

# *A Wild* FAITH

Jewish Ways into Wilderness,  
Wilderness Ways into Judaism

## Study Guide for Classes and Book Groups

by Rabbi Mike Comins

*A Wild Faith* encourages you to get outdoors and explore the connections between God, wilderness, and Judaism. After your class or book group has read *A Wild Faith*, the following discussion questions, based on topics covered in the book, will inspire deeper thought and more meaningful experiences when you head outside and begin doing the practices explained in *A Wild Faith*.

### ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL ON WONDER AND AWE

Heschel bases his theology on the experience of wonder, claiming that the experience of awe, not this or that belief, is the root of Jewish faith (24).

- How does Heschel differentiate between fear and awe (23)? Do you agree?
- Do you agree with Heschel's assertion that awe is the root of faith (24)? What is at the root of your faith? When do you feel awe?
- Do you concur with Heschel's critique of William James's "Will to Believe" theology (22)? Why or why not?

### A BODILY SPIRITUALITY

Rabbi Comins relates his personal journey from a committed rationalist to a practicing mystic through spiritual body-practices (Tai Chi, Yoga) and walking in the desert (30). He argues that God is not thought of, but *perceived* in the world (120).

- How do you understand and feel God's presence in the world?
- Does it make sense to you that one might experience God through the body? Why or why not?
- Do you experience parts of the material world as holy and sacred? How so?

### MARTIN BUBER'S *I AND THOU*

Buber's concept of I-It and I-Thou is a philosophy and theology of engagement with the world (36).

- Do you agree with Buber's basic distinction between I-Thou and I-It (36)? Is there anything about it with which you disagree?

- Have you ever felt engaged in an I-Thou relationship with nature, an animal, or God? What was that experience like?
- Buber's revolutionary insight—the Eternal opens up like a window in the here and now when we enter genuine relation with a Thou—locates God in the concrete details of our life rather than a purely spiritual dimension of the soul or far off in the Heavens. How does this compare to your experience of God?

## TWO CLASSIC PATHS TO GOD

*Devekut* (cleaving) and *teshuvah* (repentance) are opposite but equally important paths to God (51). A balance between the two makes each of them more effective (54).

- What is the difference between *devekut* and *teshuvah* as paths to God?
- Are you more comfortable with one of these spiritual paths over the other? Why do you think that is?
- Do you think it's important to find a balance between the two? Why or why not?

## RECOGNIZING AND SPREADING *KEDUSHAH* (HOLINESS)

Rabbi Comins repeatedly argues that tradition does not suppress spiritual creativity, but encour-

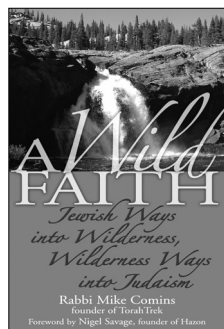
ages it. Creative spiritual practice helps us see the holiness in our lives, and share it (95).

- How does loyalty and adherence to a tradition enable cultural creativity?
- Does your Jewish community effectively balance traditional and creative spiritual practice? In what ways? How could the balance be improved?
- Have you ever been moved to say a spontaneous blessing in response to something you saw or experienced (90)?
- Would you feel comfortable creating a new blessing? Why or why not?

## BUT RABBI, IS THIS JEWISH?

Rabbi Comins adapts spiritual exercises from other traditions in his practice of Judaism. Appendix 1 (176) discusses the perils of borrowing ceremonies and rituals from other faith traditions.

- What are the dangers of freely adapting non-Jewish customs into Judaism?
- Why does Rabbi Comins—and many other Jews—do so anyway?
- Do you agree with Rabbi Comins's criterion for “authentically” (177) integrating new customs into Judaism?
- Are there any practices from other faith traditions that you have incorporated into your life? Why did you choose to do so?



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