

*Because My Soul Longs for You: Integrating Theology into Our Lives*

edited by Rabbi Edwin C. Goldberg and Rabbi Elaine S. Zecher

(New York, CCAR Press, 2021), 207 pp.

*Where are you in the journey of inviting holiness into your life?*

*Where might you consider going?*

These powerful questions Rabbi Edwin C. Goldberg and Rabbi Elaine S. Zecher ask as they conclude *Because My Soul Longs for You: Integrating Theology into Our Lives*.

Their query encounters my own as I too am deepening my quest for new perspectives of holiness and meaning. This book invited me to journey into my own *n'shamah* and my own truth from a new vista.

Two months ago, my soul guided me to move to a rural, remote area of California's Eastern Sierra to be with my partner. It certainly was not a choice made from intellect, more of a knowing that this was the next right thing. What I didn't anticipate was how much resistance I would feel once I moved. So much longing for city life (who knew I would ever yearn for a Target Superstore), my treasured Denver community, even the simplicity of living alone.

And yet, every time I connect to Source, to my higher self, I *know* Bishop, California, is where I am supposed to be right now. I can feel my own expansion as I no longer can turn to the endless distractions of city life. Instead, I am invited to source myself from within.

My prayers beseech, "Why did my soul lead me here? May I have the fortitude to look under every rock. May Spirit guide me on this scavenger hunt!" And in my better moments, I even add, "Bring it!"

As I sit in this chapter of opening to divinity in new ways, and allowing divine guidance to show me what is in my highest good, the introductory words of Rabbi Zecher and Rabbi Goldberg capture my experience impeccably. “We work too hard to speak *about* God instead of *experiencing* God” (p. xii). *Because My Soul Longs for You* so wisely helps us move beyond ideas of reasoning or intellect and explores five realms in which we experience God: Creation; Traditions; Relationships; Bodies; and Beyond Body, Soul, and Mind.

This collection is a taste of rabbis, cantors, and educators encountering the Divine. What follows are a few that propelled me inward and upward.

Rabbi John L. Rosove explores the idea of the Divine present in Creation while recounting a childhood memory. He and his brother were lying in the grass looking up at the blue sky. One day John’s brother said, “You know, there is no ceiling” (p. 3). This profound childhood statement perfectly captures the awe and vastness before them. But it led me to an even deeper place: the truth of boundless potential. The Divine creates out of the infinite. Truly, there are no limits or impossibilities in creation. As humans, we impose lack, scarcity, and judgment. The Divine, however, creates from a place of abundance. As we co-create our lives with Source, we get to choose whether we place ceilings on our lives.

Rosove then asks, “How can we connect to what is eternal and infinite in ourselves and in the world?” (p. 8). One way for me is choosing to live without a ceiling—divine miracles get to be *everywhere*! Co-creating with sparks dropped in our path, cultivating the truth of limitless possibility, and choosing a path of freedom are all elements of ceiling-free existence. While there are limitations that are imposed on us, we always get to choose the lens through which we see our lives. Hearing the foundational wisdom in this child’s observation, “You know, there is no ceiling,” reminded me to cultivate this perspective in more expansive ways.

Rabbi Hara E. Person explores another side of Creation in her essay “Experiencing God While Making Jewish Art: Glimpses of Splendor.” She writes beautifully of the power to draw forth a photographic story out of shadows and light (p. 52). At a time in her own life when feeling grateful was challenging, when praying was formidable, and when God felt distant, creating photographs opened a portal to gratitude and connection to the Divine. Person speaks of God as an artist, painting and sculpting the world into being. As *b'tzelem Elohim*, we too can use our artistry to imagine word worlds into being, each of us humbly echoing the masterful creation surrounding us.

Rabbi Rebecca L. Dubowe bravely confronts her own vulnerability in “Experiencing God While Looking at Others.” As someone who reads lips, Dubowe must look deeply into others’ faces in order to understand them. As she looks in another’s face, seeing all of their thoughts and emotions, she also shows her own. Dubowe captures beautifully, “If I am tired, I still need to look into your face. If I made a mistake, I still need to look into your face regardless of my embarrassment” (p. 82).

Gazing upon another is one way we communicate with God and the Divine responds. Dubowe reminds us, “It is always possible to communicate with God, because all that conversation requires from us is to look into our own faces...When we turn our faces away from someone, we reject ourselves, others, and God’s presence” (p. 84). Her words made me think of recent times as my partner and I navigated hurt feelings and how hard it was to initiate eye contact. Bridging our vulnerability to let another see our pain can sometimes feel Herculean. Dubowe’s discernment reminds me of one of my favorite stories from the Talmud<sup>1</sup> that I cherish captured beautifully in Mark Nepo’s book, *The Book of Awakening*.<sup>2</sup> A Rabbi asks, “How do you know the first moment of dawn has arrived?” After a great silence, one pipes up, “When you can

tell the difference between a sheep and a dog.” The Rabbi says no. Another offers, “When you can tell the difference between a fig tree and an olive tree.” Again, the Rabbi says no. There are no other answers. The Rabbi circles their silence and walks between them, “You know the first moment of dawn has arrived when you look into the eyes of another human being and see yourself.”

Dubowe’s framing of enveloping ourselves in God’s presence, choosing the vulnerability of receiving another through our gaze and being received by another, is a sacred prod. May we each intentionally choose to invite the Divine into our most human moments—choosing the holy invitation of *panim al panim*.

Rabbi Edwin C. Goldberg explores “Experiencing God in Fear: Confronting the Night.” He reminds us that it is only by learning to live in the darkness that we can find our true selves. I think of so many times during the past few months in my own darkness when I have cried out, “Show me! Show me what you want me to learn!” I wish our connection to divine wisdom didn’t have to come in those moments when we are curled in the fetal position on the bathroom floor, but there is something about that rawness that creates an opening. The *Tanya* of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi reminds us that moments of darkness “draw energy from our innate yet hidden desire for God...and thus kindles our passion for self-transformation” (p. 117). Goldberg aptly expresses how insight emerges from bleakness. Light inspires because of the darkness surrounding it. Moments of exquisite beauty from my own life have come from fully opening to grief. I think of a moment I was sobbing from my depths in another’s arms. Once my wails subsided, I was left with the exquisite beauty of what it meant to show up in my full humanness—snot-filled tears, despair, and the relief of not holding back. Being received by

another soul when I was in such a raw place is something I will never forget. And it opened a doorway of intimacy neither of us imagined.

This chapter, like all chapters, is perfect for use in an educational discussion setting. Inviting those we serve to consider bleak moments from their lives, what wisdom emerged, and how the gifts of that wisdom continue to serve them would be a powerful reflection and sharing exercise.

I loved Rabbi Efrat Rotem's essay "Experiencing God While Loving My Body." She perfectly articulated how Jewish culture has evolved as reinforcing the traditional patriarchal categories of men versus women, Jews versus non-Jews, the religiously privileged versus the religiously nonprivileged—while, on the other hand, it created textual traditions that speak extensively about otherness as the foundation of universal ethics, social justice, and shared responsibilities, embracing ambiguity, and critiquing the establishment of the notion of one singular truth and institutionalized power (p. 155). Rotem shows us what it might look like to integrate our sexuality and our spirituality. Drawing upon the groundbreaking work of Judith Plaskow, she cites the teaching that if we repress the power of the erotic because it makes us sexually alive, then we repress the clarity and creative energy that is the basis of our capacity to envision and work toward a more just social order...Can we stop evicting our sexuality from the synagogue...and instead bring it in, offering it to God and the experience of full spiritual/physical connection?<sup>3</sup>

As a queer rabbi, Rotem does not accept the boundaries set before her. The erotic is one of the most beautiful expressions of unification. When we are fully connected to our bodies, our emotions, and our sense of power, we can no longer tolerate hiding or suppression. Rotem invites us to elevate this intimacy in how we re-envision prayer, how we celebrate our bodies, and how

we reclaim Judaism to reach beyond binary role models of the past. I imagine the ways we can bring a queer perspective into our relationship with the Eternal. If we reject old categories of gender and sexuality, and instead create openings for more individually authentic sensual expression, imagine the accessibility this would open up. What a beautiful practice it would be to invite students to find a prayer they love and recreate it as an intimate expression of divine blessing. I imagine the *Hashkiveinu* would be perfect for such a creative exploration. How might a shelter of peace spread over us be envisioned as divine propinquity? The possibilities for inspired poetry and metaphor are endless.

Rhonda Karlton Rosen's chapter on her Buddhist and Jewish lenses was the most delightfully challenging for me. I love how Rosen enlivens her reading of Jewish texts via her Buddhist understanding. She boldly shows us how Buddhist concepts of mindfulness, concentration, and humility find their place within Jewish sources. Rosen's reminder that the habitual reflex is optional...knowing that we do not always have to scratch the itch is a powerful practice of choosing the world we want to create. When habitual reactivity separates us from immanence and transcendence, we can cultivate skills of connection via interested and kind awareness (p. 185).

Rosen writes compellingly about cultivating possibilities for immanent indwelling, creating a home base within ourselves (p. 184). This for me is the essence of *Shechinah*. Coming home to ourselves in deeper ways and divinity as our sacred abode is one of my favorite metaphors.

I struggled more with the ideas of taming and harnessing our passions and the Buddhist idea of resting on the "firm ground of no-thing-ness" (p. 187). I am seeking less taming of passions in my life and more passionate exuberance. My inner feminist contends with more

reasons to tame ourselves. And for me, no-thing-ness does not capture the theological depths of interconnectedness or an ever-creating, ever-expanding God. Later in the article, Rosen affirms that we live in relationship to all that is. The Divine Mystery connects the immanent presence to the transcendent, without a single moment of separation. I craved elucidation on how these concepts, which to me felt contradictory, could all simultaneously be true. Rosen's rich and provocative chapter left me desiring more of a bridge between Jewish and Buddhist concepts.

Kudos to Rabbis Zecher and Goldberg for this fine compilation. This is just a small taste of a rich array of essays. I was thrilled to see that the majority of chapters were written by women. And the poetic beauty of each chapter ending with a creative blessing brought the spiritual into each narrative. Each chapter holds stirring applications for teaching, discussion, and personal reflection. As I sit in this juncture in my life, feeling a bit like a stranger in a strange land, the concluding invitation to consider, "*Where are you in the journey of inviting holiness into your life?*" stirs an animating spirit within me.

RABBI JESSICA KESSLER MARSHALL (NY08) offers spiritually inclusive rituals and retreats, facilitates premarital and newlywed spiritual development programs, and presents at speaking engagements on authentic sacred living. She guides via abundance and JOY and connection to our own rich soul-wisdom.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> *B'rachot* 9b.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Nepo, *The Book of Awakening* (Conari Press: San Francisco, 2000), 377.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Plaskow, "Towards a New Theology of Sexuality," in *Twice Blessed*, ed. Christie Balka and Andy Rose (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 141–51.