

September 22, 2000
Beth Chayim Chadashim
Drash by Gordon Blitz
"Spirituality"

Remember when the term religious referred to person who had a strong faith in God. A religious person did charitable work for the community. A truly religious human being would not care about financial rewards. Think about Moses, Ghandi, or Mother Theresa. With the advent of the religious right, religious became a negative term to many of us. All of sudden the new buzz word was spiritual. The answer to the empty, shallow, and greedy life was to become spiritual. Spiritual sounded more inviting than religious. Less confining—less restrictive—but of course more expensive. Now instead of going to a fancy fat farm spa like Canyon Ranch—it becomes a spiritual weekend costing \$5000. Is this someone's idea of spirituality? Anyone could become spiritual.

Spirituality is one of the most over used and misunderstood words in the English language.

Tonight I will be your BCC spiritual advisor. I will take you on a path to spirituality so that each of you goes home with a better understanding of the term.

Let's get this out of the way—religion and spirituality can exist exclusive of one another. We all know people that are spiritual but profess to not be religious and you can be religious yet not have much spirituality. BCC is one of the best environments to combine spirituality and religion.

One way of looking at spirituality is directly from the term "spirit". What is a spirit? The original latin—"spiritus" means breath or breath of god. The dictionary refers to a spirit as constituting one's unseen intangible being. It's your essence—what makes you tick. Your spirit exists beyond your physical body. Your soul—pysche. When someone dies, it's their spirit that lives on afterwards. The things we remember about that person. Spirit is such a powerful word—it encompasses our drive/ambition—what compells us to face each day—the fashion that we become energized about our life—the future—how we attain our goals. Is it any wonder that alcohol is referred to as "spirits"? A poor rationilization about how the use of alcohol could be used to raise your spirit. When a person is drunk it can be thought that they are being inhabited by spirits. Evil spirits is another reference to an explanation for why bad things happen.

You can be spiritual with nature and more profoundly it's your spiritual relationship to your parents, friends, lovers and God that can give your existence a meaning. How you commingle these relationships with your spirit is what makes your life fulfilling. The intimacy that you share is a true test of you spirituality. When I look at my mom, I feel an inner strength and beauty. When I'm with my partner Neal, I sense that our two spirits are unified. My support system of life long friends, gives me a continuity and refreshingly honest spiritual environment. Shared laughter and tears are one of truest ways that spirituality is expressed. Spirituality doesn't have to be a religious experience. It can be a quiet moment of reflection—an unexpected emotion. I recently called a friend that has AIDS. He'd always thought of himself as being spiritual and yet when his health status deteriorated he felt lost and abandoned. How brave of him to share that with me. Allowing yourself to doubt can be spiritual. That intimate thought he shared with me became a quiet spiritual moment. My memories of important people in my life that I've lost can bring me a true sense of spirituality—when I think about my grandma cooking apple strudel—my dad at my Bar Mitzvah three months before he died, my wedding with my lover Scott in 1974 who died in 1989.

Now let's think about ways to get in touch with our spiritual selves. This is where I think being religious has gotten a bad rap. Being with other spiritual people—look around you and see if that's one of your incentives or perks of coming to temple on Friday night. The ritual of the service is also a device to make us more spiritual. The world stops for a few hours—as we perform each ritual, prayer, song—our bodies and mind transfer to another arena. It's unlike anything we experience during our regular work week. But you're thinking to yourself—it's the same old songs week after week—the order doesn't change—the prayers and the introductions to prayers are constant. These repetitive rituals give your mind an alternative universe to occupy. It's sort of a forced meditation/relaxation. Think of the many ways that the Jewish religion helps us keep in touch with our spirituality.

Let's look around the sanctuary so that we can encompass the spirituality present. Think about this bimah—how it's moved around the room—the various rabbi's, service leaders and guests that have presided over the congregation. Take a moment to experience the flickering candles. The many congregants that have been honored by lighting them—with a lover, parent, relative. Notice the flowers—how they enhance the beauty of the bimah—the carved wood on the podium. Over here we have the volunteer board where we honor those selfless individuals that give way beyond themselves to make sure this institutions survives. Notice how the ark houses the torah—can you remember the many times the ark has been opened—the hands that have lifted the torah out of the ark. Look up at the light how it shines over the bimah. Over here is the yarzeit board—take a moment and reflect on those congregants, friends, and relatives we've lost. The great honor that it means to have their name ensconsed on this board—lit up when it's the anniversary of their death. The piano is a new addition to our spirituality—it reminds us of the sweet music that is such an integral part of the service.

Look at each at the back of each chair—how it is in honor of someone. Feel your siddur—how it's changed over the years—the wonderful way it's been degenderized—the important ways in which it speaks to us as gay, lesbian, & bi-sexual. Even this wood floor holds memories of Israeli dancing and dance services. Now you can breathe in this space—our temple—home of Beth Chayim Chadishim.

Finally the Tzdacha box. Charitable and social responsibility is a cornerstone of the Jewish religion. Ask anyone when they've felt more in touch with their spirit—when you volunteer—when your concern is for others—when you're not wrapped up with your own problems or depression. It's those small moments when you try to recycle, give money to a charitable cause, voted for sympathetic laws that help the poor and disenfranchised. These are the actions that make our spirituality more visible to ourselves and the world.

I'm going to share with you some thoughts on Spirituality from the book "How to Know God" by Dr. Deepak Chopra. He talks about "The Power of Intention". He list five basic intentions that define a spiritual life

I want to feel God's presence—the intention is from a fear of isolation and separation. You can mask it by developing friendship but ultimately each of needs to feel a sense of inner fullness and peace whether we are alone or in a crowd.

I want God to aid and support me—God's presence brings qualities of spirit—love, intelligence, truth, creativity.

I want to feel connected to the whole—the soul's journey takes a person from a fragmented state to a state of wholeness.

I want my life to have meaning—existence feels empty in separation and this gets healed by moving into unity with God.

I want to be free of restrictions—inner freedom is greatly compromised when fear is present—as you move closer to your soul—old boundaries and defense start to melt away.

The prayers, songs, meditation and community in this room are all attempts to bring about the spirituality that Dr. Chopra identifies.

I expect my experience to be spiritual everytime I come to services. Sometimes I'm disappointed, because I don't feel anything. It's easy to blame the rabbi or service leader. More often than not it's my frustration at myself. I'm not ready to tune out the rest of the world—I've been rushing here and there all week or I've just seen a pre-shabbat film. It's a constant battle to search for spirituality. But I've found that it's my own search and what better place than here at BCC among people that have felt these same feelings. If I was a gambler, I'd place bets that here in this room is the most likely place that I'll feel spiritual.