

Women's Spirituality for Peace
A Jewish Woman's Perspective

We greet each other in many different ways according to our traditions – I particularly like the Hindu greeting 'Namaste' which I am given to understand can mean

*'The God in me greets the God in you –
The Spirit in me meets the same Spirit in you'*

In Arabic we say 'Salaam Aleicom, in Hebrew we say 'Shalom Aleichem' (note the similarity) – all these mean essentially 'Peace be to you' – or 'I offer my peace to you'. This must surely be a good starting place for us today, so Peace be with all of you.

The first thing to define, perhaps, is what is Spirituality? Can it actually be defined? There may be many different perceptions of spirituality – for many it is a warm feeling when thinking of one's inner self or thinking of the Supreme Being or Divinity who is foremost and central to our own traditions. For others it is a journey or quest, but for me I believe it to be my relationship with the Eternal One, my Maker, and through that, my relationship with all the people I meet in the course of my own life's journey. According to our behaviour, how we relate to others can either enhance or damage our interpersonal relationships. We may sometimes damage already fragile relationships and it is very hard to repair that damage – but we must try to repair it. All damaged relationships can be healed, but it takes time and patience. It would be so much better if we did not cause the damage in the first place, thinking carefully before we act or speak.

What is Jewish Spirituality?

Jewish spirituality goes far beyond feelings – it is a relationship and it is a covenant or agreement with our God to follow His ways and to teach others to do the same in whatever way we can. It is about love – for God, for ourselves and for the rest of mankind, for unless we know how to love ourselves, we cannot show love to others. We cannot always see the results of our love for others – it is often only experienced by the recipients – we just shine our lights towards them and hope & pray that they may be enlightened themselves. Love cannot be imposed, but it is very catching! From love comes peace – for ourselves and for others.

From the Pirkei Avot (Chapters or Ethics of the Fathers)

The more charity (love), the more peace.

How can we reach our own sense of spirituality? In all of our different traditions we have a core teaching as laid out in our Holy Scriptures or Holy Books – The Torah (the Five Books of Moses), The Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible), The Old & New Testaments, the Qur'an, the Vedas (wisdom or knowledge) & Arya Dharma (the path of noble people). In addition to these there are the mystical texts, the Upanishads (lit. 'sitting by the side' of the master), Bhagavad Gita, the Kabbalah (lit. 'received' teaching – an exploration of man's inner nature), and the many Christian texts by Christian mystics and those based upon study of Scripture.

Among Jewish women there are many organisations and groups which have been formed to explore Jewish Women's Spirituality – one of these is 'Under Shekhina's Wings' which (and I quote)

*'Focuses on cross-cultural women's spirituality or feminist spirituality'
There is a sub page entitled 'Jewish Women's Spirituality – A Feminist Approach'.*

(Perhaps I should explain that in Judaism the Shekinah has come to represent the feminine part of God or the Eternal One). Other groups are known as 'Rosh Chodesh' groups – (literally New Moon) – as many of you will know, women's ritual and sometimes their liturgy is based upon the cycles of the moon which is why they use this name to celebrate the new moon. These groups meet to explore spirituality and to create meaningful liturgy in, what has been up until recent years, a male-dominated religion.

There are many websites which you could explore – a list of some of these is available for you to see at end of this article.

Most of us, however, are just ordinary women – wives and mothers – who do not have any leanings towards the mystical side of our faiths, but that is not to say that we do not acknowledge our spiritual sides.

I certainly do not aspire to being a mystic, nor do most of us, but I do have a sense of my own inner being in my relation to God and a sense of God's plan for me – though I have to say I do not always know what that plan is – I wish He would let me in on it sometimes! As women, wives and mothers God certainly had His own plans for us. God gave us the rules or the laws and we have to interpret them in the best way we can and then pass them on to our children. He made an eternal covenant with each one of us; we are the guardians and the executors of that covenant.

We, as women and as mothers, have a very special role to play. We are the nurturers, the guardians of the family values and the guardians of peace. Peace in the world outside of our families can only start from within – firstly from within ourselves and then from within our families. From there it will spread outwards to our friends, neighbours, our communities like a ripple in a pond into which you have thrown a stone. In Judaism the mother is the centre and heart of the home – family life revolves around her and she is responsible for the peace and harmony within the home and family.

We have a saying of the Bershider Rebbe upon which I have based these few words –

Let there be peace within yourself first, then peace in your home. Let there be peace with your neighbours, peace in your street and in your town. Then let there be peace in your country and in the whole world.

There was a song in the 1980s and 90s, for those of you who can remember, 'Let There be Peace on Earth, and let it begin with me' and I used to teach this song in schools. I have worked in several different schools, one of them having been a Muslim School in London, I spent four very happy years there. The Headmistress once said to me, 'You and I have more similarities than differences' – how right she was. I have recently been

in touch with her and will share some of her life's work with you. She is on the staff of UNESCO and does much to promote that cause of peace and to promote and understanding of Islam and Islamic principles. Dr Ibtissam Al Bassam has, during the last year, written many Open Letters to various people – the 'Kith & Kin of the Victims of September 11', 'My American Friends', 'The West and Westerners', 'To the Moderate Majority' and so on. These have been published in various newspapers all over the world and may readily be accessed on the Internet. UNESCO itself has an education programme for teaching children about non-violent conflict resolution and there are many such initiatives.

The following is an extract from one of Dr Ibtissam' s letters : -

'Terrorism will not be defeated with drones, F-16s and smart weapons. It will be defeated with justice, humility, honesty, truth, compassion, friendships, trust, respect for cultural diversity, reverence for world faiths and love for humanity and international law. Our knowledge and our experience should be a torch lighting the way in the long dark tunnel which the world entered on Sept. 11, 2001.'

Dr. Ibtissam Al-Bassam is staff member of UNESCO and is the Academic Adviser to the Director-General for Education of UNESCO in Paris. She is a former Dean of the Women's College in Riyadh and of King Fahd Academy in London

Education for peace begins in the home – women are the nurturers and teachers in a child's early years. When we, as women and as mothers, have peace within ourselves, only then can we impart this to our children. We can teach them the ways of non-violence because conflict-resolution has to be faced, even by children, both within the home and within the school. If we teach tolerance and understanding at a very early age, together with respect for difference and diversity, it will set the pattern for our children's lives.

If you watch a group of children playing you will see that they are far less aware of cultural differences than adults are. I remember my granddaughter when she was about five or six, had a school friend who came from Gujarat; they used to sit happily playing (as little girls do) chatting away in Gujarati. My granddaughter was totally unaware (consciously at any rate) than she had learned a new language – her little friend had taught her enough for them to converse and get along together – she had picked up the language quite naturally just by mixing and interacting with her friend. If language can be learned quite naturally, then so can other skills too, including that of peaceful interaction. This cannot be learned in isolation without any guidance – just as we teach our children normal day to day life skills and social skills, so must we also teach them how to live peacefully with each other.

'Peace is not the absence of conflict but the ability to cope with it.'

There are several projects around the world where children of different faiths and cultures are living and/or playing together in controlled, nurturing environments and

learning these skills of peaceful interaction. This is particularly in the case of Arab and Jewish children in the UK and Palestinian and Israeli children in the Middle East – in both instances they are learning to live and play peaceably with each other. One of these is the House of Hope which is an International Peace Centre at Shefar'am (Shefa-Amr), Israel. They have just entered their 26th year and their mission is a ministry of reconciliation – long may they continue. Many of you could name others, but these are largely not heard about as they are not publicised or reported in the media.

One of the most important things for a mother to do in her family is to listen to her children – and to teach her children to listen. Too often we are too busy saying and doing while not listening. We have much to gain by listening to others' points of view, even children – but I would say especially children because, often in their innocence, they have a tremendous perception of a situation as it is – their judgement is unclouded by prejudice. We might ask ourselves, where does prejudice come from? Children are not naturally prejudiced, they learn it from adults and thus it proliferates.

We can help to prevent that prejudice by how we educate our children and our grandchildren (grandparents have a great influence on children, especially nowadays when they often have the care of the children in the home). We can teach them the ways of peace, we can teach them non-violent conflict resolution, even at its most basic level with siblings, but most of all, we can teach them to love by showing them by our own example. If they are loved, they can then love both themselves and others. We know that peace between nations begins with individuals – Let there, indeed, be peace on earth and let it begin with me.

Many of you will be familiar with the Prayer of St Francis – if not by name then from hearing it at some time.

The Peace Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of Your Peace. Where there is hatred let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy; where there is anger, forgiveness.

O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

O man, what is good and what does the Lord require of you? To do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8

Women's Spirituality for Peace

Useful Websites

www.unesco.org – worth looking at for their ethos – also look at UNESCO SOUL
(School of Universal Language)

www.jewsforjudaism.org

www.jewishhealing.com and follow the links for spirituality

www.geocities.com/Athens/1501/jwshfil.html

www.arabnews.com – on both of these look up Ibtissam Al-Bassam for her Open Letters,
there are various ones, all well worth reading.

www.aljazeeraah.info – as above

www.usip.org – the United States Institute for Peace – many good papers and
publications

and many, many more.

Just put into Google Search engine either 'Jewish Spirituality' or 'Jewish Women's Spirituality' and you will find hundreds of websites. Take your pick according to your own personal interest.

Enjoy!

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The above article is the Author's own views and should not be taken to reflect the views of members of Sukkat Shalom.

The talk was given as part of a Forum and Workshops on 'Women's Spirituality for Peace' held on 15th June 2004 at St John's Church Hall, Princes Street, Edinburgh and jointly organised by EICWS (Edinburgh International Centre for World Spiritualities) & Edinburgh Peace and Justice Centre. The other Women Speakers were from the Iona Community, the Hindu Community and the Edinburgh Central Mosque.

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