

A Gentile Experience of Judaism

Some of the Ways Jewish Spirituality Can Benefit Non-Jewish People

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Hi there. My name is Fran, a woman in her 40's living in Sydney, Australia and this article is an overview of my experiences of Jewish spirituality as a gentile (i.e. non-Jew). I've been learning in the Jewish system since 1999, first at the Adelaide Hebrew Congregation then at Central Synagogue and Chabad Double Bay in Sydney. I'm Anglican-born, learned Christianity in school and have studied parts of Christian theology, 'New Age' doctrines and Traditional Chinese Medicine since. Until my 35th birthday, I'd never contemplated Judaism or Jewish teachings. Now, I can't get enough of them.

Please note that whilst I have taken advice on some of the matters below, this article is written very much from a non-Jewish perspective. It has not been written with an aim of representing the Jewish or rabbinical community's opinions of the matters discussed; of appearing as if it has been endorsed by others; nor is it intended to make me appear subject matter expert.

How I became involved with Judaism

It might sound odd but I never came to Jewish spirituality seeking religion, faith or G-d. I came with a desire for information, guidance and logic; a point of reference that would help me better comprehend how life worked in my world. I'm energetically sensitive you see. Since childhood, I've always picked up the thoughts, moods and feelings of those around me without even trying. I see clairvoyantly and hear clairaudiently but it's the silent, feeling sense that's strongest. I don't write this to distract your focus away from the topic. I write it because I believe that it makes what I'm saying below even more relevant for those who seek a system that explains spirituality and energetic phenomena well, in a way that enhances their ability to function in the 'normal' world.

For my first 30 years, I had no idea that I was energetically sensitive. Whilst I'd experienced the invisible world quite loudly as a child, I'd learned to call that my imagination, need for attention and/or problem. It wasn't until a series of incidents in the corporate world that I started to require information and help. Since childhood, the minute I'm asked to help, something just takes over in a way that can blind me to the realities of human nature. It keeps me focused on the target of genuine helping which is great but, in my earlier years, it found me continually landing into trouble with people who didn't really want "genuine" for themselves or others. I could 'hear' the things people were holding back and projecting even when they were being denied – I always have – and I came unstuck big time. So, at 30, my spiritual development began. I had to make sense of life in a way that helped me keep grounded and centred in the physical world. I had this extra layer of experience, a skill perhaps, which I didn't understand.

My education commenced with readings, creative visualisation classes and spiritual healing sessions (all from Sydney intuitive and astrologer Kris Gibson). These helped me become more aware of what I sensed; examine the models of life that I embraced; and better understand my internal and external worlds. I then found an intuitive development program sponsored by the Spiritualist network in Sydney where I learned how to connect, open up to white light and

clear energetically; what energies to associate with and reference to (or not); and how to use my intuitive skills to live more honestly and problem-solve. After a few years of this I needed to go further - where I didn't know. Whilst my early training helped me greatly on the practical level, I had yet to find the right level of explanation for how and why things happened in my world. Information wasn't lacking but I sought a system that not only drove from Divine will, true balance and integrity (not that I was/am at that place yet myself) but also one which explained invisible things at a practical (i.e. useable) level. I intuitively knew that the use of energy/intuitive skills didn't have to come from a place where "I" or the need to control is king. Energy work, no matter how strong, can be very limited when it does. I also knew that experiencing the invisible world in itself didn't need to mean "problem" or "illness". The earlier forums had helped me greatly in these respects; I just hadn't found my spiritual "home" yet.

I was in Adyar bookshop in Sydney one day and came across Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan's book, *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation in Theory and Practice*¹. I didn't understand much of it even though I read it twice. This didn't matter; every cell in my being knew that I'd found the right system and that I'd benefit greatly from this form of teaching: Jewish Kabbalah (i.e. Kabbalah as it's taught by rabbis/rebbitzens). My search for the right Kabbalistic group initially took me to non-Jewish groups and Jewish lay-groups. I didn't think to call a synagogue (shul) at first, somehow thinking that I had to find my education in the secular world.

Finally! Going to the weekly shiur

In 1999, I finally realised that I might have more success at a synagogue. I rang the Adelaide Hebrew Congregation and was advised that there was a weekly class (shiur) which I was welcome to attend. The first shiur was incredible. Rabbi Yosef Engel, AHC's Senior Rabbi at the time, spoke with such focus and awareness about the literal passages in the text as well as the more esoteric levels. By the time the class finished, I knew I'd found what I was looking for.

A weekly shiur that discusses Kabbalah is a really exciting class to attend. Perhaps, for a non-Jew, it's even more inspiring simply because not all systems of theology or spirituality discuss esoterics very much. Without a discussion of that which lies behind the text, faith and religion can seem lifeless, dull. This isn't to denigrate any creed but, for one who experiences energy on a daily basis, many non-rabbinical systems fail to offer much guidance, clarity or help. When a rabbi talks Kabbalah, the room changes; all is silence even though there's still talking; the energy shifts and the atoms start to dance in ways they weren't before; something more is with us, reverberating through the room and magnifying the teachings. In my words (i.e. not necessarily technically correct) the soul level just takes over. In a world where more and more people experience invisible things on a daily basis, Judaism offers a wealth of explanation, structure and guidance – key variables in balanced living, grounded spirituality and functioning well in the physical world.

Rabbinically-led shiurs are also mind-blowing in that they introduce you to a much deeper definition of G-d (Hashem). This can lead to a significant overhaul. Where non-Jewish systems can portray G-d as being strict, stern and distant - just Gevurah in Kabbalistic terms - Judaism presents Him as pure benevolence, ever-present and multi-faceted even in the more

¹ Samuel Weiser, Inc., York Beach, Maine, 1990

challenging moments. Jewish spirituality has helped me understand that G-d is real, that He's right here all the time (even if I can't sense Him) and that He will help in all things even if I've yet to be "as good" as I can be. This has resulted in fundamental changes in my spiritual practice and my understanding of Judaism let alone Christianity. It's taught me what a practical, manifesting powerhouse faith, trust and a genuine desire to partner with Divine will can be (and not just in spiritual or religious terms).

Another aspect experienced regularly in a shiur is the emphasis upon family, benevolence and kindness, not only theoretically but in very real, practical terms. This, from my non-Jewish perspective, is very interesting given that other doctrines can paint Judaism as stern, cold or cruel. It's nothing of the sort. Where other spiritual groups and teachers can seem to reserve their kindness for particular people, times or moments, Judaism gives it genuinely and continually at all levels no matter which system of spirituality one chooses to follow. Judaism is the spiritual parent I believe that most of us long for, from whom the non-Jewish world would benefit enormously (indeed, it already does).

One last attraction of the weekly shiur is that the rabbis actually explain things - the reasons why, against and for. In other systems at some levels of dialogue (e.g. esoteric), there can be a tendency to just call something "bad" or "evil" rather than to explain why that's so. This does nothing for an educated or inquiring mind which nowadays is quite common. It's my experience that rabbis/rebbitzens never back away from a question asked respectfully and with good intention. There's always a reason that can be given and one's inquiry is never avoided or put down.

Please note that, unless specifically stated, classes led by rabbis usually focus on Jewish spirituality – i.e. they don't aim to discuss other faiths or systems at all. Whilst there may be questions from time to time about how/why other creeds approach certain subjects, the aim is to promote understanding of Judaism and Judaica (things Jewish). Non-Jews are welcome to participate and ask questions but should respect these parameters. A student who wants to explore/compare Jewish teachings alongside other systems more overtly is probably best served by approaching a university, adult education forum or community college.

The Texts

Whether attending a shiur or reading a Jewish text, one is continually exposed to the vast library that is the Jewish teaching catalogue. The following are the texts I've discovered thus far and a brief description of the benefits I've experienced as a result of studying them.

The Tanya

Whilst in Adelaide, I was very fortunate to hear Rabbi Engel (now at ChabAdelaide) teach from the Tanya. The Tanya is known as "Kabbalah for the Common Person" and it discusses the world of energy, the layers of creation, the structure of souls and how things work. Rabbi Engel is an amazing teacher and listening to him teach from the Tanya is awesome. If you're ever in Adelaide, see if you can attend one of his classes.

Often, as I'm studying the Tanya, I'll be informed of a pattern or energetic phenomenon that I'm learning about in my day-to-day reality. This never ceases to amaze me because it's not as if we discuss our personal lives before, during or after class. The synchronicity is incredible. As one who comes from a system where the invisible world tends to be treated as a product of

one's imagination, gullibility or state of health, to have access to the teachings of the Tanya and the privilege of learning it from such a great teacher is a blessing that I wouldn't even try to place a value upon. When I left Adelaide, I lost access to a physical Tanya class but I haven't given up looking! Excellent alternatives include the audio/online Tanya classes by Rabbi Manis Friedman at www.chabad.org and Rabbi Krasnianski at www.lessonsintanya.com.

The Zohar

The Zohar is the highest level of esoteric narrative behind the Torah (which is the first part of the Jewish Tanach/Bible). The Zohar is an amazing document, offering a lifetime of learning opportunities such is its depth. I've been reading it since 2008 and am still very much at the beginning and the surface of it! The Tanya reinforces the Zohar; the Zohar reinforces the Tanya; they both reinforce the Written and Oral Torah; and so on. The dance that is the study of Jewish metaphysics (irrespective of the text you open) is a rich one, multi-layered, never-ending and with good intention, very tangible.

For anyone who enjoys poetry, dance, symbolism - energy flow on any level - the Zohar weaves its way through the esoteric and spiritual teachings of the Torah, helping you understand so much more. Even if you're unable to repeat a lot of it (which is often the case!), the fact that you've applied yourself tends to result in intuitive, spiritual and energetic "more". This is another joy of learning Jewish metaphysics – you don't have to remember what you're taught in order to benefit from your study! In Kabbalistic and intuitive terms, this is such a gift because one receives best from the Divine when one lets go of his/her knowing. It's as if remembering details is not the point; as if all we're supposed to remember is the Divine and the code we were given all those years ago. By knowing more perhaps, being of ego, we'd start playing G-d ourselves (more than we do already). Either way, I find this aspect of studying Jewish metaphysics (let alone creation) one that really takes care of the student. Whatever the lesson, living at egoic levels is continually shown for what it is and what it can generate, in a way that often leads to a conscious choice to live in/honour it less and align more to Source.

The Oral and Written Torah, and the Tanach

The Torah comprises the 5 books of Moses – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Tanach is the entire Jewish Bible consisting of 3 major sections – the Torah, Prophets and Writings. The Tanach includes all of the books that also make up the Old Testament which, in itself, accounts for over 80% of the Christian Bible.

In Jewish spirituality, the Written Torah is the first text one is supposed to study. I initially balked at this because of the dryness I'd experienced when reading the Old Testament as a younger person. Torah study therefore came much later! However, the Zohar and the Tanya continually refer to the Torah which makes studying Torah and the Tanach inevitable. Given that so much of the Christian Bible hails from the Tanach (with modifications), Torah study at any level can also significantly enhance one's understanding of Christianity together with world and Western society's development.

Oral Torah presents you with additional layers. It discusses the Written Torah then adds the various perspectives and commentaries that have been passed down through time. To really learn well in the system of Jewish spirituality, one benefits most when s/he has access to both the Written and Oral Torah. This makes learning from a rabbi/rebbitzen a rather important

ingredient in studying Jewish spirituality then, given that they tend to be the ones who learn the Oral Torah in depth (i.e. in order to teach it to others).

What I love about Torah study is that, by having a baseline understanding of the esoteric teachings, I can often see beyond the literal passages. That doesn't make me an expert but the Torah comes alive when you have even the most basic comprehension of (or access to) Jewish esoterics as I do. You start to appreciate the energetics, the spiritual meaning and the wonderful imagery, and you go beyond the literal presentation of the words themselves. What I thought was going to be hard work, drudge, with lots of unintentional naps and losses of concentration, has turned out to be the most interesting and exciting part of my study. I'm not only re-reading/hearing 'stories' from my childhood for the first time as an adult, I'm understanding them to be far richer and highly beneficial to my way of being now. They're not just 'stories' any more.

Kabbalat Shabbat

In 2006/7, having attended the weekly shiur for about 18 months, I became interested in attending a service to acknowledge and give thanks to Hashem, G-d, for all that He is and does. Rabbi Wolff (Central Synagogue) suggested that the Friday night service (Kabbalat Shabbat) may be a good next step. Kabbalat Shabbat is the moment when the congregation ask Hashem to remember and unite with them once more, in time for Shabbat ("Sabbath", the day of rest as G-d commanded). It's the beginning of 24 hours of focussing on G-d and family, remembering What is most important and Who is Source. For anyone who loves G-d, the service really is awe-inspiring: a moment when you can offer praise, devotion and thanks to the Creator using beautifully rhythmic and heart-stirring prayers. One can feel the energy shift as He responds to the call. Central Synagogue has a chazan and choir who sing the service in Hebrew on behalf of the congregation (who can join in as well). For anyone who enjoys singing, even opera, attending the Kabbalat Shabbat service at Central Synagogue is incredible (though it's not the only reason to go).

When I first started attending Kabbalat Shabbat, the next few days would be framed in peace and a sense of connection with something greater than self - a very loud quietness. It was a noticeable energetic shift that I hadn't experienced before and, after a while, that presence began to stay with me longer. Although one may enter into Jewish spirituality for more logic- or self-focused reasons, the more s/he moves into its practices and teachings, the more this presence can be felt. I'd connected through meditation, etc (and still do) but the energy that comes as a result of attending services is an altogether other level. I'm not suggesting it's the only reason why one should go but it's an interesting aside for the energetically sensitive.

Studying Hebrew

In 2009, having settled into services and my studies above, I decided to learn Hebrew. I had wanted to learn the language for some time so that I could read the Tanach in the original tongue. *[Interestingly, there's everyday Hebrew and biblical Hebrew and these two tongues are not the same. I decided to learn everyday Hebrew before heading into the latter and will need to learn other languages in order to be able to read all the scripts in original form. A long-term project.....]* As with any translation, the conversions from Hebrew into English can influence/skew the original meaning. This isn't to say that the English versions are faulty but Hebrew is a language with many subtleties and inter-relationships so one's understanding of

what's being said can benefit greatly by learning it.

I'd also sensed for some time that an ability to read and speak Hebrew would help me step up a notch in my intuitive and channelling abilities. Three years on from the start of my Hebrew language studies, I can certainly confirm that this is the case, as if every additional step I take into Judaism nets me gains on the intuitive, spiritual, physical, intellectual and practical (i.e. doing) levels. It's as if the Divine moves into greater relationship with me every time I allow It to be the one and only (and very real) Source of everything (i.e. to another degree). Perhaps then, others too would experience such things....? Jewish spirituality as a system of spiritual development can offer many tangible benefits, I believe, to anyone who wants a life of balance, integrity, peace and genuineness.

Pulling away from shul

Interestingly, my launch into Hebrew coincided with a pulling away from my synagogue-based learning. The more I studied the language, the more I experienced what seemed to be invisible obstacles preventing me from attending classes and services. I don't understand this completely yet but it seems partly due to the shift away from a purely spiritual/intuitive intention/focus to more of an intellectual/mind-based one. This may not be the entire reason but I do believe it plays a part.

Although recent years have seen me less involved at synagogue in face-to-face learning forums, I continue to study the texts with the help of on-line classes. Whilst I aim is to get back to shul, even without a physical classroom the energetic and spiritual benefits of studying Jewish spirituality are still very much there. Even though it's nice to sit with a teacher, this period has also helped me examine, cement and quality-check my reasons for being in the system. This has been quite affirming despite the tentativeness that's accompanied it. Pulling away has been challenging but the Jewish system continues to help me in everything.

Jewish spirituality as a guide for the energetically sensitive

It's with firm conviction that I'd refer any student of spiritual and/or intuitive development to Jewish spirituality as a means to enhancing his/her understanding of the world of energy, intuitive living, spirituality AND humankind (let alone of Judaism as a culture, creed or way of life). Whilst I've found similarities in other forums, none of them have delivered adequate explanation of that which is written with the same level of kindness, tolerance or support. Where some systems can seemingly frown on a person for genuinely wanting to understand things, Judaism doesn't.

What also holds me to Jewish spirituality is the practical understanding that it delivers with respect to the world of energetic, intuitive and invisible phenomena. Most importantly, it teaches the fact that there exists more than one level of soul and, metaphysically, this is very important. Divine versus ego; holy versus self-interested; Judaism is a system that really helps the energetically sensitive make sense of invisible phenomena, human behaviour and how the egoic realms can affect what manifests in this world - silently, subtly or out aloud. This is not to say that classes only focus on Kabbalah – not at the level I learn at anyway! It's not as if we sit down to talk the Tree of Life and that's all. One tends to receive metaphysical snippets interspersed amongst other dialogue which, in itself, usually stems back to the Torah, Tanach and/or Tanya. Yet this is what makes it so enjoyable and engaging – one isn't necessarily

handfed or taken step-by-step. What happens in reality is that you receive quite a lot of the esoteric teachings intuitively in a way that makes the instruction not only subtle but also custom-made for each participant. I can often come out/away from a class having heard one level of explanation whilst receiving another on the silent/intuitive level. I tend to experience two levels of dialogue and, put together, they make a highly beneficial class!

As a last observation, in a world where one can find a wealth of information about spiritual and/or intuitive development, one isn't always able to find explanations that don't encourage the reader into opinion, "magic" or "special". Whilst one can always learn from an intellectual perspective, it's not always so that a teacher or text explains things from a non-egoic platform where all things/events can play a positive spiritual role. Nor do all systems allow unity in a way that positively permits other religions or beliefs to co-exist. This is where Jewish spirituality for a gentile is so amazingly kind and welcoming – they're not there to convert or criticise you and they'll help if they can. The rabbis and rebbitzens are more than happy for you to remain a non-Jew whilst learning with them; their desire is that you'll hear the spiritual messages irrespective of your personal stance, that you'll take what you learn and apply it in your world. For that reason I'd argue that Jewish spirituality is true mentoring; it sees reason and value in every level of reality, including the intuitive and invisible ones, and encourages you to find the right spiritual platform for you.

My overall experience as a gentile learning in the Jewish system

It's more than possible that, at this stage, I sound like a stuck record - can every aspect of Judaism be THAT good, THAT amazing? The reader is encouraged to explore Judaism and its spiritual teachings for him/herself: its texts, the rabbis/rebbitzens and the teachings offer a wealth and depth of spirituality that other systems just don't offer.

What blows my socks off every day is the fact that, through my involvement with Judaism, my energetic and spiritual connection grows stronger and more aligned to Hashem, G-d. There's increasingly an energy, a presence that's just with me as I travel, helping me in everything even when life's challenging. What also amazes me about my time with Jewish spirituality is that I can't claim to know much of anything. Being female and a gentile, there's only so much I get access to (and yet the amount I receive is more than enough). What I do retain however are the important, practical lessons – how to do and/or be genuinely me in a way that maximises peace and integrity; what is kindness; how to discern whether I'm driving from ego, selfishness or not (and how to adjust if so); how to honour That which I subscribe to without needing to convert or battle with others; and more. Study within the Jewish system has helped me come to a level of spiritual practice where I can be more at peace, confident and genuine; where I don't need to know it all or control; where I'm well and truly an active co-creator of my reality yet subordinate to a Power that knows, does and gives so much.

So, why not convert?

It may seem that the above constitute some very good reasons to convert to Judaism but for now, I remain a gentile who wishes, please G-d, to continue her spiritual development within the Jewish system. Judaism is a life of commitment to Hashem in ways that often ask you to do something 'just' because G-d asks the congregation to do so. Whilst there's always a sound explanation for every commandment (mitzvah), the depth of commitment to G-d in Judaism and its impact upon one's lifestyle is far greater than that experienced in other systems of

observance. Put simply, I'm not confident that I could deliver to that level.

My energetic sensitivity is another factor as it can be easy for me to label the feelings of others as my own. As such, I've needed to progress slowly. To convert because of my affiliation with (or appreciation towards) a spiritual leader or just because I feel good is not a good enough reason to convert.

Some say there's also a strong case for gentiles staying gentiles. On the occasion when I "Asked A Rabbi"² about conversion, it was put to me that I may be better to stay in the system I was born in to and serve the world (including Judaism) in that capacity. As a gentile exponent of all that Judaism can offer, I may perhaps be of more value. Time will tell!

A last factor is whether Judaism would have me! Whilst converts are accepted, the process isn't as easy as the prospect declaring his/her desire. There's study to do, things to learn and customs to adopt before one is eligible. As a student who knows a few things but not a whole lot, I've more study to do before I even qualify.

Noahidism - monotheism for gentiles who benefit from Jewish teachings

As a gentile raised in a largely Christian society, my studies and experiences of Judaism have shown me one thing - at a time when so many people seem to be seeking a system of spirituality that makes sense to them, Jewish teachings are (in the least) a very great guide. For a non-Jew, this can be done in two ways – by studying the Jewish teachings in totality (as I do) or by focussing on the seven Noahide laws (i.e. the commandments that G-d gave exclusively to the non-Jewish world).

The Seven Noahide Laws are:

1. Belief in G-d, implicit in which is the command to not worship idols
2. To respect G-d and praise Him, implicit in which is the command to not blaspheme using His Name
3. To respect human life, including the command to not commit murder
4. To respect the family and not commit immoral sexual acts
5. To respect others' rights and property, including the command to not steal
6. The creation of a judicial system and the pursuit of justice
7. To respect all of G-d's creatures, implicit in which is the command to not be cruel to animals

There are plenty of non-Jews who have fully adopted monotheism as taught by the Torah (i.e. who believe that there is one G-d and one G-d only) as well as all the laws that are relevant to them. Judaism calls these people "righteous gentiles" or Noahides.

Noahidism is not a religion. It's simply a way of life that observes the seven laws above as passed down by the Torah, most of which can be found in many systems of spiritual practice. It's Judaism without all the bits that pertain only to the Jewish congregation. *[Many of the ordinances in the Torah apply only to the Jewish people]*. It offers the monotheistic gentile a spiritual home where s/he is allowed to remain gentile, yet be nurtured by and learn from

² "Ask A Rabbi" is an inquiry service at www.chabad.org which allows you to ask questions of about Jewish life and spiritual practice. Having sent your question through, it's directed to a Rabbi or Rebbitzin who is qualified to respond.

Jewish spirituality in a way that isn't foreign. Noahides aren't expected to become or act Jewish; they're just a group of individuals who find support, guidance, education and community within monotheism.

Still to really take off in Australia, Noahidism does offer spiritual development forums. There was a group in Melbourne led by Rabbi Yehoishophot Oliver but this finished in 2008 when he relocated to the United States. As at 2009, Sydney had yet to launch a Noahide group and I'm not certain if one exists even now. Rabbi Eli Cohen at Jews for Judaism in Sydney is available to answer inquiries, offer guidance and speak to Noahide groups on request as well as running a weekly class for Jewish and non-Jewish people alike (to inquire, email: J4Judaism@gmail.com). There are also Noahide websites, predominantly Israel- or US-based, which offer articles, online classes, chat rooms and contact networks – e.g. www.asknoah.org, www.noahidenations.org and www.noahide.org.

Alternatively or additionally, many rabbis/rebbitzens, synagogues and Jewish groups (e.g. Bina, Bnei Baruch, Nefesh) welcome non-Jews in their spiritual development classes. Non-Jews can contact the synagogue(s) in their area and ask if they can attend the weekly shiur or Kabbalistic forum. Please be aware that, as a gentile, there can be a limit to how you can participate in classes and services. That said one is always made to feel welcome and guided in how s/he can take part. There are, of course, also Jewish websites which offer guidance and advice to non-Jews. These include www.chabad.org, www.virtualyeshiva.org, www.bina.com.au and www.nefesh.org.au (to name a few).

For many reasons, Judaism offers the non-Jewish world so much more than many gentiles seem yet to be aware of. Be it the energetically sensitive, the Christian trying to go deeper into his/her faith, the new ager or the secular individual who's yet to find his/her spiritual home – anyone! If you're interested in spiritual development; finding a monotheistic forum as a gentile; studying metaphysics; or just coming to a life of better balance, Jewish spirituality, Jewish Kabbalah and/or Noahidism are incredible areas to explore.

With thanks to all those who help and encourage.

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