nonetheless. They most likely are well educated and extremely intelligent. If they attend services occasionally or even regularly it's usually because other needs are being addressed. Even if they enjoyed praying one wonders if they feel that praying cultivates their spiritual selves or helps them achieve or maintain some sort of spiritual balance in an adequate manner. In most cases, I think they would say, "I don't think so."

This essay is intended to suggest a method and a specific vocabulary to assist people to develop a language that re-enforces their spiritual beings. A number of Jewish professionals might balk at the word "spiritual" and ask "how should this word be defined?" While most lay people might not be able to explain it, a majority of them clearly understand on a basic level exactly what it means.

I believe that because we as a Movement project that community prayer is one of the only acceptable ways for spiritual development to occur, we have created a spiritual chasm between our leadership and our existing and potential membership.

Our religious tradition is sufficiently flexible and creative to allow, as it has done for thousands of years, new efforts aimed at spiritual development to emerge. One such method was pioneered more than fifty years ago by the late Max Kadushin who extracted a series of rabbinic value concepts from the Talmud and religious literature that was written prior to the second century. He implied that specific words reflect specific values can be integrated into normal usage and when that occurs can affect personal choices and behaviors. Just like the fringes on a tallit are intended to remind us who we are and how we should conduct our lives so too can specific phrases impact on individual development. Simply thinking about the symbolic meaning of the *tzitzit* when we grasp them can have a profound impact!

What are the words, what are the values that can assist the Jew who doesn't find meaning or value in a worship service to get in touch with their spiritual selves? And how can the employment of these words and actions re-enforce their identity as a Conservative/Masorti Jew?

## An Important Question

I think it's important to begin this section with an important and perplexing question.

- *Would ethical behavior or spiritual growth be enhanced if people were more ritually observant or attended religious services more frequently?*

How many times have so many of us asked why religiously observant people are often guilty of unethical behavior? One would think that ethical behavior should flow from ritual observance. Unfortunately that can only be true if the context and the culture of observance re-enforces those values.

Similarly while group prayer and ritual observance can be successful and provide satisfying experiences on a number of levels they don't necessarily produce ethical or spiritually balanced human beings. I suspect that some of our prophets as well as our sages from the Talmudic period would also agree, since a number of examples exist in the Talmud that lends credibility to ethical behavior trumping ritual observance. For a number of reasons our communities have either been taught or have come to believe that the only vehicles for spiritual development in the Jewish community are prayer and ritual observance.

- *What then can the non-praying Jew who is not inclined to attend religious worship services do to develop a spiritual life?*

I have never read or heard this question raised before and would like to suggest that just as personalities and leadership styles can be modified and cultivated by absorbing, integrating and articulating specific language, a similar process can be employed to develop a spiritual language for the person who would rather not attend daily and Shabbat services through the construction and employment of spiritual (value-embodied) language.

The verbalization and subsequent integration of specific Jewish values in a person's normal vocabulary can enhance self awareness and provide a spiritual platform for the non-praying Jew if it is integrated into one's regular daily vocabulary. These phrases/values don't necessarily need to be articulated in Hebrew but if employed could further re-enforce a connection to Jewish living.

### Spiritual Building Blocks derived from value concepts

The usage of some words and phrases can elicit both positive and negative reactions. People will often blanch or grimace when someone uses some of the infamous four letter English words. People can have a similar reaction when they hear a specific three letter word, for example, the "G" word.

Consider how you or your friends might react if during the normal course of conversation at a social gathering you heard someone ask another, "Robert, how have you been? How are you feeling?" And Robert replied, "I'm glad you asked. Last night I had a dream and in my dream God spoke to me."

Imagine the immediate reactions or the palpable silence that would follow. "Bob's in trouble. He needs help"

Using the “G” word can be off putting for many in the Jewish community. Some people will grimace if and when they hear phrases like, “This is what God wants you to do,” or “You should experience the godliness in yourself.”

Does Judaism and specifically Conservative Judaism acknowledge the possibility for the people in question (which is a substantial number) that they can live ethically spiritually sensitive lives even though they can’t use the “G” word?

If I were a Catholic or a member of some religious denominations, I would have to answer “no.” Catholics and a number of Christian denominations believe that a person can only have a spiritual experience if it is connected to a belief in God. For them a “spiritual person” is a godly one, and the more elevated spiritually one becomes the closer the possibility of merging with God exists. It’s different for us because we don’t necessarily insist that spirituality is linked to belief or fulfilled through mandated prayer.

Judaism unlike other religious traditions does not clearly understand or define the word “spiritual”. On one hand Judaism is sufficiently flexible to distinguish “spiritual” from words like “belief” and “faith. Judaism is also sufficiently broad minded to allow one to assume that a spiritually sensitive person can be or should be an ethical one; however, being a spiritually sensitive person and an ethical person are not necessarily synonymous. In addition Judaism does not connect being spiritually sensitive to spiritualism, communication with non-world entities, or receiving communication from the “other”.

It is true that our prophets and sages traditionally prayed for inspiration, guidance and assistance; however, our tradition is unclear how one can perceive God or develop oneself spiritually. Clearly study, prayer and focus are a suggested traditional way. The Hasidism two hundred years ago, added experiencing joy and appreciating the wonders of nature to this definition. Other schools of Jewish mystical thought have developed their own esoteric rites and customs. But none of them are exclusively “right” or exclusively “wrong.” Not surprising and perhaps as a counterbalance to those who were ritually more observant, our tradition is replete with stories about simple people whose pure hearts and ethical behavior took precedence over ritual observance and Torah study.

I am certain that we all know people who appear to be spiritually balanced. They might not be synagogue or church goers. They might not be observant or what we might call “religious”. But they seem have a special sensitivity or perhaps a depth of character that is evident in the manner in which they conduct themselves. One tends to believe that they can handle the normal complicated life situations in the best manner as possible. They appear to be solid, focused. They have, for those who understand this phrase, “strong cores,” and because they are core-grounded they just might perceive our world a bit differently. There is a verse in the Talmud and for me it sheds light on that elusive word, “spiritual”. We are told that the early mystics couldn’t begin to study certain specific texts until they reached a certain age and were *mavene daato*, i.e. self-aware, *balanced*.

There are those who don’t hear the call to observe Shabbat or Kashrut and aren’t motivated to pray. Judaism offers those who fall into this category a number of spiritual vehicles one of which is a special language, a language that needs to be used in a specific manner. It’s important how we use and identify with specific words. Some people have difficulty using certain words, yet some words or phrases can be positive and life affirming.

While a number of paths to leading a spiritual life exist in Judaism too many people ignore them and simply reject Jewish life for another philosophy, religion or spiritual discipline. This in part is a reflection of the rabbinates failure to understand our people's longings and to more fully explain the multiple spiritual options that already exist in our tradition. It is possible for the Jew who doesn't like to pray to become spiritually attuned without seeking spiritual connection outside of the Jewish world. Conservative Judaism's broad based pluralistic community culture is the ideal venue for these pursuits. The numerous options for self-exploration and development through study, social action, ritual engagement as well as regular prayer make us the ideal address and facilitator for the person who wishes to become spiritually engaged. These options are augmented by a value-rich language that provides the spiritual building blocks to facilitate this process.

### Getting Started: Cultivating the Proper Attitude: Mitzvah, Kavanah and Kedushah

My study of religious and spiritual systems has lead me to believe that if one desires to develop one's spiritual self he/she needs to begin by cultivating the proper attitude. The musician, author, dancer, writer, mediator, chi runner, aspiring athlete, and potential mystic all begin the same way. They begin by establishing their intent through focus.

Three terms exist in our tradition that can assist us in this effort. The first is *mitzvah*, which loosely is defined as a commandment. A number of people are comfortable with the idea that they are *metzuveh*, commanded. A number of people are not. There are people who have explained *mitzvot* as value concepts or naively as good deeds. I understand *mitzvot*, as the wheels of the car that we drive toward becoming ethical/spiritually sensitive human beings.

Many of us will readily acknowledge that a person can be scrupulous in the observance of *mitzvot* and at the same time be spiritually bankrupt. Obviously the performance of the deed is not sufficient. Something is lacking. That something is "intent". The Hebrew word for intent is *kavanah*. *Kavanah* means inner striving or focusing. It is the act of focusing that allows us to create *Kedushah*, a sense of holiness.

The word *kedushah* has many different forms. There is *kadosh* which means holy. Most of us are familiar with the *Kiddush*, the prayer that sanctifies our drinking of wine on Shabbat and holidays. Similarly, another word which is derived from *kadosh* is *kaddish* prayer which is recited in many forms and most notably when we remember or mourn.

We have the opportunity to inject *kedushah* into our actions in both time and space. I know that sounds odd, but think of it this way; a parent or loved one who chants the *shema* to a child lovingly, as they are being put to sleep, is chanting with *kedushah*. A person who creates a special moment when they light Shabbat candles or chants the *Kiddush*, performs an act of holiness in time, that is to say, they perform an act on a regular (timely) basis and by doing so, make that act special or sacred.

Some of my colleagues would consider this "prayer" and of course they are correct; but for our purposes the word "praying" has too many nuanced associations and could cause confusion. Consider that understanding ritual activity as a way to cultivate one's personal sense of *kedushah*, of holiness.

When one performs a ritual act with *Kedushah* they also create a holy space. It is more than just a metaphor to say that our dinner table replaced the sanctuary, complete with candles, *challah*, and wine. When one observes the forms of the Shabbat dinner ritual with intent, a special place and time is created that allow acts of sanctity to occur. We can do it almost anywhere as long we make certain we are performing it with *kedushah*.

Integrating *kedushah* into our daily and ritual actions, through words and deeds provides the necessary input for us to establish spiritual balance. It is the intent that you provide when you make something special that distinguishes between a mitzvah being a spiritual act or simply a ritual one.

### Creating the Foundation for meaningful living

How many of us have been told that there are 613 *mitzvot* in the Torah? I don't know about you, but I doubt I could memorize one third of them. If I can't remember them, how can I possibly perform them? On the other hand, it is possible to create a list of the broad categories and conceive of them as the foundation from which our spiritual selves can develop. Our rabbis living during Roman times had a tendency to make lists of three's. "The world is based on Torah, Sacrifice (*avodah*) and acts of loving kindness (*G'milut hasadim*)" -*The ethics of the Fathers*.

Not being as succinct or as wise as our ancestors, I suggest that the person who wishes to cultivate themselves spiritually and doesn't relate to prayer can employ five phrases/values to assist them building their spiritual foundation.

They are

1. Caring and doing for others
2. Caring and taking care of ourselves
3. Caring and taking care of our planet
4. Belonging to a community
5. Cultivating and challenging ourselves through study of Jewish texts

### Developing a Jewish spiritual vocabulary: Halacha and Aggadah

*Halacha* and *Aggadah* are two words that create the opportunities for acts of meaning and re-enforcement of values to occur. These terms might not be the best ones with which to begin and indeed they might even be irrelevant to many of us; but nevertheless, they need to be understood because they can provide a framework from which the five items just listed can be understood.

When most people think of Judaism, they don't immediately think of a meaningful embracing passionate way of life; they think of rules. They think of law. It's a shame. The word that they are most likely to hear in a synagogue is Halacha. Halacha is an important word but it is too often translated and perceived of as "law" a definition that doesn't do it justice. The word Halacha is derived from the verb that means to walk or to move. Halacha is about movement. Movement is constant and fluid. Halacha is about adjusting to a constantly changing world. Halacha can mean change.

Halacha can provide guidance and spiritual centering or spiritual balance in a number of ways: It can serve as the testing ground for the making of choices. When life cycle events occur, whether they are joyous events, bittersweet ones, or simply tragedies, the Halacha provides the necessary framework and guidance that can help us maximize our joy or mitigate our sorrow.

How often do we succumb to pressures, lose control and become anxious? How easy is it for us to experience an occasional happenstance and suddenly find our world completely disrupted and tottering on the verge of collapse? For many of us it doesn't take much, it could be a child who doesn't come home on time, a loved one driving in a storm, or a parent falling and failing.

How we learn to maintain our balance when anxiety or potential tragedy strikes is why *Halacha* (movement, change) is such an important word. The strictures, suggestions, and guidelines demonstrated by our Halachic system were designed to help individuals retain balance amidst a constantly changing and often frightening world. Sometimes new interpretations or different explanations of Halacha to either justify a specific practice or modify it might be in order to insure that it resonates more fully with us. At other times it serves as a filter that enables the individual to address real concerns from a secure place. That's one of the roles that a good rabbi is supposed to fulfill; interpret the Halacha so that it provides us with the support and guidance that we need.

Our tradition has the flexibility to modify or expand or re-interpret it to meet the needs of emerging populations. This process of explanation of modification, or interpretation is called "aggadah". *Aggadah* is derived from the word that means "to tell." It is a different form of the word *Haggadah*, the book we use to assist us to tell the story of Passover. *Aggadot* are the legends, the stories or the legal explanations and interpretations that balance, explain or re-interpret the traditions. They are the new interpretations that emerge through a vigorous thoughtful legal process that allows core values to continuously be transmitted to new generations. By integrating the phrase "aggadically speaking" into our language, we inform others that we are linking to and seeking guidance from our tradition.

How does one understand the person who chooses to live according to Halacha? Halacha assists the individual to navigate between the boundaries of tradition and the necessities caused by inevitable change. Jewish law guides and governs almost all aspects of life from the womb to the tomb. It is concerned with what we eat, how we pray, how we conduct ourselves in business and in the bedroom. The person who employs the phrase, "halachichly speaking" informs the listener that he has made a decision based upon the interpretations of our ancestors as they wrestled with similar situations.

What are some of the words/concepts in addition to Halacha and Aggadah that could be included in a spiritual language, how should they be employed and how can they lead to practice?

#### Caring and doing for others *G'milut-chesed* and *Tzedakah*

A number of years ago, I underwent a year of chemotherapy. It was a humbling experience. The side effects were serious and for a number of weeks I was barely functional. During that period, a number of people made a point of calling me every Friday afternoon to wish me a "Shabbat shalom". Words cannot describe the joy I felt when they called. I never understood how important it was to visit the sick, until I became ill. Parenthetically, their calls made me look forward to Shabbat.

Acts of loving kindness, human beings learning and teaching others to care about one another, makes a tremendous difference. Our rabbis described these acts of selflessness as *gim'lut-chesed*. Acts of *gim'lut-chesed* range from helping the "widow, orphan and stranger in your gates", to visiting the sick, and burying the dead. It would be unfair to describe these acts simply as "social

action.” It wouldn’t do it justice. Every act of kindness is an act of “*gim’lut-chesed*. It differs from *Tzedakah* which usually refers to the bestowing of material things. Both of these concepts need to be modeled and need to be learned. The person who performs an act of loving-kindness or *tzedakah* and prior to, or following that act reminds himself by saying, “I am or will or have just performed an act of *g’milut chesed or tzedakah*,” strengthens a pillar of their Jewish spiritual core.

### Caring and taking care of ourselves

Have you ever been sick? Have you ever become sensitized to the importance of being healthy after you hopefully have recovered? Wellness, taking care of our physical selves is a spiritual imperative. In Rabbinic literature it is referred to as “*hovat ha guf*” or to translate it loosely it is the obligation to take care of our physical selves. Judaism teaches that our bodies are gifts that have been lent to us from God, and it is our responsibility to take care of them while they’re in our possession.

I remember sitting at the pool one Shabbat afternoon at an FJMC convention and trying to catch a few rays and unwind a bit. Most of the men were swimming or playing volley ball. I was lying on a chaise and sunning myself and was surrounded by women one of whom casually made the following statement while looking at the fifty plus something men frolicking in the pool. ”Look at them,” she said, “and they wonder why we loose interest.”

Is it written somewhere that Jewish men’s bellies have to grow outward as they, as we age?

Special blessings exist in our tradition to remind us to take care of our physical selves. A special blessing was written some twenty-five hundred years ago to remind us to praise God when everything works. It is called *asher yatzar* and refers to how our insides work and need to keep flowing in order to keep us healthy. Yes, even prunes are one of God’s gifts created to assist us to maintain our balance. Employing the phrase *hovat ha-guf* reminds us not to take our body for granted and to make an effort to take care of it.

Integrating the phrase *Hovat Ha Guf* into our vocabulary enhances our awareness of what we eat and challenges us not to smoke, but to breathe, walk; exercise in whatever way is most suitable for our body types. The rabbis of ancient times believed that the governing part of our bodies was the heart, not the mind. They believed the center of intellect resided in our hearts. Today we know this is incorrect but the idea that we work at keeping our hearts strong re-enforces this important Jewish value. *Hovat ha guf*. Take care of yourselves become a *shomer ha guf*, a guardian of your physical well being

### Taking Care of our Planet: Shomrei ha-aretz

I wonder how many people understand that being environmentally sensitive is a spiritual act and an actual commandment! Just as we are enjoined to take care of ourselves, a biblical mandate exists for us to take care of the world. The Torah and Talmud are filled with stories and verses that are designed to sensitize us to the responsibility to our world.

When a person chooses to insulate one’s home, conserve energy, offset their carbon usage by donating to an environmental organization, refrain from using bottled water they make a choice that re-enforces a core spiritual value. Choosing and doing strengthens our spiritual cores. The person who identifies him/her self as a guardian of the earth becomes a *shomer ha-aretz*.

### Belonging to a Community: the *Chevra* or the *Kehillah*

Why do people join synagogues and rarely attended religious services? How many of them, of us, would describe themselves/ourselves, as atheists, agnostics, or at least “non-believers?” Yet we join and become active all the time. We volunteer, assume positions of leadership and make long term commitments to becoming a part of something greater. Rather than spend all of our leisure time playing golf or going to a health club, a significant numbers of us seek out our synagogues and become engaged. However, if most of us were asked to define ourselves we would most likely not call ourselves “religious.”

I spent my summer of 2002 visiting twenty plus congregations in North America in order to meet and listen to groups of supportive non-Jewish spouses. In each instance, we would meet in someone’s home and I would ask why did they choose to associate with a Conservative synagogue? The groups were composed of agnostics, atheists, seekers and potential Jews. As different as they were they all responded the same way. “I have never felt more part of a community as I do today.”

*Kehilla*, community, is one of our strongest assets and represents a core Jewish value that is more than two thousand years old. A person who feels part of a community makes himself available to give and to receive, to learn and to teach and ultimately to help to share the future of the Jewish people. Community identification and participation is a core Jewish value. The person who articulates that he/she is part of the *kehilla*, or a *chevra* ( a smaller group) broadcasts a subtle but strong message about the importance of identifying and belonging.

### Cultivating and challenging ourselves through study of Jewish texts

“*Study is the highest form of worship because study leads to practice.*” Rabbi Akiba

*Talmud Torah*, the study of Jewish texts, is the final core strengthening pillar of Jewish spirituality. For two thousand years our tradition has encouraged us to study and to question. It is our obligation to wrestle with our tradition because this is the process challenges us to grow. Talmud Torah, sharpens our minds and challenges us to consider how to better respond to everyday situations. Talmud Torah like *gim’lut-chesed* elevates and assists us to transform into thinking, caring people who choose to live in a specific manner.

Torah study in most forms can force us to think outside of the normal ways we function. Torah study challenges us to consider and reconsider our actions. Torah study is the glue that connects idealized values like taking care of our physical selves, the environment, etc to daily living. There are those who see Talmud Torah as an end to itself. This is not our way. Study with the aim of helping us develop into thinking people is one of the strengths of Conservative Judaism. It allows us to accept different approaches to living. It allows us to be pluralistic.

### Conclusion

One of Conservative Judaism’s most under realized and greatest assets is the diversity of the people who choose to identify with us. It would be naïve to believe that one form of worship could address the needs of so many. We shouldn’t be afraid of the word “spiritual” and we need to broaden our definition of the word “religious” in order to more effectively position Conservative Judaism. Rather than view prayer as our central purpose wouldn’t it be healthier to promote Jewish living and

develop strategies that speak to our diverse population? The key is not synagogue attendance it is involvement. Involvement like the giving of *tzedakah* is a learned practice. If the people who identify as Conservative Jews use words like community, taking care of one's body, the world, being more personally sensitive; they will articulating a strong message about who we are and what we do. How could these people be considered anything other than religious? If they made their decisions based upon the values they articulate how could their lives be anything but spiritual?