



A SHOT OF SPIRITUALITY

RADICAL AMAZEMENT

∞ *Facilitators' Guide* ∞

By Aryeh Ben David
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Sponsored by:

The Joseph Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Learning
Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life
The Nathan Cummings Foundation
Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies – www.pardes.org.il



Illustrations by Maria Radacsi

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WELCOME

Welcome to the “spiritual check-ups” designed and written for Hillel’s Joseph Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Learning by Rabbi Aryeh Ben David, Director of Spiritual Education at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem.

In the same way that we all look after our *bodies* by having physical check-ups, these “spiritual check-ups” are designed to help students take care of their *souls*, and think about the things that give meaning to their lives.

These workshops are ready-made activities for use on campuses of all kinds. We hope that they will spark conversations, enrich the students with some experience of studying Jewish thought and help them feel connected to their Jewish identities.

All the workshops have been tested many times and run successfully on campuses all over North America and in Israel.

The spiritual check-ups in the series are:

- The Inner Voice
- Body and Soul
- Radical Amazement
- Preparing for Passover

They can be used in many ways; as a whole series focused on Jewish spirituality (the order in which you do the workshops is not important); as a curriculum for a retreat (choose 2 or 3 workshops over a Shabbat); as a one-time evening activity. They can also be broken up and the parts integrated into other activities. More ideas for how to adapt these activities is at the end of this document.

BEFORE THE SESSION

1. Marketing and Targeting the Spirituality Check-Up

- a. Which students would you like to participate in this session? Do you want your student board and other empowered students to have the opportunity to think deeply? Or are you going to use the topic of spirituality to attract students who don’t usually come to Jewish events? Have you thought about partnering with organizations on campus who are interested in spirituality?
- b. Some students are attracted to the word “spirituality”, some are turned off. Make sure that you think about the words you use on the publicity. Don’t forget to tell people that this is

For the sake of clarity and convenience, each Spiritual Check-Up includes the **Facilitator’s Guide**, **Student Guide** and **Experiential Exercise**. The Facilitator’s Guide is the same for each Check-Up. Background on the **history and philosophy** of these guides may be found at the end of this packet.

a workshop that requires their full participation for the whole time (usually 3 hours). It is very disruptive for the whole group if people come late and leave early.

- c. As with all Hillel events, students will be much more likely to come to this event if they have had personal contact with someone involved. Think about sending personalized invitations in advance, or calling people personally. This is the kind of event that requires the personal touch. You could also advertise that there will be dinner served, which makes it into a whole evening program.

2. Selecting a Location

Who are the students you are targeting? Where are they? Which location would be the best for them? Sometimes hosting events at Hillel will deter unaffiliated students from coming. Think about the best place to host the event, remembering that it should be comfortable and with a relaxed and quiet atmosphere.

3. Preparing the Room

- a. **Most importantly – make sure that it doesn't resemble a classroom.** Is the setting friendly? Are the chairs in a circle? Can you pull a couch into the circle? Are there pillows on the floor to sit on? Students walk into a classroom and automatically go into an academic mode of detachment. We want a warm, inviting atmosphere to help them unwind, and maybe even open up their hearts.
- b. How is the lighting? Don't try to make it too moodful or dark. They'll just fall asleep.
- c. Is the room clean? Are there any newspapers, magazines, or flyers lying around? Coffee cups or candy wrappers? Get rid of them. We don't want any distractions.
- d. Do you have name tags? This is very important. Hopefully there will be some new faces and they won't know each other. It eliminates the feeling that there are "insiders" and "outsiders."
- e. Will you need a white board or an easel with markers that work? Double check.
- f. How about pens and paper for the writing exercise? Or are they readily available?
- g. Do you have the booklets copied and ready? If you don't have enough, are there enough to share?
- h. Snacks? Not essential but create a friendly atmosphere.

☞ DURING THE SPIRITUALITY CHECK-UP

1. Preparing to be the Facilitator

Nervous? Relax. Remember - it's not about you.

- ☞ You don't have to dazzle them with your erudition or charisma.
- ☞ You don't have to be funny.
- ☞ You don't have to know everything.
- ☞ You don't have to have an answer for every question. Remember that at the Pesach Seder we start off by asking four questions. Then we read the *Haggadah*. We only answer three of the questions, one of the questions we never answer.

You just have to be personal and sincere. Your job is to:

- ☞ Guide them through the booklet and facilitate the writing exercise in order to bring them to the personal *chevruta* (one-on-one dialogue) at the end, which always works, because it's completely dependent on them.
- ☞ Make sure that the evening keeps moving. Don't let it get bogged down. Don't let anyone monopolize the evening. **The program should last about 75 minutes.** Make sure to leave about 20 minutes for the personal *chevruta*.
- ☞ Try to bring in people who appear to be on the outside, without drawing attention to the fact that they are an outsider, or that it is their first time.
- ☞ Encourage people to ask questions, and help to make them inclusive so that everyone understands and can participate.

You can do it. So relax and enjoy it. If you are transformed by the workshop, then for sure it will work for everyone else.

2. The Welcome

Are the students seated comfortably? Can you make eye contact with everyone?

- ☞ Find the people who chose to sit on the outside. They're nervous. They're not sure if they really want to be here. They're checking things out. They're not just sitting on the outside; they're emotionally on the outside. They're the most likely to leave.
- ☞ Give them a big smile and bring them into the circle. Start a conversation with them.

Everyone seated? Let's get them talking. Ask someone: "Why did you come here tonight?"

Just point and shoot. Ask someone else. Try to bring in the people who are looking distant. It will help warm them up. It should give you a feel of the crowd.

The students are coming from all different places – classes, sleeping in their rooms, exercise, coffee shop, etc. Your job now is to bring them together and to help them focus on the program. For this program to work, everyone will need to concentrate. Look serious. Even better, be serious.

3. Get Personal

You, the facilitator, now have to set the tone by saying something personal about yourself. If you don't lead the way, then they will not fully engage.

1. Talk about why this is an important subject for **you**. Try to be as specific as possible. Offer a moment – positive or challenging – that has affected your spiritual life. It's a great opportunity to deepen the bond you have with the students, and to show new students that you can create an engaging and welcoming space for them to discuss meaningful issues. Most of their professors do not share their personal side.
2. You're giving them permission to bring their hearts and souls (not just their minds) to the activity.
3. Don't (!) talk too long. Three minutes is plenty. Remember, it's not about you. It's about them. You're just the catalyst.

After the Session

One of the most important parts of these workshops is what you do *afterwards*. How are you going to capitalize on the success of the workshops? How can you involve these students in future activities? How can you build on their interest and energy? Even before the session starts, invest some time in thinking about what will happen afterwards. Here are some ideas of how to continue the connection with the students who participate.

Ideas for Follow-Up

- a. Invite all those who participate to have coffee with a Hillel staff member in the week following the workshop. Call them up and make a date to talk about their interests and how this workshop affected them.
- b. Encourage the students to start meeting on a regular (perhaps once a month), informal basis to learn and discuss issues of spirituality. They could meet in a dorm room and study together.
- c. Invite other religious leaders in the campus community to join you for similar activities in the future. They make good partners for future events.
- d. Think about planning a retreat based on similar activities, later in the year.
- e. Encourage the students who participated this time to bring a friend to the next workshop, and to help organize and publicize.
- f. Involve your Jewish student board, and lay board, in activities of this type. Brainstorm ways to integrate pieces of these spiritual check-ups into regular Hillel events (personal *chevruta* at a Friday night dinner or other events, etc.)

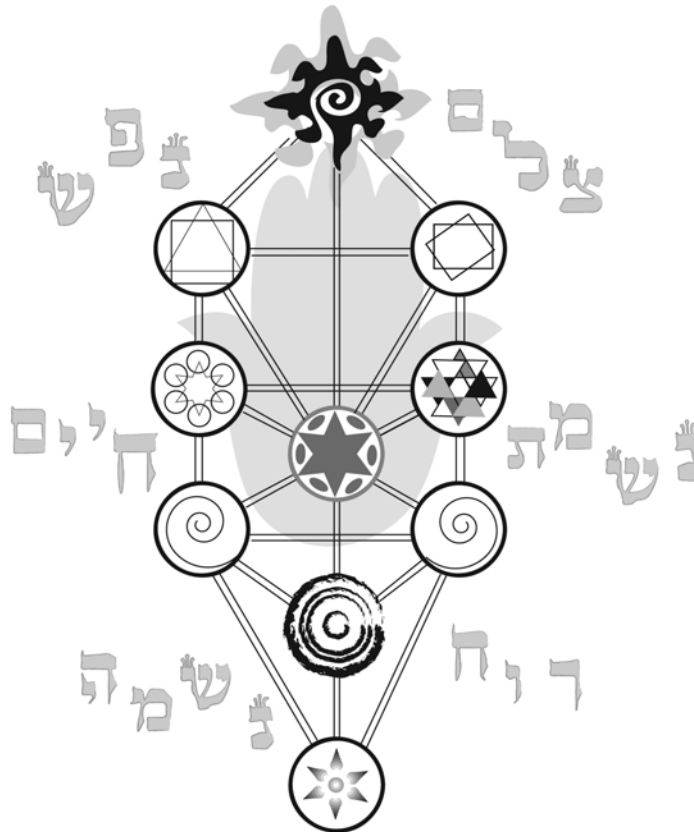
ADAPTING AND “TWEAKING” THE SPIRITUAL WORKSHOPS

The spiritual check-ups are written in a “*haggadah*” format, meaning that they are ready to use and don’t require any additional material. You simply take the “*haggadah*”, make copies for the participants, and start!

But, you should also feel free to take the material and adapt it to suit your needs, your students and your own personal style. Make it personal, add individual touches, and do whatever you need to make it work. The following are some ideas taken from things that other Hillel professionals have already done to make these workshops work for them.

- a. Begin the whole evening with a moment of reflection. You could end with one too.
- b. Dim the lights and have candles and chocolates to create a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere. You could also have pillows on the floor and soft music to start (although you won’t want it to distract you during the workshop itself).
- c. Start with a *nigun* (a song without words).
- d. Begin with a personal story about your life, your soul or a spiritual moment.

- e. Ask a small number of students to share their spiritual moments at different times during the evening.
- f. Ask everyone to write down a word describing how they feel at the start of the evening, and then do this again at the end, comparing how the feelings are different.
- g. Have people introduce themselves by saying something about their souls.
- h. Don't be afraid to ask people to "just sit with this idea for a moment" if something interesting comes up. Ask them to reflect on this at the end.
- i. Add an ice-breaker game at the start or in the middle.





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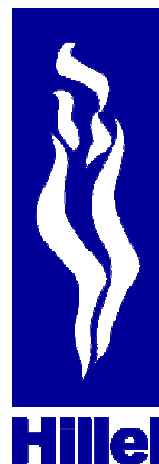
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Will someone please volunteer to be our first reader? Thank you.

☞ GUIDELINES FOR THE READING OF THE BOOKLET

These booklets are modeled after the *Haggadah* of the Passover Seder; the book that we use to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. Just like the *Haggadah*, this text will be read by the participants of the evening.

Guidelines for Readers:

1. Some people get nervous when they read aloud and end up reading very quickly. Try to read loudly and slowly.
2. Try to add a bit of life to what you're reading. Relax. Have some fun.
3. Please don't read ahead. The *Haggadah* works better when we're all on the same page.
4. Occasionally there will be "Instructions to the Reader" directions, don't be alarmed, enjoy it.

At the ☞*Next Reader* sign, pick the next reader of your choice.

☞*Next Reader*

☞ GETTING STARTED

Abraham Joshua Heschel was one of the most fascinating Jewish figures of the 20th century. A descendant from a Hassidic dynasty, he traveled in Reform, Conservative and Orthodox circles. The Catholics and Protestants both revered him. He was a philosopher, poet, scholar, and leading social rights activist in the 1960's, marching hand in hand with Martin Luther King.

Tonight we will go on a journey. Abraham Joshua Heschel will be our guide. The beauty of this trip will not be in the things that we see. The depth and beauty will reside in how we see things. He will show us how to penetrate into the life around us. He will allow what we see to touch our souls. Along the way we will also witness how faith and holiness may become daily events.

What we are going to do tonight is very unusual. It is rare for Jews to get together to talk about issues of faith and belief. We like to talk about a lot of things. We talk about – food, Israel, social action, food, relationships, sports, business, Jewish movie stars, and food. But we rarely devote an evening to such a personal and sometimes difficult subject as God's presence in this world.

Heschel knew this. He knew that Judaism had retreated from the challenging and essential topics of life. He wrote:

It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid (boring) . . . when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion – its message becomes meaningless.

Religion is an answer to our ultimate questions. The moment we become oblivious to ultimate questions, religion becomes irrelevant, and its crisis sets in. The central thought of Judaism is *the living*

God

☞ *Next Reader*

These are very provocative words. Rarely do we hear a rabbi pass such a harsh judgment on the state of Judaism.

Instructions to Reader: ask participants if any of them identify with Heschel's words.

Tonight we will accept Heschel's invitation. We will focus on ultimate questions.

We may never have answers to questions like: "Why do bad things happen to good people? Where was God in the Holocaust? Is there an ultimate truth?" But those are not the questions for tonight. Tonight we're looking inward, into ourselves.

People often talk of the "hiddenness of God." But God is not always hidden far away. Sometimes God is hidden very close by. Perhaps even in this room.

So, let all who are interested in having a "spiritual check-up" come and participate.

☞ *Next Reader*

☞ **Order of the evening**

First we have to prepare ourselves appropriately. Just like on Pesach when we get rid of all of our *hametz* (leavened products), so too tonight we're going to have to get rid of something for this workshop to be meaningful. Tonight, our *hametz* is our cynicism or sarcasm. For the duration of this workshop we will be functioning in a cynicism-free zone. Why? It's very hard for one person to raise the mood of a whole group, but it is very easy for one person to bring down the mood of the whole group. Tonight, we'll have to work together to make this evening productive.

We have all been in a group setting in which someone makes a very personal remark and another person rolls his or her eyes. Everyone sees the eyes rolling. It only takes a second but at that moment, everyone else in the room shuts down. No one is willing to become the next target of rolling eyes.

Just like we replace *hametz* with matzah, so too tonight we're going to replace cynicism with tolerance and support. No judging each other. No criticizing each other. No attacking each other. We want to create a "safe space" environment. We may have talked about a lot of things together, but I'm not sure if we have ever helped each other think about our souls. Keep in mind that people may be in very different places, and we will have to maintain mutual respect for each other to make this process work. So let's celebrate the diversity of this group.

Okay, let's start. First, please turn off cell phones.

☞ *Next Reader*

☞ Sources (from Heschel's *Man is not Alone*):

Instructions to Reader: please read the sources aloud, slowly. If you get tired reading, ask someone else to continue.

I) Wonder & Radical Amazement

Among the many things that religious tradition holds in store for us is a legacy of **wonder**. Wonder goes beyond knowledge. Wonder is a state of mind in which we do not look at reality through the perspective of our memorized knowledge; in which nothing is taken for granted.

Modern man fell into the trap of believing that everything can be explained, that reality is a simple affair which has only to be organized in order to be mastered.

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder almost necessarily declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. **Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living.** What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.

Science does not try to fathom the mystery. It merely describes and explains the way in which things behave in terms of causal necessity.

Wonder is not the same as curiosity. Wonder is a form of thinking.

Wonder, rather than doubt, is the root of all knowledge. There is no answer in the world to radical amazement.

☞ *Next Reader*

II) Awe

Wonder is the beginning of awe.

Awe is the awareness of *transcendent meaning*, of a spiritual suggestiveness of reality (a sense that something lies behind and created the moment of wonder).

Awe, then, is more than a feeling. It is an answer of the heart and mind to the presence of mystery in all things, *an intuition for a meaning that is beyond the mystery*, an awareness of the *transcendent worth of the universe*.

If the world is taken for granted, then all we need to know is its cause; but if the world is a mystery, then the most pressing problem is, what does it stand for? What is its meaning? Where did it come from?

It came from the ineffable (the realm beyond words, beyond expressing, beyond even knowing). By the ineffable we are not talking about things that are unknown today but may be known a thousand years from now. By the ineffable we mean that aspect of reality which by its very nature lies beyond our comprehension; and is acknowledged by the mind to be beyond the scope of the mind. The ineffable, then, is a synonym for hidden meaning rather than for absence of meaning.

In thinking on the level of the ineffable, we do not set out with a preconceived idea of a supreme being in our possession, trying to ascertain whether He is in reality the way He is in our minds. The awareness which opens our minds to the existence of a supreme being is an awareness of a divine presence. **Long before we attain any knowledge about His essence, we possess an intuition of a divine presence.**

The world is a mystery, a question, not an answer.

Instructions to the Reader: ask participants to look over the sources again, and to note what stands out for them.

☞ *Next Reader*

☞ Review of Sources

Our tour guide tonight is Abraham Joshua Heschel. The tour is a journey from our regular lives – to lives full of wonder and radical amazement – to lives replete with awe – to the seeds of faith and acts of holiness. This tour involves a different kind of seeing, an inward seeing. Everyone is capable of this kind of seeing, though rarely do we actually do it.

Heschel often spoke the praises of another tour guide. He was known to have said that if someone visits Jerusalem, they have to see it with Rabbi Pinchas Peli. The first time that Heschel visited Jerusalem after the Six Day War his guide was Rabbi Peli, professor of Talmud at the Ben-Gurion University in Beersheba. When Rabbi Peli was asked later on what he did that was so remarkable, he replied, “I took Heschel up to the Mount of Olives and said one word: ‘look.’ Then I took him to Mount Scopus and said one word: ‘look.’ Then I took him to the Western Wall and said one word: ‘look.’ I didn’t explain anything. I didn’t tell any stories. I didn’t do anything extraordinary.

It was an amazing tour because Abraham Joshua Heschel had the awesome ability to see deeply into things and life.” We have eyes. Most of us are blessed with sight. Yet we all witness life at different depths. Some people, like Heschel, grasp beyond what the eye records.

☞ *Next Reader*

Wonder. Radical Amazement. Words that Heschel brought into the Jewish vocabulary. How would you describe a moment of radical amazement? Have you ever had a moment of wonder? A moment that just makes you say “wow,” a moment that defies words, that defies comprehension.

Instructions to the Reader: ask participants if they have ever had a “wow” moment of wonder. Choose a few people to share their moment.

Is a moment of wonder necessarily a “religious” moment? Is it theological?

Wonder, the first stop on Heschel’s journey, does not have to be connected with faith, God, or religion. Somehow we sense, we see, something beyond what our vision detects. We are stunned and speechless. It’s as if we are seeing something for the first time. A “wow” experience. A moment that is real yet virtually impossible to describe to someone else.

The moment is powerful, but does not necessarily have to be connected to a greater being or reality. It is simply a “wow” moment. Often it is inspired by breath-taking scenes or events in nature. But the person who sees deeply can discover objects or moments of wonder in the smallest daily occurrences.

Wonder is not only about developing a new way of seeing. It is really about cultivating a new way of thinking and interacting with the world. It is less dependent on “what is being seen” than the attitude of “who is doing the seeing.”

☞ *Next Reader*

“Wow moments” don’t need to happen at the Grand Canyon or looking at a double rainbow. “Wow moments” can happen anywhere, anytime. It just depends on how we look at the world.

Look around the room. Put on your “wonder eyes.” Choose 5 things in this room make you go “wow.” Choose 5 things that are, in your eyes, “amazing.” Try to choose things that upon first notice seemed quite ordinary, but upon greater reflection seem – “wow.” Let’s take a few moments (in silence) to give everyone this opportunity. Use the space below to list your things:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Instructions to Reader: Ask people to share one or two of the “wonder things” that they chose.

How many “wonder things” did people share? 5, 10, 20? What would happen if we took longer for this exercise and each person was asked to find 10 objects of wonder? 20 objects of wonder?

What would happen if each person shared all of these objects with the group? How would we feel the next time that we walked into this room?! Wouldn't we see this room in a completely different way? Wouldn't we recollect all of the various wonder things that each person pointed out? Wouldn't this room be transformed into a “wonder room?”

Wouldn't that be amazing?

☞ *Next Reader*

Awe.

Was the moment of wonder – by chance? Was it random? Perhaps significant in and of itself but pointing to no greater meaning? “Wonder is the beginning of awe.” Awe is the second stop on this journey. Some people will get off at the first station, the wonder station, choosing not to connect the wonder to awe. Awe begins with questions: “how did that moment of wonder occur? Why did it happen? What brought about that feeling of wonder that I just experienced? I just had a moment that made me go “wow.” Did something create that experience? Where did it come from? Was it just by chance?”

Awe looks into the mystery of the universe, the mystery of my life. It regards the moment of wonder as an invitation to discover the meaning behind or beyond the moment. Is some meaning being suggested? Is there some message for me in this moment? **Was the moment of wonder some kind of gift that is inviting me to look for its giver?** Did something create this moment for me to experience?

Awe connects the wonder to the source of the wonder. We may apply many different names to this source – God, the Beyond, the Transcendent, the Spiritual, the Divine. Heschel would say that at the deepest level, all names are insufficient. The “Source of all wonder” is beyond human words.

Instructions to the Reader: Ask if anyone has ever felt that God was in a moment of wonder that they experienced.

☞ *Next Reader*

Heschel writes that “Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation.”

Almost 500 years ago the Kabbalists (mystics) of the city of Tzfat in Israel originated the custom of saying “*modeh*” (*modah* in the feminine) as the very first word that a Jew says upon waking up in the morning. “*Modeh*” – similar to the word “*toda*,” whose meaning is “Thanks.” Mystically, they understood that the first word that one utters gives birth to the mood of the whole day. Before even opening one’s eyes there is an expression of appreciation on one’s lips. Appreciation for living, for life. Hopefully this awareness transforms how one experiences each day.

The words “Jew” and “Judaism” come from the word “Yehuda,” which stems from the same idea as “*toda*,” of thanking. Perhaps the definition of a Jew could be “one who is grateful.” And this approach to life is “the beginning of our happiness.” Notwithstanding the challenges and trials every life endures, a person who is genuinely grateful for life will tend to lead a happier life. We may kvetch from time to time, but it is simply hard to be cranky when one feels blessed.

☞ *Next Reader*

What happens after the moment of wonder recedes? Does it just all fade away? Does life go back to normal? Return to the routine? Do those moments become warm and sentimental memories of nostalgia? Do we just wistfully look back and remark “aahhh. Remember when . . .” How many of us have albums of beloved photographs gathering dust on some bookshelf? Is this the fate of moments of wonder and awe? What happens during the moment after? The time between the moments of wonder and awe?

According to Heschel, the moments of wonder and awe are the building blocks for a whole attitude toward life. There will always be interludes between moments of wonder. The process of weaving together the moments of wonder and awe is the creating of a personal faith in the transcendent, in God. Faith is the state of mind that says, “even though at this moment I am not experiencing awesome moments of wonder, nevertheless I realize that the Source of all wonder still exists. I still maintain the relationship.”

Perhaps it is similar to maintaining a loving relationship during the moments when the sparks of love have faded. Some relationships falter the moment that the sparks diminish. Others remain “faithful,” and continue until the sparks eventually return. The moments of wonder and awe also eventually return.

Out of a sense of wonder – then awe – then faith – comes holiness. For Heschel, acts of holiness are the human responses to encountering the Divine. We respond to these moments of wonder with wondrous acts of our own. In the end, our being radically amazed by the wonder of life is the springboard for our own radically amazing acts of wonder.

☞ *Next Reader*

Bottom Line:

Wonder is a natural response to the world which causes me to transcend the mundane, the daily, the insignificant. A moment which causes me to stop and say, “wow,” that’s amazing. Religiously and spiritually neutral, I can be an atheist and still have moments of wonder.

Awe. I begin to create a minimal expression of theology. What is behind this “wow” moment? Is it just by chance, or does it suggest something beyond? Is there “something” bringing this moment into existence?

☞ *Next Reader*

☞ Personal *Chevruta*

Now comes the last and most important part of the evening. We're going to divide into pairs. In a moment, everyone should get a partner.

We're going to give each other a "spiritual check-up." It's very similar to a physical check-up.

These are the ground rules:

1. **Confidentiality.** Just like with a doctor, everything that is said between the two of you stays between the two of you.
2. **Total respect.** No judging or evaluating each other. No giving advice. We're not trying to fix each other. We're trying to create a "safe space" so that each of you can sincerely express where you are holding spiritually.
3. **Deep listening.** Focus on each other. Most people today just listen, but don't deeply listen. There are some people in the world who are blessed to be exceptional listeners. When someone deeply listens to us that enables us to deeply listen to ourselves.
4. **Reflective Questions:** If you ask your partner a question, make sure that it is a reflective, open-ended question. Not a question in which you are looking for a certain answer. Examples of reflective questions: "How long have you felt like that?" "How does that make you feel?" Examples of non-reflective, non-open-ended questions: "Why don't you do this . . . ?" "Have you ever considered doing this . . . ?"

Take turns. Listen to each other. Here are your questions.

"A Spiritual Check-Up"

1. Do you identify with Heschel's idea of wonder?
2. How would your life be different if you had a greater sense of wonder?
How would it affect your level of happiness or gratitude for life?
3. What do you think is holding you back from having a greater sense of wonder and awe?
4. Have moments of wonder ever brought you to connect to God?

☞ *Next Reader*

☞ *Afikomen*

This workshop is coming to a close. The reading of the *Haggadah* is almost over. Hopefully we have gained, individually and collectively, from this experience.

Instructions to Reader: Ask if anyone has any reflections on the evening.

At the end of the Passover seder we look for the *afikomen*. How appropriate. In the end, we are always searching. Searching for our true selves.

We are always seeking to return to the Garden of Eden, to rediscover paradise. Kindred spirits yearning for more. In a sense, every time we understand a bit more about our true selves we come closer to paradise. Let's continue to help each other search. Let's continue to inspire each other to keep on seeking, to fill our lives with radical amazement and wonder. To encourage each other to appreciate life more fully, with greater happiness. To allow this celebration of life to stir us to create our own relationships and acts that are full of wonder. With our minds, hearts, and bodies.

RABBI ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Heschel was born on January 11, 1907, in Warsaw. He was named after his grandfather, a hassidic leader, also known as the Apter Rebbe. He received a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Berlin in 1927, writing a dissertation on the phenomenology of prophetic consciousness. Heschel spent a short amount of time in a displaced persons camp in 1938-9, and then escaped “only weeks before the disaster began” (his words). He taught at the Reform Movement’s Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati for a number of years and then moved to the Jewish Theological Seminary of the Conservative Movement in New York in 1945.

Heschel was in many ways a loner. He took flexible positions regarding ritual obligations that many Orthodox Jews considered to be controversial or inauthentic. He was too traditional for most Reform Jews and too intent upon inwardness for many adherents to any Jewish denomination. His increased media visibility in the 1960s caused some to question his humility, for the public could be overly impressed by his beard, his flowing white hair, and his lush oratory. Protestants and Catholics saw in Heschel a Hebrew prophet and some skeptics felt that he derived too much pleasure from being called “Father Abraham.” His profound involvement with the anti-Vietnam War movement aroused the anxiety of some Establishment leaders.

Heschel masterfully articulated our most intimate yearnings. He stressed the universality of religious insights, although he insisted on the divine authority of the Hebrew prophets. He most successfully addressed religious moderates, Christian and Jews, open-minded people receptive to spirituality, as well as agnostics touched by hunger for the holy. He had an open reverence for the Bible and shameless passion for God. His attachment to God was equaled only by his endless striving to sanctify all humanity.

He passed away in 1972.

Suggested reading by Abraham Joshua Heschel:

1. *God, in Search of Man*
2. *Man is not Alone – a Philosophy of Religion*
3. *The Sabbath*

For more information, see:

<http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/H/Heschel.asp>;
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Joshua_Heschel



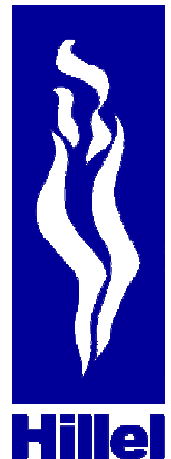
A SHOT OF SPIRITUALITY

HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

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This series of “spiritual check-ups” were written for Hillel’s Joseph Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Learning by Aryeh Ben David. Aryeh is an Israel-based educator who has taught for many years at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies.

These workshops are a partnership between Hillel, Pardes and the Nathan Cummings Foundation. In this document Aryeh describes the philosophy and rationale behind them.

INTEGRATED AFFECTIVE LEARNING

I have been involved in Jewish education for over 20 years now teaching full-time Torah, Talmud, Jewish philosophy, prayer, interpersonal ethics, and other seminars. I come from an academic type of family, and felt at home sitting with books for seemingly endless periods of time. I have thoroughly loved the challenge and process of teaching. I have been very comfortable with it in every way.

But after a number of years in the classroom it began to feel too comfortable. I have felt in the last number of years a particular shortcoming in the classroom. We were learning well. Information was being conveyed. But something was missing

I felt that not enough was happening within the students’ beings. And not enough within myself also. The learning remained either in our heads, or in our notebooks. Restlessly, I carried these thoughts with me for a number of years. I experimented with different ideas and approaches in the classroom, some things worked, and some things didn’t.

The approach now adopted in these seminars emerged out of my learning kabbalistic sources during the last few years. According to the *Kabbalah*, we have three primary voices of the soul within us. In Hebrew they are called: *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama*. The *neshama* is considered to be our intellectual voice, the voice of our mind. The *ruach* is considered to be our emotional voice, the voice of our heart. The *nefesh* voice is considered to be our physical voice, the voice of our body.

I reflected on this idea and came to the conclusion that if this indeed was the case, then Jewish education should reflect this understanding, this deep wisdom. Programs were then designed to include these three components: for the mind, the heart, and the body.

Each of these workshops contains these three elements. First we learn sources and use our minds. Then there is an experiential element, usually writing or art, for our bodies. Listening to the voice of our bodies does not necessarily mean dance or exercise, but rather the process of creating something physical. Allowing what has been heretofore internal to take on its own being, its own reality. The third part of the workshop is the “personal *chevruta*,” which offers expression to our emotional side. In the personal *chevruta* the students are invited to take a partner and in strict confidentiality to speak to each other from their hearts.

These workshops have now been run for over 3,000 participants, with overwhelmingly positive results. Not only have the students internalized the ideas discussed, but the sharing and bonding between the participants has helped to foster language and an environment conducive to the further contemplation of the subjects at hand.

☞ THE HAGGADAH APPROACH

The second innovation arose while contemplating the most feasible method for Hillel professionals to facilitate the workshops. Originally I wrote a “facilitators’ guide.” This included sources, trigger questions, ideas to incorporate, metaphors, stories, and tricks to maintain the focus of the students. After looking at this guide I came to a single irrefutable conclusion: it wasn’t going to work! It really is very difficult to teach someone else’s sources. Secondly, the degree of preparation required plus the pressure to control the discussion would have made the whole endeavor too difficult. At the Joseph Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Learning we’re very aware that the professionals in the field are already working 110% and sometimes don’t have the time to start preparing something from scratch.

So I went back to the drawing board and contemplated how we can make this potentially great workshop feasible.

I tried to think of the kind of programs that Jews already run themselves, with an easy-to-use format. The answer was obvious – the Pesach Seder. Most Jews know the *Haggadah*. It gives us the instructions and runs itself. Of course, we can always add more. We can be creative and insert ideas, stories, and experiential elements. But the basic Seder also can be run straight from the *Haggadah*. And it works! At least it seems to me that it works. Growing up in my family we pared the *haggadah* down so that Seder would run about 15 minutes. Yet it was still important and memorable.

So I wrote *haggadot*. Word by word, including instructions to the readers. Now, the program virtually runs itself. The major points can’t be missed. Now there is much less of a concern regarding the facilitating of a discussion of the sources. The *haggadah* runs the discussion. Now there is much less worry over someone either monopolizing the conversation, or of someone being left out. And most important, the time of preparation and pressure to facilitate the program has been cut to a minimum.

We discussed this approach at the Joseph Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Learning and honestly we were all a bit skeptical over whether it could work. It seemed a bit contrived. It seemed overly structured, too limiting, too stilted. But we decided to try it out and see.

The first guinea pigs were University of Maryland, American University, U.C. Berkeley, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Indiana University, and University of Wisconsin (Madison). And the results were – “wow.” They liked it! They said that they liked it. The *haggadah* format felt familiar to them. They liked being in charge. They liked reading from it and choosing the next reader. They even liked “hamming it up” at times. And they liked that when the program was over they had something in their hands to take home (with additional reading suggestions).

