

## **Judaism's Spiritual Vocabulary: How Jewish Liturgy Can Add Value in a Spiritually Remixed World**

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

Re-Charging Reform Judaism Conference

Parashat Naso 5783

June 2, 2023

*Rabbi Stoller originally delivered this sermon on June 1, 2023, at the Re-Charging Reform Judaism conference in New York City. He shared these remarks as part of a plenum session entitled Re-Framing Theology, Belief, and Practice for the Next Generation. You can watch the full plenum [here](#).*

American Reform Jews, to borrow a phrase from the band R.E.M., are “losing their religion.”

The drop in engagement with our movement is part of a broader trend of decreasing religious affiliation across the board in our country.

But the story is not all gloom and doom.

Tara Isabella Burton, a contemporary theologian and observer of American culture, points out that the decline in conventional religiosity is *not* matched by a corresponding decline in spirituality. This is evidenced by the fact that people who define themselves as “spiritual but not religious” is one of the fastest growing groups in American religious life.

Meaning: A strong thirst for spirituality remains, even among Millennials and Gen Z'ers; they're just not seeking it in traditional religions anymore.

Burton explains that traditional religions offer four key benefits to the spiritual seeker: meaning, purpose, community, and ritual.

Once upon a time, not so long ago, a person would seek out all four of these elements in just *one* religion. But this is no longer the case.

Burton argues that, today, people are seeking to meet their spiritual needs in what she calls a “Remixed” fashion—meaning: They feel free to mix and match, a little of this, a little of that, to create their own personalized form of spirituality.

And, instead of looking exclusively, or even mainly, to conventional “institutional” religions like Judaism, the spiritually Remixed are turning to what Burton calls “*intuition*al” forms of spirituality—secular quasi-religions like social justice and DEI, politics, wellness culture, science, and even Harry Potter-fandom.

Given this trend, it would be futile to discourage our people from seeking their spiritual fulfillment in a Remixed way and to claim that they can find everything they're looking for in *Judaism alone*, if only they would give it a chance.

The ancient Nazir we read about in this week's parashah—the monk-like figure who seeks religious meaning by immersing himself in extreme Jewish practice—is dead.

As Burton puts it, "this shift is deeply rooted in the technological changes of the twenty-first century. ... [It] is, at heart, the natural spirituality of Internet and smartphone culture."<sup>1</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

And, yet, even as science and technology have made our world so much more expansive, their sheer ubiquity has also, paradoxically, narrowed our perspective on it.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel already realized this half a century ago. In *God in Search of Man*, he tells this parable<sup>2</sup>:

When the electric streetcar made its first appearance in the city of Warsaw, some good old Jews could not believe their own eyes. A car that moves without a horse! Some of them were stupefied and frightened, and all were at a loss how to explain the amazing invention.

Once while discussing the matter in the synagogue, a man entered who in addition to studying the Talmud was reputed to know books on secular subjects, to subscribe to a newspaper, and to be well versed in worldly affairs.

—You must know how this thing works, they all turned to him.

— Of course, I know, he said. And they were all hanging on his every word with total concentration.

— Imagine four large wheels in a vertical position in four corners of a square, connected to each other by wires. You get it?

— Yes, we get it.

— The wires are tied in a knot in the center of the square and placed within a large wheel which is placed in a horizontal position. You get it?

— Yes, we get it.

— Above the large wheel, there are several wheels, one smaller than the other. You get it?

— Yes, we get it.

— On top of the smallest wheel there is a tiny screw which is connected by a wire to the center of the car which lies on top of the wheels. Do you get it?

— Yes, we get it.

— The machinist in the car presses the button that moves the screw that brings the horizontal wheels to move, and thus the car runs through the street.

— Ah, now we understand!

\*\*\*\*\*

Heschel uses this parable to point out that as we gain ever more technical knowledge of *how* things work, we tend to wrongly believe that we understand the totality of *everything*. But this is a delusion. There is infinitely more we *don't* understand:

How is it even *possible* that there are elements and forces in the world that, if you combine them just so, you get a car or a smartphone? How is it even *possible* that the human mind has the capacity to figure it out?

As the majestic and sublime give way to the much narrower field of the observable and provable, we don't ask questions like this anymore, let alone contemplate them.

We lose our innate sense of awe and wonder.

Consequently, as the theorist Steven D. Smith puts it, our experience of the world becomes *unconsecrated*—because while it may be explainable by empirical data and mathematical formulas, it is missing that intangible and enchanting quality we call "*holiness*."

To quote Smith, this reality might be compared to "a movie with the musical soundtrack deleted. Visually, the same actions occur, but something is missing—something that helped to endow the movie with mystery and joy, romance and suspense.

"An unconsecrated world [is] a world with no musical score."<sup>3</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

The great spiritual challenge of our time is to rediscover the music—to expand and deepen our awareness of reality by venturing into the realm of the holy.

Judaism's term for "holy," as you know, is *kodesh*. This same word also means "separate."

In Judaism, holiness and separateness are bound up together. *Kodesh* refers *both* to "the fullness of all the earth," *and* to all that exists *separate* and *apart* from the ordinary stuff of the world.

"*Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh Adonai t'zva'ot; m'lo chol ha-aretz k'vodo*—Holy, holy, holy is God; the fullness of the whole earth is God's glory."

And: "*Baruch k'vod Adonai mim'komo*—Blessed is God's glory from God's transcendent place," a place that, as Rav Soloveitchik explains it, is beyond our reach.

While the modern secular quasi-religions of the Remixed *do* offer community, ritual, purpose, and meaning, they do *not* in any way point to the holy for the simple reason that they are fundamentally *humanist* in nature—meaning that they center on the human being and the human experience, and thus they limit the scope of reality to that which humanity can know and master.

By contrast, Judaism sees a “Reality” in which humanity plays an important role, but which is also much, much bigger than we are—a Reality that is infinitely complex and mysterious.

And no matter how much knowledge we gain through scientific discoveries and how many new capabilities we acquire through technological innovation, this Reality (with a capital “R”) will forever be beyond our ability to fully comprehend or control.

Einstein said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. ... He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: His eyes are closed.”<sup>4</sup>

Einstein pinpointed something profoundly true about the innate human longing for spiritual connection with the wondrous, the sublime, and the transcendent. This is why, even as we continue to abandon traditional religion, we are *still* searching.

And while we *are* finding a lot of what we’re looking for outside of conventional religion, it still feels like something is *missing*—because modern secular humanist culture and its forms of discourse like politics, social justice, and wellness don’t give us the vocabulary to engage with the mystery; it’s just not their sphere of concern.

It may not be possible—or desirable—to supplant these Remixed spiritual forms, but we *can* fill this major gap that they leave. We can fill it with language that can help us become more attuned to the sublime and transcendent dimensions of Reality.

Fortunately, Judaism gives us that language. We call it liturgy, and it’s found in what may be the most important text in all of our tradition—and that is the *siddur*.

My proposal for recharging Reform Judaism is to offer the people in our orbit the opportunity to build an intimate relationship with the liturgy—not only so that they can participate more fully in prayer, but, much more importantly, so that they will have a *spiritual vocabulary* to have conversations about things like holiness, reverence, awe, God, and cosmic purpose. ...

A vocabulary that can help them make sense of their lives in the context of a Reality that is far too vast and far too mysterious to be explained by conventional humanist concepts and categories.

\*\*\*\*\*

We are doing this at my congregation, Temple Beth-El of Great Neck, on Long Island.

I teach a weekly adult education class called Judaism’s Spiritual Vocabulary, devoted to careful, in-depth study of the prayer book.

Because the class is ongoing rather than limited to a certain number of sessions, we move through the liturgy slowly and deliberately, exploring the various dimensions of meaning, from literary structure to biblical allusions in the poetic language to *halakah* to underlying philosophies in rabbinic texts.

In addition, a crucial aspect of our methodology is to study the liturgy together with secular scientific and philosophical sources to draw out deeply embedded ideas and gain insight from comparing Jewish and secular worldviews.

One example of this is a recent series of conversations in which we contrasted the kabbalistic concept of the soul with modern scientific literature explaining why the concept of a soul is incompatible with the Theory of Evolution—and we discussed at length these contrasting theories' implications for the meaning of human life.

The conversations are highly stimulating and often quite moving. They elicit insights and invite exchanges of ideas that simply do not happen in other settings, because the vocabulary we engage with in that room is a vocabulary that just isn't used in other spheres of life.

In that way, our discussions of the liturgy lead to more textured and dynamic perspectives on our lives and our reality.

In the Remixed world of today, where people are curating their spirituality from the best of what they think is out there, I believe Reform Judaism's uniquely comprehensive and modern vocabulary of transcendence and holiness, embodied in our liturgy, can add value for anyone who is searching.

1 Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites*, 242

2 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 44-45

3 Steven D. Smith, *Pagans & Christians in the City*, 37-38

4 As quoted in Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God*, 49