

A Wild
FAITH

*Jewish Ways
into Wilderness,
Wilderness Ways
into Judaism*

Rabbi Mike Comins

Foreword by Nigel Savage

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vii
A Note on the Text	x
Foreword	xi
1. The Call of the Wild	1
2. The Stereotype of the “Unnatural” Jew	9
3. Do I Have to Believe in God?	15
4. Finding God in Nature	20
5. A Map of the Heart	43
6. The Mindful Hiker: Learning to Listen	55
7. Yearning and Gratitude: Opening the Heart to God	73
8. Seeing the Sacred: The Way of Blessing Part I	85
9. Filling the World with Holiness: The Way of Blessing Part II	94
10. Heart-song in the Heart-land: Jewish Prayer in Wilderness	101
11. With Your Whole Self: Living in Your Body	117
12. Four Winds, Seven Directions	134

Contents

13. <i>Teshuvah</i> : The Wild Heart of Repentance	151
14. Putting It All Together: Wilderness Retreat	166
15. A Wild Faith	172
Appendix 1: But Rabbi, Is This Jewish?	176
Appendix 2: But Rabbi, Should I Talk to Trees?	181
Appendix 3: The Nature of Jewish Study	188
Appendix 4: Traditional Nature Blessings	197
Notes	200
Resources	211
Index to Practices	219



THE CALL OF THE WILD

In all of ancient Near Eastern literature, the Bible is one of the few texts that knows wilderness as a place of majesty, a place where God lets himself be known.... Far from rejecting nature, the Hebrews embrace her as a whole, thorns and all.

Evan Eisenberg¹

The Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, September 1996: I am camped snugly against the cliffs of a canyon in the desert mountains above the Israeli city of Eilat. The vertical walls rise a hundred feet toward the stars. The soft limestone, streaked with yellows and oranges that mirror the sunrise, envelops me. In this private cathedral I am protected, though the stark, dry riverbed leaves me a bit unsettled. I wrap myself in my *tallit*, my prayer shawl, against the early morning cold in that brief moment when shade is the enemy, and listen to the birds for inspiration. I begin to sing the ancient words of praise to the Creator of this sacred place. Memories enter my awareness: backpacking in Sequoia with my family, watching the sunrise from Mount Sinai with friends in college. I recite a psalm and speak words of yearning to God.

It is time to welcome the New Year as Jews have done over the millennia. It is, in the tradition, the Day of Judgment, where all stand before the Holy One, accountable for their deeds in the previous year. Like the acacia trees and salt plants beside me, I am fully exposed. Far from humans, in God's handiwork, my heart sheds its burdens and my prayers flow.

It was a superb Rosh Hashanah. The words I spoke to God were sincere and true, emotionally charged with yearning, infused with awe and love. By every measure, this was what the architects of Jewish ritual had in mind—except for one thing. I wasn't in synagogue. I didn't pray in the required minyan of ten. And at that time, this was a particularly sensitive point. I had been ordained just two months earlier. My first Rosh Hashanah as a rabbi was my first Rosh Hashanah away from the Jewish community in two decades. What would my teachers think of me now?

As the sun rose and the shade receded, I thought about the long and circuitous road to this desert canyon. I had spent the previous three years working feverishly on a rabbinic thesis devoted to theology. I was constantly thinking about God, but as the months went by I felt further and further away from the kind of spiritual experience that led me to writing the thesis in the first place. I davened, or prayed, in one of the best places on earth to daven, Kehilat Kol HaNeshamah in Jerusalem. But after ten years, my devotion was waning and my prayer life had become stale. When I finished my thesis, I felt compelled to do something for my heart that I had neglected for years. I went hiking.

Walking a trail is second nature to me. My parents never missed a summer visit to Yosemite. I grew up backpacking in the "Range of Light," the incredible Sierra Nevada mountains of California. But as I lived an observant, traditional life in Jerusalem, I spent the one Israeli day off, Shabbat, in synagogue. Now, feeling suffocated from books and buildings, I returned to the source of my first spiritual feelings, to wilderness. It was like jumping into

an alpine lake, a wake-up call that soothes the spirit by shocking the system.

I walked the deserts, the only true wilderness in Israel. I went to stop thinking about theology. So what happened caught me by surprise.

God kicked in.

Before then I had been a wannabe when it came to God. I wanted to experience God in my life. And I tried. I went to Orthodox yeshiva and liberal rabbinical school. I lived the pious Jerusalem life. Now I know what I failed to admit to myself then: a personal relationship with God was missing. I rarely allowed myself to think about it. After all, Jewish religious life is so communal that one need not worry if an individual experience of God is lacking. There is no requirement for a Jew to compose his or her own words of prayer or listen for God in silence. Jewish communal religiosity can be so powerful, soulful, and moving, one can make do quite nicely without feeling a lack of spiritual passion. But now the communal experience no longer satisfied. I needed more.

I turned to the desert. Between hikes, I read what I felt like reading for the first time in years. I was exposed to nonacademic works on Jewish mysticism (thank you, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner), to Eastern mystics and the Desert Fathers (early Christian monks who settled the same desert locale). Suddenly I had a theory, an understanding that helped open me to God in wilderness. Suddenly I had a language to articulate what I had always felt in wilderness but could not connect to Judaism or the Jewish community. I began to feel something that I believe must be similar to what the psalmist felt before writing the psalm. I was feeling God in my bones. I began to trust my intuition. I stopped talking and began to listen. Instead of thinking, I walked. Instead of looking from my brain, I followed my body.

I had plans to continue on for a PhD, but there was no going back. My life had changed. Instead of Hebrew University, I went

to Sde Boker in Israel's great desert, the Negev, and qualified as an Israeli desert guide. I began leading spiritual desert trips in the Judean desert and the Sinai, filled mostly with rabbis, rabbinic students, and students for the ministry. I found myself on the journey that led to the writing of this book.

So I left the synagogue that Rosh Hashanah. It was an act filled with irony. I would not have felt the need to spend Rosh Hashanah in a place where God was so present to me if Jewish culture had not taught me that God exists and is available to human beings. Yet, to gain that experience, I felt compelled to rebel against the very tradition that planted the thirst for God within me!

NATURE OR TORAH?

Putting away my *tallit*, I paused to look at the prayer book in my hands, and then the orange limestone under the bright blue sky. I thought about the great debate that has occupied Jewish thinkers over the millennia. It has resurfaced with great intensity due to the environmental crisis and the fact that large numbers of Jews are hiking, skiing, kayaking, and climbing in wilderness. Where do we find God? From where does revelation come? Wilderness or the Book? Nature or Torah?

Obviously, the answer can be both. After all, the Torah was given in wilderness! But now that we have Torah and its always evolving commentary, do we find God in printed words, through reading learned texts and praying the inherited words of the prayer book? Or do we find God at the original site of revelation, in the natural world, without words at all?

Of course, the preferred answer would be both. But, in fact, it rarely happens that way. Entering wilderness to experience God's presence is not a concept taken seriously by the major institutions of Jewish life in America and elsewhere. Jewish spiritual training centers on intellectual acumen and study, study, study! I spent twelve hours a day at the yeshiva. Rabbinical school put me in a

library, not on a trail. The deserts of David, Amos, and Jeremiah were just down the road, but we went there to get a break from our studies, not to further the spiritual quest.

One need not look to Jewish cultural history to know this Torah/nature conflict. I stand on a ridge overlooking the Sinai wilderness with the siddur, the Jewish prayer book, in hand. Do I recite a psalm praising the Creator for the grandeur of nature, or do I just look up? And if, in fact, I feel closer to God when I look away from the book, why do I need the siddur at all? But what would happen to the People of the Book if books, the vehicles of Jewish tradition, were secondary to what we experience firsthand?

My personal dilemma is, in fact, played out daily in the life of the Jewish people. As one who frequents backcountry trails as well as mainstream Jewish communal institutions, I have learned: most Jews who love wilderness know little of Judaism, and most committed Jews know little of wilderness.

THE TORAH/NATURE DIVIDE

Every author has a reader in mind when writing. *A Wild Faith* could have been written for those on one side of the Torah/nature divide, but it is intended for both.

The first reader, let's call him Wilderness Jew, feels intensely alive in the natural world. He doesn't consider himself a religious person. Hebrew school was an ordeal to be overcome and left behind after bar mitzvah. The idea of a punishing and rewarding God in heaven makes little sense. What's left of his Jewish identity may have more to do with bagels than the Bible.

But he recognizes the importance of some kind of spirituality in his life. And in the beauty, the strong emotions, and the exhilarating excitement of the natural world, he unquestionably knows that there is something profound and moving in wilderness. He senses the natural world as meaningful for its own sake, ethically commanding, and sacred—in short, holy.

On the other end of the spectrum we find Religious Jew. In this person's self-understanding, Jewish identity is prominent. She celebrates Jewish holidays, gives *tzedakah* (charity), socializes in the Jewish community. She may even pray three times a day. God-language is not a problem. But like all regular worshipers, she knows that the connection to God is elusive and fickle, here today, gone tomorrow. It is all too easy for the prayers to become rote, devoid of the electricity generated by a living relationship with divinity.

And yet, right around the corner, there is a wilderness place in which most people say they feel something that can only be described as transcendent and sacred. In Religious Jew's education, little if any connection has been made between this experience and her self-understanding as a Jew. Yet she knows what she feels. There is something special in the splendor of the natural world.

Religious Jew is moved because wilderness is a place where the "problem of God" is neither contrived nor irrelevant. In the struggle to keep one's ongoing religious practice fresh, wilderness is helpful because the felt presence of God is readily and reliably available. Religious Jew needs the natural world. *Wilderness matters because it is an optimal place to work out a personal, unscripted, fresh relationship with divinity.*

Wilderness Jew's situation is not to be envied, either. He struggles to find an acceptable vocabulary to express his most profound and noble emotions. He intuitively knows the moral implications of his feelings, but can't really explain why. He is missing a framework to integrate his feelings of awe and wonder into the larger ethical fabric of his life. And he lacks the means to take it home. Since his spirituality is alive in wilderness and absent in the city, when he leaves wilderness, he leaves his spiritual life behind. To my mind, Wilderness Jew has much to gain from Jewish observance. *Judaism matters because it offers a vocabulary and a practice to translate the sublime experience of wilderness into a life of purpose*

and meaning, a life lived in community, a life of beauty, integrity, and moral action.

Thankfully, the Torah/nature divide is not set in stone. One need not choose between wilderness and Judaism.

In the course of this book, we shall see how wilderness leads to Judaism—to a deeper, more vibrant Jewish practice. The increased awareness required to travel safely in wilderness not only protects us, it also prepares us for the encounter with God. Many Jewish practices can be far more effective when practiced in wild nature. And many Jewish thinkers—medieval Jewish mystics, Hasidic rabbis, and modern thinkers like Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel—sought to renew Jewish life by explicating their experience of God in the natural world.

Conversely, Judaism leads us to wilderness—to absorb wilderness in deeper, more vibrant ways. Jewish practices help us to slow down and truly experience all that the natural world offers to our senses. Through blessings and prayer, we give expression to the intense emotions we feel in the incomparable beauty of nature. And as we give voice to our appreciation and gratitude for this incredible planet, our connection to the natural world grows in richness and strength. Finally, Judaism translates the experience of awe into moral meaning and ethical responsibility.

Wilderness Jew and Religious Jew are caricatures, of course. We are likely to find a bit of each in our hearts, and this is fitting. Wilderness and Judaism are joined at the hip.

In the Hebrew Bible, wilderness is where the Torah is given, where David and the psalmists find inspiration, where Elijah hears the “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19:12). Wilderness is the enduring home of revelation. Human culture has changed a great deal over the last four millennia. Thankfully, wilderness has not. What’s left of it, anyway. It remains a special, unique setting to meet God. For today’s spiritual seekers, it is a place of potential and promise.

THE CALL OF THE TIMES

In offering a primer on Jewish spiritual practice in wilderness, it is my hope that readers will come to understand that the organic partnership between wilderness and Judaism begun in Sinai over thirty-five hundred years ago is just as relevant now as it was then. In the age of global warming, when the quality of our grandchildren's world hangs in the balance, I believe that the renewal of our spiritual relationship with the natural world is the calling of our generation. For many Jews, that relationship will begin with the rediscovery of wilderness.

We need to unearth our wild roots.





FINDING GOD IN NATURE

Holy, holy, holy!

Adonai of the multitudes, whose glory fills the entire world.¹

Isaiah 6:3

[To the ancient Israelites] God is not outside nature so much as unfathomably deep within it: the essence of nature.

Evan Eisenberg²

For our biblical ancestors, the place of nature in spiritual practice was central. But today's Judaism is quite different from Temple-centered, ancient Israelite religion. Are there postbiblical rabbis and Jewish thinkers who agree with the biblical perspective on God and the natural world? If so, how did they interpret and update the worldview of the ancient Israelites? Can Jewish tradition provide us with a vocabulary to articulate our experience of wild nature as sacred and divine?

WONDER AND AWE: ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL

Perhaps the most revered twentieth-century Jewish thinker in America is Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972). Many

American institutions bear his name, particularly Jewish day schools. Born in Poland, Heschel received a classical Jewish education before studying for his doctorate in Germany. He came to America in 1939, rescued by Reform Judaism's rabbinical seminary, the Hebrew Union College. He quickly moved to New York, where he taught at the Conservative Movement's Jewish Theological Seminary. His popular book *The Sabbath* and his theological works made him famous in religious circles in the 1950s. In the 1960s Heschel burst onto the national scene as one of the first major religious figures in America to oppose the Vietnam War and support the civil rights movement. In the footage of Martin Luther King marching into Selma, the man at his shoulder with the goatee and flowing white hair is Heschel.

Heschel's magnum opus on Jewish theology is entitled *God in Search of Man*. (Heschel wrote in the 1950s; he surely would have embraced nonsexist language had he written later.) It covers the themes that any serious work on Jewish theology must: the revelation at Sinai, the authority of Jewish law, the problem of evil. But he only reaches those subjects on page 167! Part 1 is dedicated to the universal, human experience that religion is built upon. In particular, he devotes chapters to "wonder" and "awe" and gives us a new theological category: radical amazement.

THE WILL TO WONDER

I emerge from the tunnel on the road from Wawona and suddenly Yosemite Valley stands before me in all its glory. El Capitan towers to the left, Bridalveil Fall plunges to my right, Half Dome looks over it all from the center. I have seen it many times, but here I am again, astounded and ecstatic. What Heschel calls the *grandeur* of nature envelops me. I am filled with wonder.

Heschel teaches that wonder is different from curiosity. At this moment I am not interested in the geology of the valley. Maybe later. But now, enraptured by the natural world, my wonder does

not lead to a set of questions that might be answered through scientific inquiry. Knowing how certain visual stimuli cause synaptic responses in the brain neither explains my amazement nor satisfies the longing in my heart. I don't want to ask how or why; I just want to say thanks.

This wonderful, that is, wonder-filled mystery, says Heschel, is what brings one to God.

Awareness of the divine begins with wonder. It is the result of what man does with his higher incomprehension. The greatest hindrance to such awareness is our adjustment to conventional notions, to mental clichés. Wonder or radical amazement, the state of maladjustment to words and notions, is therefore a prerequisite for an authentic awareness of that which is.³

Wonder is that way of being in the world when we can truly be surprised, when, like children, we are not imprisoned by our past notions of the way things are supposed to be. Heschel, whose prose reads like poetry, would be the last one to disparage the value of words. But when it comes to the awareness of God, satisfaction with words and dogmas are more likely to blind than enlighten.

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder 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.⁴

This last line is Heschel's quintessentially Jewish response to the "leap of faith" theology prevalent in parts of the Christian world. William James famously wrote that one requires "the will to believe" because by contemporary intellectual standards, belief is a

calculated risk.⁵ Heschel counters, we need the “will to wonder.” To find God, we don’t need to avert our eyes from the world we know and what science teaches about it. Rather we need to look at it deeply—with “eyes remade for wonder.”⁶ Normally, one thinks of wonder as a reaction to something we see in the world around us. But Heschel claims that it is much more than that.

To the prophets wonder is *a form of thinking* ... it is an attitude that never ceases.⁷

This point is critical. Wonder happens to us. It is a gift we receive in the presence of beauty and grandeur. But the religious personality does not wait passively for it to happen again. Rather, she internalizes it as a value. She works to cultivate wonder as a virtue. This is the goal of a spiritual practice. The attitude of radical amazement enables her to experience more and more wonder in the world.

AWE: THE ROOT OF FAITH

Wonder or radical amazement, in turn, leads to awe. In our time, “awesome” is a word used far too glibly. It points to nothing less than the most precious moments in our lives. Awe is a response to beauty and grandeur, a recognition of mystery, an expression of humility.

Originally, the Hebrew word *yirah* meant “fear.” But over time it came to denote “awe” as well. The two meanings are connected. The paradigmatically awesome moments of life, such as childbirth, are filled with danger. The mystery, fragility, and preciousness of our existence pervades awe-filled moments. The difference is that when we feel fear, say from a lightning storm, we want to run. When we feel awe, we want to stick around. We are attracted. Despite the danger, we even want to get closer.⁸

What does this mean to our spiritual sensitivities? No one can explain it better than Heschel.

The meaning of awe is to realize that life takes place under wide horizons, horizons that range beyond the span of an individual life or even the life of a nation, a generation, or an era. Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal.⁹

For Heschel, wonder flows into awe, where we will ultimately meet the divine. In awe we know that the most physical things—rivers, flowers, mountains—point to the transcendent.

The experience of awe, so readily available in the natural world, is critical to Heschel's theology.

Awe precedes faith; it is at the root of faith. We must grow in awe in order to reach faith. We must be guided by awe to be worthy of faith. Awe rather than faith is the cardinal attitude of the religious Jew.¹⁰

It's so difficult to talk about the who and what of God. Often the same words mean different things to different people, and our conversations get bogged down in contradictions and misunderstanding. But when I say that I have "God-moments" in wilderness, people know exactly what I mean. In his description of radical amazement, Heschel captures this experience. When we are awestruck, the question of God is not contrived. If you ask, "Is this sacred?" you have already missed the point. We don't need to be "believers" in this or that dogma. Rather, we need to be people who see the world with "eyes of wonder."

Before Heschel, I always thought of wonder and awe as human reactions, something we cannot control. It did not occur to me that some people experience it more than others or that we can consciously try to make awe and wonder happen rather than wait

for them to happen to us. But, of course, this is true. If awe is an attitude, then we can educate and train ourselves to acquire it. It is the aim of spiritual practice. We'll be returning to the dynamics of this process throughout *A Wild Faith*.

WILDERNESS: THE GATEWAY TO EVERYDAY AWE

Heschel was famous for beginning a lecture by exclaiming, "I have just seen a miracle! I have just seen a miracle! I have seen the sunset." It is not surprising, for Heschel teaches that the path to God is through awe, and nature is the most reliable gateway.

In explicating the dynamics of awe—beauty, grandeur, fear, danger, attraction, humility, mystery—Heschel explains why wilderness is indeed awesome. In the backcountry, beauty is commanding and pervasive. But so is danger and risk. One cannot see wildflowers or moose calves without passing rotting tree trunks, the remains of fire, or unburied bones. The grandeur and fragility of our world, the immediacy of life and death, are all around. It's hard *not* to feel awe in wilderness.

And awe opens our eyes and hearts to God's presence. In awesome moments, the great mystery of our lives holds us like a baby.

THE RIVER OF LIGHT: JEWISH MYSTICISM

A second source of spiritual wisdom that illuminates the experience of wild nature as sacred is Jewish mystical thought. Appearances to the contrary, mysticism isn't much of a mystery. While mystical thought admirably recognizes limits to human knowledge in its very name, it is a misleading term for a theology. Mysticism is simply one of many religious takes on how the world works. It claims some things and refutes others. But it says just as much, probably more, about the big issues of God, revelation, and human nature as any other stream of spiritual thinking.

if one does not have a personal relationship with divinity outside the synagogue, it's not likely to exist inside either. For many, many people, wilderness is the best place to discern God's presence.

The individual nature of spiritual practice in wilderness, then, is an important corrective to the communal emphasis in Judaism, but it is neither an alternative nor a substitute. The aim is balance.

MAPPING THE HEART

DEVEKUT (CLEAVING) AND *TESHUVAH* (REPENTANCE)

An important dynamic of spiritual living, one that serves as an organizing principle for me, is the interplay of two classic paths to God: *devekut* and *teshuvah*.

Devekut is a spiritual term adopted by Hasidic rabbis from earlier mystics. It denotes living with the constant awareness of God's presence or being with God in an immediate sense. A derivative from the Hebrew root for "glue," *devekut* is similar to the traditional goal of the mystic: merging or entering into union with God. But in Hasidism, *devekut* is not something for exceptional moments of deep prayer or meditation. Rather, it is a state that can be maintained at all times in all endeavors by living in *mochin d'gadlut*, in expanded consciousness.

The Hasidic movement was a response to the scholastic, Talmudic culture of the late Middle Ages, an elite culture far removed from most Jews. In opposition to the stern, intellectual Judaism of their day, the Hasidim emphasized sincerity of heart over knowledge and heartfelt prayer over strict observance. They taught that one should serve God in joy and infuse prayer with dance and music. Perhaps most important, they brought mysticism to the masses by offering a new interpretation of the Kabbalah.

For the kabbalists, the action was in the godhead. Prayer and ritual were important because they affected God in the upper realms, thus bringing love and compassion into the world. They

often engaged in meditation, prayer, ritual, and study in darkened rooms in the middle of the night, alone or in small groups of highly educated men. While there were some important exceptions, they generally had little use for the world beyond their books. But the Hasidim taught that the divine battlefield, as it were, is the human heart. Everyday awareness of God, by every Jew in every activity, affected God in the upper realms. The founder of Hasidim, the Ba'al Shem Tov, frequented the natural world. He taught that one could cleave to the Creator in a forest as well as a tome of Talmud. The key was *deveikut*, the constant awareness of God in everything.

In the spirit of Hasidism, but in my twenty-first-century worldview, I conceive of *deveikut* as Jewish mindfulness. We enter receptive mode to focus on the world around us in this moment, to be aware of the sacred in everything, to meet God in I-Thou relation. *Deveikut* is a classic right-brain activity—intuitive, emotional, artistic, beyond language.

Teshuvah, on the other hand, is mostly left brain. Each of us has a personal history, a story, that constitutes the unique content of our individual selves. Particularly during the High Holy Days, we evaluate our stories by scrutinizing our past with an eye to the future. We critique our personalities. And then we employ another form of thinking that is critical to moral refinement: imagining. I envision—I image—the person I aspire to be and promise to move in that direction.⁵ This left-brain activity, where we utilize language, reasoning, and imagination, is essential to personal growth. I will have more to say on *teshuvah* in chapter 13.

Deveikut and *teshuvah* are opposite poles of a spectrum, the east coast and west coast of the heart. In *deveikut*, we cleave to God by transcending our egos as much as possible. This path to God is intuitive, artistic, receptive, wordless, focused on the present. In practicing *teshuvah*, or repentance, we work with our egos. We try to understand our stories, probing the past, imagining the future,

articulating our emotions in words, and putting our best thinking in service of *tikkun*.

A BALANCED SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

A Wild Faith places a particular emphasis on *devekut* practices—wordless spiritual exercises that focus us on the present through mindfulness and sensual awareness. This is balanced by a hefty dose of *teshuvah* practices where analysis is central. In between are practices that incorporate language and thought but eschew logic and reasoning. Rather, we direct our minds to poetry and music. This is the realm of prayer.

Why is it important to strike a balance in these paths to God?

I have a wonderful fantasy: I go into my closet, open up a drawer, and lock my ego in it for a few days. If only that were possible for all of us. We would live in a continual state of *devekut*, of receptive mode. Life would only be I-Thou, in perpetual closeness to God, full of holiness.

Unfortunately, life doesn't work that way. Since we cannot take a vacation from our personalities, we cannot change by working around them. We have to work through them. Think about what happens when people lie. They must devote their awareness to remembering the fabrication so that when the occasion arises, they remember to repeat it. Every spiritual tradition I know begins with morality, because when we move beyond the small-minded pursuits caused by jealousy, fear, and addiction and gain some calm, it is easier to see the big picture and open our hearts to God.

So we do *teshuvah*. We critique ourselves in order to identify the places we need to change. We ask forgiveness from others. We clear the clutter in our hearts and become less agitated. But of course, we can never lock our selfish traits and their vices in a closet drawer. Sometimes just identifying the cause of a bad behavior is enough, but often not. How do we actually change?

We turn to *deveikut* to gain temporary respite from our fears and insecurities. We turn to *deveikut* to loosen the grip of our bad habits. We turn to *deveikut* to shake our hearts like a *shofar* blast.

Most of us think that we live in our minds, the place that has been (mistakenly⁶) identified by our culture as the locus of awareness. But we can transcend the realm of our fears—the (guilty) memories of the past and the (fear-filled) imaginings of the future that occupy our minds—by living in our bodies. When we focus our awareness on the present moment by dwelling in our physical senses, we get a glimpse of what life is like when we are attached to God rather than to our selves. For a moment, we have indeed locked our egos in the closet. We know that we are more than our stories.

The more time we spend in *deveikut*, the more time we want to spend in *deveikut*. But we also gain a new perspective with which to critique our stories and do *teshuvah*. In mindfulness, even if just for a bit, we are removed from the fears that motivate our habitual defense mechanisms. When we turn to our analytic thinking and self-critique from the place of *deveikut*, we are less prone to self-deception. We are more likely to be honest and truthful about who and what we are.

So the more *deveikut* I experience, the more successful my *teshuvah*. The more I do *teshuvah*—the less I am occupied by my neuroses and vices—the more I find myself in receptive mode, in *deveikut*.

A wholesome spiritual practice, then, includes both these avenues. They feed each other. As we turn to the various practices of a Jewish wilderness spirituality, we gain insight into individual exercises by placing them on the *deveikut/teshuvah* spectrum. This is useful as our spiritual practice matures. We can sense when our hearts need us to concentrate on *deveikut* practices or when an emphasis on *teshuvah* is preferable.



6

THE MINDFUL HIKER: LEARNING TO LISTEN

In the wilderness your possessions cannot surround you. Your preconceptions cannot protect you. Your logic cannot promise you the future. Your guilt can no longer place you safely in the past. You are left alone each day with an immediacy that astonishes, chastens, and exults. You see the world as if for the first time.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner¹

In turning now to the specifics of a Jewish wilderness spirituality, we begin with *devekut* exercises. These practices enable us to listen deeply and directly for God by placing us firmly in the present, by leaving language behind, by opening our senses and cultivating a compassionate awareness of wild nature.

MEETING THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

When I look back at my spiritual quest, I have no regrets but more than a little sadness. How long I looked for God in the wrong places!

So often we expect to meet God in some dramatic fashion. And since epiphanies do happen—a moment of great insight, a

moment of light and love, a true meeting with another soul, an experience of overwhelming beauty—we thirst for more. But “epiphany spirituality” faces the same paradox as hedonism. The more epiphanies we have, the more we need to be satisfied. And the less likely they will happen.

In my spiritual life there were important epiphanies, but I realize now that they were strong because a new world opened up to me. I had traveled so far that everything seemed new and exotic. But this had more to do with immaturity than wisdom. As one settles into spiritual life, moments with the divine are less and less likely to carry the emotion that comes with surprise. A mature spirituality, like a long-term love, needs to find its power in the small things of everyday life. Witness the title of my teacher Jack Kornfield’s recent book, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*.

The great teaching of Jewish mysticism, particularly important for the Hasidim, is that God is in everything. So if God is not in our field of awareness, the problem isn’t with God. It’s with us. I find this true and empowering. I need not strive for an elusive epiphany. I just need to open my eyes. I need to adjust my expectations and look for God in the undramatic, everyday routines of life.

This lesson came home to me on my solo wilderness retreats. Usually we entertain ourselves while hiking. Walk another mile and you get another view, and some more adrenaline from the exercise as well. That’s exactly what gets taken away from you when you sit in a small circle for four days. I had to face my fears of boredom. I had to find beauty and relationship in the small, limited area that was my home.

But the payoff was enormous. I noticed patterns and textures in leaves, soil, and bark. I saw tiny spiders weave webs over the creek at dawn, from rock to rock, with amazing speed and dexterity. Rising with the day’s snowmelt, the stream soon washed them away, preparing the ground for next morning’s repeat perform-

ance. As I slowed down, I learned to appreciate things I never knew I had missed. It's amazing how much better you can hear when you stop to listen.

Sometimes I think of myself as a target and God as an archer with rather poor shooting skills. The archer can't hit a moving target. But when the target stands still, it's a bull's-eye every time.

While there is always an element of grace in meeting God—we never exercise complete control over these things—we need not wait for God to break through to us from the heavens. If we can change our awareness, God's presence need not be elusive and fleeting.

MAKING ROOM FOR GOD

To dwell in *devekut* consciousness—to hold God's presence in the forefront of our awareness—requires that we transcend our very selves. Like everyone else, I have a story, the stuff of my personality. There you will find my best traits and most noble virtues. But it is also the repository of my bitterness, pettiness, neurosis, and arrogance—all the things that blind me to God. *Devekut* is possible when we lessen the hold of past and future on our minds by entering receptive mode. In “emptying out,” we create a space to hold awareness of the Thou. We become the empty vessel that God's spirit might fill. Moving beyond our stories is not only psychologically liberating. The practice of *devekut* actually makes room for God.

“Spirituality” is an overused and abused term these days. It carries very different meanings for different people. So let me clarify my own understanding. If I had to choose a definition for spirituality, it would be “deep listening.”

The method is mindfulness. We try to live fully in the present. The people who emphasized the concept of *devekut*, the Hasidim, are famous for introducing a new practice into Jewish

life that continues in our day: the singing of a *nigun*, a wordless melody of *las* and *lis* and *oys*. Why is it so powerful? Music fully engages the body, the center of our awareness when in receptive mode (more on body awareness in chapter 11). But more important, a *nigun* is a simple repetitive melody that functions like a mantra. It weakens the hold of the thinking mind on our awareness. Free of thoughts about past and future, we can fully focus on the world. This is the goal of every mindfulness practice. While we never fully transcend our “I,” our egos, we listen more deeply with less preconception and prejudice. Our minds join our hearts as vessels that the *shefa* can fill when we live in receptive mode and invite moments of I-Thou.

THE GIFT OF WILDERNESS

Mindfulness came easily when I played football in high school. If my mind was distracted, I quickly found myself on the ground with a macro-view of the grass. It paid to pay attention. The same is true in wilderness. There are serious consequences for getting lost in the to-do list back home. When we are far from hospitals, awareness of the potential dangers in the natural world keeps us focused and alert in the present moment. Mindfulness is the great gift of wilderness.

Of course, our minds will wander at times even in wilderness. It is amazing how little people see of the world around them when walking quickly down a trail. But we can choose to walk in ways that increase our mindfulness. The practices in this chapter help us to slow down, stay present, and listen.

PRACTICES

As we turn now to specific practices in wilderness, it is important to note what is not in this book. *A Wild Faith* cannot cover safety procedures, which vary from place to place, season to season, and

activity to activity. **It is your responsibility to learn and follow the appropriate safety procedures in wilderness.**

WALK SILENTLY

When I am leading a group, I start out on the trail and people follow. Inevitably, I hear the steady hum of conversation behind me. Often, someone asks a question about the flora, the geology, or lunch. Then we stop and I point out that we have been doing what every group does when left to its own devices. We talk. We are social creatures. Ignoring another person is rude, and we are often uncomfortable if we have not exchanged a least a few words with the human being standing next to us. It is the friendly thing to do.

Then I ask the group to continue in silence. Nothing we do later has quite the dramatic, paradigm-shifting effect of walking silently. When you stop thinking about what someone else is saying, or what you're saying, or what others will think of your ideas, or what you're wearing, or how you look ... you get the idea. Silence frees one to focus on the natural world that we have come to experience. This is an essential practice for those who wish to be fully present in wilderness.

Practice 1

GO SILENTLY

1. As you walk (or ski or kayak) in wilderness, refrain from speech of any kind. Do not fill the silence by listening to music on your headphones.
2. If you are in a group, spread out on the trail and leave space between yourself and other hikers.

For people who have never walked quietly, the change is revolutionary. Suddenly flowers are everywhere and birdsong fills the air. Many people appear to have a paradoxical experience. The more

they concentrate on outer geography, the more aware they become of inner geography—their emotions, feelings, and yearnings. In reality, it is not a contradiction at all. Free of the incessant chatter of the media, the Internet, and social niceties, awareness grows into a fullness that holds everything we experience. The more we are alert and focused on our surroundings, the more we are aware of our interaction with them. As Martin Buber showed us in relating to a tree, sometimes the deepest dialogue is wordless.

MEDITATIVE 25-25-50 WALKING

When we remove ourselves from the social world by walking silently, other distractions are ready to jump in. Our minds might occupy our attention with worries regarding tomorrow's meeting, regrets about something we said yesterday, or thoughts about what we're having for dinner. Meditation is the art of dealing with our restless minds in order to live fully in the present.

One meditative strategy is to occupy the mind with several simultaneous tasks, all focused on the present. This is my favorite way of staying in the here and now while hiking. The goal is simply to pay attention to the natural world.

Practice 2

MEDITATIVE WALKING

1. While standing still in wilderness, focus on your breath. You might listen for the subtle sound of breathing, notice the rising and falling of the belly and chest, or focus on the sensation of air passing through the nostrils. When thoughts arise, gently let them go and return to the breath.
2. After a minute, leave half your attention on the breath and place the other half on the bottoms of your feet. Feel the pressure of your body on the earth; notice the constant adjustments your muscles make to maintain balance.

3. After another minute, shift your focus once again. Place 25 percent of your awareness on your breath, another 25 percent on the soles of your feet, and 50 percent on the world around you. Begin to walk, taking in all the sounds and sights of the land you are traversing.
4. When your mind wanders and focus fades, try not to get angry at yourself. This happens to everyone, no matter how experienced at meditative walking. Gently return your attention to the breath and the soles of your feet, then look, listen, and continue on.

FOCUS ON THE SENSES

We can further focus our attention on the world around us by lending our awareness to one particular sense. As we walk (or kayak or ski), we place our conscious attention solely on sound, sight, smell, or touch.

Practice 3 **SENSE WALKING**

1. In a wilderness place, begin with sound. Place your attention on your faculty to hear, and listen intently for birdcalls, the rustle of your boots on dead leaves, the whistle of the wind through trees and canyons, the gurgle of a stream. What do you hear that you have never heard before? Move beyond your story by concentrating your attention on wild nature.
2. Repeat with the senses of touch, smell, and sight.

SEEING WITHOUT EYES: BLINDFOLD GAMES

Much has been written by eco-philosophers about the dominance of sight in contemporary society. We enjoy sound, touch, and taste, but unlike earlier times, we are almost completely dependent on sight to succeed in the world. These exercises activate the other



WITH YOUR WHOLE SELF: LIVING IN YOUR BODY

Man stands created, a whole body, ensouled by his relation to the created, enspirited by his relation to the Creator. It is to the whole man, in this unity of body, soul, and spirit, that the Lord of Revelation comes ... it is not only with his thought and his feelings, but with the sole of his foot and the tip of his finger as well....

Martin Buber¹

The first blessing in the Jewish prayer service after the *Sh'ma*, the *V'ahavta*, is central in the consciousness of the Jewish people. A direct quote from the Torah, it reads, "You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart and with all your soul [*nefesh*] and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5).

Though usually rendered "soul," the word *nefesh* is best translated as "person," the way we might say, "Oh, that poor soul deserved better." Unlike the postbiblical notion of a soul, the *nefesh* of the Torah, whether human or animal, eats food. Scholar Joel Hoffman concludes that what is usually translated as "heart" and "soul" in our prayer (*b'chol l'vav'cha u'v'chol nafsh'cha*) was in fact a biblical idiom for "the whole person."² Since *nefesh* also refers

to the animals, the word clearly includes what we have in common with them: our bodies.

The command to love God applies not only to intellect and emotions, but to the body as well!

THE LIVING LAND AND THE SENSING BODY

It's amazing when you think about it. The bizarre sound of a frog croaking can nevertheless evoke wonder and joy. Wherever we go in the natural world, enchantment awaits. Our emotions seem wired to our sensual involvement with sunsets, streams, and flowers. The spaciousness of a wide-open desert horizon creates spaciousness in the heart, while a fog-filled Sierra canyon with softened colors and limited visibility induces feelings of intimacy and vulnerability.

This is hardly surprising. It is our bodily senses that perceive the natural world, and our senses are most alive in the place where they evolved: the wilderness. In the city, our senses often feel under assault. We actually try to turn them off at times to avoid advertisements or block out the grating noise of trucks and lawn mowers. Much of the time, our senses are underutilized as we navigate the predictable urban terrain and stare at two-dimensional pages and TV screens.

In the natural world, everything we perceive is in motion. Even the mountains are moving, if on a schedule of their own. Plants and animals, the weather and the elements, they are always stirring, always improvising. Particularly with animals, we don't know where they are headed next. But we better bring all our senses to bear on the bear, lest we be caught unawares when she moves toward us!³

When I am awestruck in wilderness, engaged in moments of I-Thou with rivers or rainbows or moose, I can hardly move my

mouth. At most, an “Oh wow” or “My God” comes out. Yet, the moment is profound. But if my thinking mind is paralyzed, what is receiving the Thou? What perceives the sacred in the natural world?

In moments of awe, the mind goes mute, but the body is fully engaged.

THE WISDOM OF THE BODY

No one would disagree, I hope, with the notion that our bodies contain wisdom independent of our thinking. The various systems of my body are constantly adjusting to changes in the environment without my thinking about it, just as my foot plants in such a way as to maintain my balance when the incline of the trail changes. I may work on my basketball shot consciously during practice, but during the game, it happens on its own or I will not score many baskets. When I do try to alter my shot during practice, it is not enough to think about it. Rather, I implant the proper motion in my body memory through repetition and practice.

Enlightenment ethical theory, in the wake of Western religious thought, saw the body as a source of temptation and evil. In order to act ethically, one needs to reason and then act without the interference of the bodily passions. It is only in the last generation or so that our culture has begun to move beyond this fallacy. The mind/body dualism that grounds such thinking is being disproved in many fields, including philosophy, psychology, and perhaps most significantly, medicine.

One of the tribulations that autistic people often face is a revulsion to touch. Many cannot stand to be embraced. Sometimes an autistic person is touched on one part of the body and feels it in another. Researchers note that these same people also have trouble making everyday, commonsense decisions. They struggle to tell the difference between a stranger who comes to

genuinely befriend them or one who seeks their trust in order to steal from them. In other words, the people who according to mind/body dualism should think best—people who avoid sensuous contact with the world—are the very people who have trouble thinking straight.⁴

Our abstract reasoning abilities are not inhibited by our bodies. Rather, it is the sensuous touch of our bodies with the world that enables us to think at all.

THE PASSIONATE BODY

Enlightenment thought, however, was indeed correct in identifying the correlation between passion and the body. If you want to know whether a person is happy or depressed, telling the truth or telling a lie, are you going to give more credence to their words or their body “language”? As my Buddhist teachers like to say, “The mind has many ruses, but the body does not lie.” The body is indeed home to our emotions.

Both thought and emotion, then, require bodies. And of course, so does our perception of the world. For me, it is simply inconceivable that we could know anything without our bodies. So if we want to put intuition, emotion, and body wisdom into our spiritual practice, if we want to express our passionate desire to connect with God, we are shooting ourselves in the foot if we fail to involve ourselves physically.

This is especially true for those of us who discern God as the *shefa*, the River of Light, as well as for those of us who meet God in I-Thou relation. We do not reason God or think God. Rather, we perceive God. Some say we humans have a sixth, spiritual sense beyond the physical senses that detects the divine.⁵ It makes more *sense* to me that we perceive God like we perceive everything else—through our bodies.

PRACTICES

NOTICE HOW THE LANDSCAPES AFFECT YOU

Everyone knows that our physical surroundings have an impact on us. It matters if we have a cubicle or an office window, if the climate is mostly overcast or sunny, if the yard is green from plants and trees or gray from concrete. In the following exercise, we take this insight seriously.

Practice 26

NOTICE WHAT THE LANDSCAPE EVOKES IN YOUR HEART

1. While hiking, skiing, kayaking, or embarking in other outdoor activities, keep part of your awareness on your body, as in meditative walking (see practice 2).
2. As you focus on the natural world, notice the emotions that the landscape evokes in you. See if certain landscapes tend to elicit similar emotions over time.
3. If you can, return to the same spot at different times. Do different seasons, temperatures, or times of day elicit different feelings?
4. If you like, record your observations in your journal.

Some landscapes are lush, others barren; sometimes the water is salty and crashing with waves, other times clear and still; sometimes you enjoy wide horizons, other times an intimate canyon, surrounded by trees.

Sometimes the same view yields an entirely different landscape at different times: midday versus sunset; a flash flood versus a dry wash; storm clouds versus clear skies.

When we put our awareness on our bodies, we notice that different landscapes really *feel* different from each other—viscerally.

This is a deceptive exercise. It seems easy but in fact is quite subtle. First, we learn to differentiate between our projections and our perceptions. When we are emotionally charged, our feelings impact what we see. When the emotion is a reaction to the landscape, that's excellent. If we're angry about something that happened before we left home, not so good. To truly "feel" the landscape, we must calm our minds, enter receptive mode, and see with our senses. If we get emotional after that ... excellent!

Over time, you will notice that certain psychic states arise in certain landscapes. You might be calmer in some places than others. (For me, that would be a place near flowing water.) Other landscapes might induce a bit of anxiety (a dark, decaying forest). Most people's spirits soar on a mountain peak with a great view. Again, it takes refined discrimination to differentiate between what the landscape is evoking in you and what you bring to the encounter. Are your spirits high on the peak because you "conquered" the mountain or "mastered" a difficult route, or because the infinite view sensitizes you to Infinite Spirit?

CHANT

Music deeply affects us for a simple reason: we experience it bodily. If you have any doubts about this, place your hand over your chest cavity and sing. Feel your body resonate with the sound. Notice the difference when you sing AAAHHH or EEEEEEE or OOOHHHMMM.

Chant is singing in a meditative mode, not so different from the Hasidic *nigun* or wordless song mentioned above. The melody should be simple. The woman who is revitalizing chant as a Jewish practice, Rabbi Shefa Gold, teaches that when we encounter a good chant, it's as if we already knew it. It also needs to be simple because it needs to be boring. No, you didn't read a misprint. It needs to be boring. As Rabbi Gold teaches, boredom precedes breakthrough. A chant works the same way as a mantra does in sit-

ting meditation. When we bore our analytic thinking mind, it is lulled to sleep, allowing us to live in our bodies. In chanting, we sing simple words in a simple melody far too many times. Like any mindfulness practice that plants us in the present and directs awareness away from our egos, we are clearing heart-space and sculpting a heart-vessel for the *shefa* to fill.

When ending a chant, it is quite easy to let our minds wander and start thinking about lunch plans. But this, teaches Rabbi Gold, is a critical moment. Here is where we discover what the chant has changed in us. If we remain in receptive mode, we receive the world around us with fresh, calm attention.

Since I can't teach you chant in this book, let me recommend Rabbi Gold's CDs and the recordings on her website (www.rabbishefagold.com). I'd also suggest attending a retreat with her or another teacher of chant.

Practice 27

CHANT IN WILDERNESS

1. Choose a chant with words that might enhance your connection with wild nature.
2. In other settings, it is sometimes useful to chant with eyes shut. But in wilderness, we attempt to connect to the natural world around us. Chant with half of your awareness on your body, and half on what your eyes behold and your ears hear. If you do close your eyes to concentrate on your heart, keep awareness on your body and the natural world through your other senses (as in Vipassana meditation).
3. Sing the chant too many times. Boredom precedes breakthrough.
4. As you sense your body while chanting, you may feel "stuck" in a particular place. Keep your attention on the spot, and it will likely relax.⁶

5. When you end the chant, be especially mindful. Enter receptive mode by following the breath and placing the rest of your awareness on your body and your heart (see practices 2 and 11).
6. If you are unfamiliar with Jewish chant, try any simple Hebrew song that you know, such as *Hinei mah tov u'mah na'im, shevet achim gam yachad* or *Oseh shalom bimromav, hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu v'al kol yisrael, v'imru, amen*. Or chant the *Sh'ma* (*Sh'ma yisrael, Adonai eloheinu, Adonai echad*).

These are my favorite chants from Rabbi Gold:

מַה־גָּדְלוֹ מַעֲשֵׂיֶיךָ יְהוָה מְאֹד עֲמֻקּוֹ מִחֻשְׁבֹּתֶיךָ:

Mah gadlu ma'asecha Yah, m'od amku machsh'votcha.
How great are Your works, O God, how deep are Your thoughts. (Psalm 92:6)

מַה־נּוֹרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה

Mah nora hamakom hazeh.
How awesome is this place. (Gen. 28:17)

וְנָהָר יֵצֵא מֵעֵדֶן לְהַשְׁקוֹת אֶת־הַגָּן

V'nahar yotzei mei'Eden, l'hashkot et hagan.
A river comes forth from Eden to water the garden. (Gen. 2:10)

MAKE MUSIC

On my last solo wilderness retreat, a four-day fast, I brought a Native American flute. Easy to play (just six notes in one scale), it was perfect for a less-than-professional musician like myself. I quickly discovered why jazz players call a saxophone an axe. I wore the flute in my belt and took it everywhere. I had no idea that it could affect my retreat so thoroughly.

Every time I rested between practices and my mind began to wander, that is, about one hundred times a day, I played the flute. The music exiled thought and brought my awareness right back to

INDEX TO PRACTICES

1. Go Silently 59
2. Meditative Walking 60
3. Sense Walking 61
4. Picture Frames 62
5. Meet a Tree 62
6. Blind Sense Walking 63
7. Wide-Angle Vision 64
8. Be Especially Mindful of Safety Issues and Procedures 65
9. Find Your Soul-O Site 66
10. Take a Stand 68
11. Simple Meditation 69
12. Quiet the Mind 69
13. Disturb Nothing 70
14. Say Thanks to the Natural World 79
15. Recite a Psalm 80
16. Write a Psalm 82
17. Recite a Poem 84
18. Wilderness Blessings 90
19. Personal Blessings 98
20. Blessings Walk 100
21. Pray Slowly 110

Index to Practices

22. Memorize a Prayer 111
23. Carry a Power *Pasuk* 112
24. Pray at Sunrise or Sunset 113
25. Personal Prayer 116
26. Notice What the Landscape Evokes in Your Heart 121
27. Chant in Wilderness 123
28. Play a Musical Instrument 125
29. Sense the *Chiut* in the Natural World 126
30. Drawing *Chiut* from the Elements 128
31. Exchange *Chiut* with a Tree 129
32. Drawing *Chiut* with *Tefillin* 130
33. Fast in Wilderness 132
34. Four Winds, Seven Directions Gratitude and Permission Ceremony 144
35. The Four Species and the Four Winds 147
36. What's True 156
37. *Hitbodedut* 157
38. Write a Letter to God 158
39. Carry a Question 158
40. *Teshuvah* Dialogue 160
41. Write Your Own Eulogy 161
42. Lie in Your Grave 162
43. Four Winds *Teshuvah* Ceremony 163
44. Give It to the Earth 164