

## Jewish spirituality as reflected in Jewish Practice

### Goldie Milgram

A standard Jewish view on just about any topic cannot be characterized. Any question needs specifics: Which Jews? Where? And when? This reflection on the agony of Shulamit is one concrete instance evoking some of the beliefs and teachings that influence my practice of spiritual direction and formation. Shulamit's Agony

"God must comfort you amidst the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem—*Hamakom yinacheim etchem b'toch sha'ar aveilei tzion v'yerushalayim*." Agony still suffuses Shulamit's face, as I receive her for supervision with the traditional phrase for mourning a death. It's her first year here on the burn unit as a chaplaincy intern. prior to doing two units of clinical pastoral education, she was a pulpit rabbi for ten years. In this rural area, we're lucky to have someone like her—someone with some training.

On Thursday three children came onto the burn unit, victims of a house fire set by a drunken father who fell asleep smoking and awoke to see the room in flames. He got himself and his children out, but not soon enough. Shulamit had seen them that day at the end of her week's shift. Today, Monday, she has just learned that on Sunday, with burns covering 80 percent of her body, the soul of Ellie Sara Shulweis ascended from this life at age of six-and-a-half-years-old.

Our ritual, derived from Jewish mourning practices, is to remove the pillows on the chair in my office and to sit low. Shulamit grabs the pillows and throws them angrily at the wall. I remain silent, noticing my own sadness for the rivers of families in similar situations. As I silently offer "all that" up for God to hold, I'm aware of an anchoring chant peeking around the corner of consciousness—*ahavah rabbah*—we are Loved by an Unending Love—and I allow It in. My body softens; a slight head tilt and an eye/facial muscle tone that is kind, without being patronizing takes hold. *Shechinah*—presence is here. Hot heavy tears are pouring down Shulamit's face. She looks at me, "I haven't seen anyone yet. You have to assign someone else to see their father today. I can't do it."

"You're angry and sad beyond words."

Shulamit smashes her hand against the wall and shakes like a dog under the bed in a thunderstorm and she kicks the wall. After pausing, she picks up a pillow from the floor, hugs it, and sits down low on the barely covered springs now exposed on the armchair.

"Her sisters don't know she's dead yet. The staff didn't consider them stable enough over the weekend. The father is in delirium tremens and, I'm told that since hearing Ellie died, is on suicide watch. He's the one who should be..."

One sister is the deceased girl's twin; the other is three-years-old. The mom died of breast cancer the year she gave birth to the youngest. The father comes from an alcoholic family and his sister, who flew in this morning, says he has never coped well. The division of Youth and Family Services have had workers at the house on and off for years responding to neighbors' concerns. No matter. My concern right now is Chaplain Shulamit Silver.

I repeat: "The father is suicidal, the sisters don't know yet." Shulamit barely perceptively nods.

"Can you take a shallow breath?" She does. "And a deep breath?"...

"Good. And take another breath and plant your feet, your own Tree of Life firmly on the floor." She is becoming more present; her eyes open and she turns

toward me. “please scan inside and see what else arises for you? Thoughts, sensations, images...anything.”

“I have to run out at lunchtime and take my daughter for an allergy shot.”

“Allergy shot.” I mirror and nod. “Is there more?”

“Benji Allen is being discharged to rehab this afternoon. We’re doing a transition ritual together to honor both his healing, and at his request, the staff on the floor.”

My voice warms: “Benji Allen’s going to rehab and you are doing a healing ritual with him and the staff. Will you tell us about the ritual at tomorrow’s staff meeting, please? You excel at them.”

“For sure. I’d love to.”

“And...?”

“My solo art exhibit starts this weekend. I have a piece in it that...oh, it’s so tight around my throat now.”

“What kind of tight?”

“Like something wants my attention; almost to wring my neck.”

“Your attention is needed at your neck...is it like a belt? Or hands? Or something you can’t swallow? Or...?”

“Hands...strong, not dangerous but more insistent...gasp...It’s the hands of God!...That’s right, yes, that’s better, now they are soft, warm, moving to my shoulders. Oh...my painting is about God’s light...depicting that feeling when you are suffused with love and aren’t in control...to remember to trust...softer...I can breathe now...”

I reflect back further: “Underneath the traumas and the healing that we see, under the daily duties like allergy shots, even beyond getting ready for the art exhibit, there’s this great feeling of warmth, support, suffusing love, and trust...stay with this divine knowing, feeling...”

Shulamit’s eyes are closed and after about three minutes of silence they open. “It’s like the story where the voice of God isn’t in the traumas; It’s still, subtle, eternal...we forget and need to reconnect.”

“Still, subtle, eternal...beyond each individual’s story.”

Shulamit looks at me. “The flaws, or seeming flaws...I wasn’t able to go to the father because I wasn’t able to see him through God’s eyes. Now I will.”

“You will—after taking your daughter for her allergy shot and an extra hour, if she’s available, on swings at the park and then on your own, perhaps out by the river.”

Shulamit: “I thank you and the Holy One of Blessing for restoring my ability to be present, to remember my role—to listen through the Eyes of God.”  
“Amen.”

#### Jewish Spirituality and Shulamit’s Agony

There are several themes from Jewish spirituality that have shaped me and are embodied in my response to Shulamit. There are many more dimensions of Jewish spirituality, but in the moment with Shulamit, these were central. *The body is the instrument on which the soul plays life for God. —Hassidic saying*  
The body is considered to be a precious vessel, which becomes the abode of the soul at birth. This aphorism reveals a core Jewish spiritual practice, to care for our bodies. In our morning prayer we read: “If even one of them [bodily entry or passageway] would be blocked up, it becomes more difficult to praise Your Name.” Other than an occasional half or full day fast connected to some of our holy days to elevate awareness, Jews do not afflict the body in any way, nor view it as having any negative connotation. When the body is not functioning optimally, our prayers include the lament that being ill makes it: “more difficult to praise Your Name. Blessed be the Healer of All Flesh, Maker of Miracles (like the body).”

*Yad Elohim ba-kol—the hand of God is in everything.*

Sometimes, as with Ellie Sara, the body cannot be healed—making the next

spiritual stage for the family the one before burial, called *aninut*, where family mourners are not to be comforted. All we can do is be with, and respect, their silence and/or their grief, keening, and lament. The traditional sacred phrase for a death with which I began the essay, *HaMakom yinacheim etchem*, embodies our people's perspective that the purpose of death is beyond the human ability to comprehend and comfort.

The lament is a traditional Jewish spiritual practice. Knowing how to listen for a lament is especially important with Jews, because it is one of the most common ways we empty ourselves of emotional and spiritual pain in order to be able to regain equanimity and refill with spirit. Jews read the anguish expressed in our Scriptures in two ways: 1) as referring to our people and prophets who lived at the time those sources were written, and 2) as liturgy in support of grieving, awareness, and healing.

Judaism urges compassion for ourselves when we lose alignment with our higher selves, as well as for others, including our enemies. The Hebrew word often translated as "sin," *khey*, is actually a more forgiving ancient word from archery meaning, "to miss one's mark." In contrast, the word for Jewish scripture and teachings, *Torah*, is the giving of "instructions and guidance," deriving from the same root as the Hebrew word *yareh*, meaning to "learning to hit one's mark." We often call Torah "God's light," and living in accordance with our ever-evolving understandings of it is our way of being holy, "an [inspiring, non-evangelical] light to the nations. Recalling that we have no answers to ultimate questions for the family and with Godly compassion and human imperfection in mind, Shulamit could visit the father.

*All that was created during the six days of creation requires improvement. For example, the mustard seed needs to be sweetened and the lupine need to be sweetened, the wheat needs to be ground, and even humanity needs improvement.*

—*Genesis Rabba 11:6*

daily we acknowledge in our prayers: "God, the soul you have placed in me is pure." Each soul begins its life with a clean ethical slate; we have no doctrine of original sin. The dominant Jewish teaching on when life begins is when the body's head and shoulders emerge from the mother's womb. The end of life is when the soul departs on the wings of the body's last breath, causing the heart to stop and the brain stem to lose the "spark" that make its function possible. Judaism uses metaphor to express spiritual experiences, because many of the teachings that arise through experience are impossible to convey in any other way, for example: "The soul of a human is God's candle" (Mishlei/proverbs 20:17). Spiritual development tends to result in one appreciating each law, or *mitzvah*, as God's tribute to humanity's apparently inherent, unlimited potential.

Our tradition views the soul's departure from the body to be as painless as "removing a hair from milk." Even so, the *midrash* goes, the sage who describes this says the fear of death is so great that one would not go through it again in order to return. We have a *vidui*, a traditional prayer expressing that we have erred and hope for understanding and forgiveness. The *Shema* prayer—"Listen, Israel, the Lord Our God, the Lord is One," from deuteronomy is said near death with, and when necessary for, the dying person.

This same prayer is in the *mezuzah* on a Jewish home, in daily prayers, and at bedtime—so saying it as death comes is like putting a *mezuzah* onto the doorpost of life and leaving listening, not to machinery beeps but rather, for the "voice" of the Mystery Beyond.

*Kedoshim tihyu, ki kadosh ani—become holy, for I am holy. —Leviticus 19:2*

Spiritual formation in Judaism is not at all focused on accruing merit for a better afterlife, as we have no dogmas of hell or damnation. Our focus is upon faithfully aligning our behavior with each divinely inspired spiritual practice, or *mitzvah*, to do what is good for its own sake. The Jewish mission,

as found in our scriptures, is to focus upon developing in healthy, holy, Godly ways. We all have the spark of that Holy potential (YHvH) within. Each *mitzvah* helps us to create a heaven on earth through *mitzvah*-centered, rather than self-centered living.

It is our conviction that through prayer and dedication we must save ourselves from ourselves, through our covenantal understanding of how to live in healthy and holy ways. For some of us, our faithful focus is on the details of Jewish law, where ethics and *mitzvot* are beautifully spelled out and interpretations are adjusted over the ages by sages; for others it is through deepening our understanding, with teachers and study partners, of the meaning and relevance of each *mitzvah*, and then creatively undertaking them wherever and whenever possible.

Missing an ethical mark or religious precept gives cause for sadness, concern, and repair. It is, however, not a Jewish spiritual practice to focus on beating oneself up, neither literally nor figuratively. Should awareness of having misstepped arise, this is a holy moment that we are guided to embrace as an opportunity to move us toward understanding and change. We do not look to God for forgiveness of errors and wrongs we do to others until we have worked the matter through with those we may have harmed. We do pray to God for the strength, courage, and compassion to help us go to those affected, if it is possible and safe to do so, to admit what we did. We then show that person that we have undertaken steps to ensure we won't do it again (therapy, self-discipline, medication, etc.) and hope that they will enter into a healing process with us to the point where our relationship is restored to normal, or better.

Shulamit may benefit from time off-site with her daughter. She understands my reference to the river. Water is a metaphor for God's healing presence in our tradition and I am hopeful that restorative time in nature will help her soul, so recently shattered by compassion.

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