

In Review: *Seeking the Divine Presence, Part 1: The Three Pillars of a Jewish Spiritual Life* (Trafford Publishing)

By Maria Reis Habito

It is sheer luck, or is it perhaps Providence, to come across a book that speaks to the soul of the spiritual seeker as gently and persuasively as this new book by Rabbi Yoel Glick. Rabbi Glick's experience and expertise in guiding people on the spiritual path for the last 25 years is reflected in every chapter and page of this rich volume, which is a collection of Rabbi Glick's weekly lectures and writings composed over a number of years, in which he and his family lived in Canada, Israel, India, and France. The individual pieces, most of them no longer than three to five pages, beautifully offer themselves as inspirational readings for each new day.

Rabbi Glick's approach to the sources and practices of Judaism could be compared to the pioneering work by Henry Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda) and Bede Griffiths, who also read and interpreted the Christian scriptures in the light of Hindu spirituality. It is indeed rare to find a presentation of Jewish spiritual life which highlights the universality of the teachings over the particularity reserved for those who are scriptural experts and members of the Jewish people. Rabbi Glick's approach to religions is pluralistic; one all-important fruit of the expansion of consciousness is the love for other religions, "which cannot be a half-hearted kind of love that says: 'Your religion is okay, but my religion is the best.'" It needs to be a full love, a love that has a deep respect and appreciation for what other religions have to offer to humanity. It needs to arise out of a firm knowledge, clear understanding, and a profound sharing of each other's religious experience" (252).

The central purpose of the book is "to instruct spiritual seekers how to use the teachings and practices of Judaism to experience the reality of God" (xix). The focus here is on "experience," the individual quest for a personal relationship with God, rather than the study of ethical rules and regulations which emphasize the social and group dimension of Jewish teaching and practice.

As indicated in the title, there are three pillars of the Jewish spiritual life, in accordance with which the book is structured, followed by a description of the spirituality of the Jewish Holydays (as Rabbi Glick refers to holidays).

What are the three pillars? In the Ethics of the Fathers (*Perkei Avot*), they are described as Torah, *avodah* (worship), and *gimilut chasadim* (acts of loving kindness). The introductory chapter of the book offers a richly layered explanation of these terms, based the rabbinical understanding of Torah as study, *avodah* as prayer, and *gimilut chasadim* as good works. His view of these three pillars is inspired by the Hindu tradition, namely as different spiritual paths suited to the different dispositions of individuals: *Jnana* (wisdom), *bhakti* (devotion), and *karma* (action). Rabbi Glick also takes his own approach from the "concepts and consciousness of spiritual science (p.2)," in the light of which he interprets Torah as the expansion of consciousness, *avodah* (worship) as Remembrance of God and *gimilut chasidim* (acts of loving kindness) as Self-transformation.

The spiritual life is the path of Self-transformation, “the work of transforming ourselves from physical creatures into perfect Divine instruments” (69). This is achieved through a combination of physical disciplines and the development of virtues based on self-examination and deepening awareness. Remembrance of God leads to immersion in Divine presence through the constant turning of our mind to God in prayer, mantra-repetition, and meditation, not only in times especially reserved for religious practice, but more importantly as we go about our daily business. The expansion of consciousness is arrived at through these foundational practices, deepened and sustained through the study of and reflection on the scriptures of the World’s religions and other spiritual materials, either by oneself, or in a group guided by a spiritual mentor. The expansion of consciousness leads to a state of “unbroken awareness of the underlying Unity of all existence” (259), which is distinguished by an all-embracing, all-pervading love. As described in the culminating chapters of part 3, this love is comprised of “Love for God,” “Love for the Divinity in Every Human Being” and “Love for All Paths that lead to God.” The spiritual seeker who arrives at this state of infinite oneness “will see nothing but God, nothing but love” (259). Expressed in the language of the Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism), the spiritual seeker who has reached the consciousness of oneness will “build a vessel that is worthy to hold God’s Infinite light” (238).

The sources used to illustrate the topics and teachings outlined above are mainly derived from the Hasidic, Kabbalistic and Hindu traditions, with the inclusion of some examples from Christian, Buddhist, and Sikh traditions for further clarification and added insight. Like every gifted teacher, Rabbi Glick uses stories about and sayings of the masters, saints and spiritual giants of these various traditions to bring a teaching to life, to highlight a point, and to inspire. To give one example, the two chapters on “Guidance through Divine Inspiration” provide the practitioner important criteria to distinguish the authenticity of a divine calling from ego-delusion, and point out the obstacles and pitfalls on the path of following God’s will in one’s life. These chapters assemble helpfully commented upon examples from the lives and the teachings of Ramakrishna, the Baal Shem Tov, Saint Teresa of Avila, Sri Ramana Maharshi, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkonos, Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Kotsk, and Swami Turiyananda of the Ramakrishna Society.

The overall richness of the materials presented to the reader in this volume demonstrates Rabbi Glick’s knowledge of and familiarity with the spiritual scriptures of these respective traditions. However, one is left to wonder why no materials from the Sufi tradition are included as well.

While each short chapter in this collection is unique as an inspiring piece of reading, the coherence between or sequence of the chapters and ideas expressed therein does not always become readily apparent. This of course has to do with the fact that the volume is a collection of teachings given over a number of years. But the reader not so familiar with Kabbalah, Hindu meditation practices, or the “concepts and consciousness of spiritual science” – which are not explained per se – sometimes may wish for some more help in making pieces fit together in an overall picture. For example, the early chapter on “Divine Attributes” (13-17) introduces the basic notion of the ten Sephirot, which, in Kabbalistic thought, form the fundamental pattern of the universe and the

human being. The connection that Rabbi Glick makes between the ten Sephirot and the yogic system of the seven chakras is especially important with regard to meditation, but aside from a small footnote, no further explanation is offered here. Since the development of the ten divine attributes is presented in an introductory way as a key notion of self-transformation, the reader naturally expects a further deepening of this theme in the following chapter and might be surprised to find instead reflections on humility that are mainly drawn from Christian sources, such as the life of St. Francis and the Desert Fathers.

While Rabbi Glick speaks about the importance of meditation as a discipline in the spiritual journey, he refrains from describing or advising a particular method of meditation in detail. The great virtue of this open and inclusive approach is that readers who already have a practice of meditation will feel confirmed in their own path; the drawback is that other readers might feel the lack of a clear and practical guide to meditation. There are short descriptions of different forms of visualization or meditation dispersed over different chapters of the book, for example in connection with the special color blue (*techelet*) of the early *tzitzit* (178), or the raising of *Shechinah* or Kundalini energy (107, 169). Since the latter practice is described as a method used by those who merge with the Eternal Self and become “at one with the whole universe,” one might wish for a more systematic presentation of this method, rather than just a short paragraph. Rabbi Glick also mentions the practice of linking up with the “souls which are on higher planes (53), or describes how the *darshan* of a holy man or woman “lifts the individual out of his lower state of consciousness and links him to the root of his soul” (56). But the concept of the root soul to which all of this seems to refer to is only explained in the latter part of the book (183) in the chapter of “The Evolution of Religion,” which in contrast to other chapters does not indicate the source of the ideas expressed. These comments on some structural shortcomings of the collection do not intend to detract from the very rich and uplifting content that it offers to all readers, regardless of their religious or spiritual backgrounds. While Jewish seekers will be helped in rediscovering their own roots, non-Jewish seekers will also very much benefit from learning about the richness of the Jewish mystical traditions, as presented in this book.

As stated in the beginning, most of the sources and notions used in the book are from Hasidic and Hindu backgrounds. Both of these traditions, maybe more explicitly than others, use a language that clearly seems to imply a dualistic view of this world: spirit versus matter, soul versus body, transcendence versus immanence. In this language, the “higher” spiritual realm is opposed to “the darkness of this physical reality,” in which “the sparks of divine light” are bound by the “material sheath.” Our “lower self or nature” needs to be removed so that our “Divine self” can be revealed. Our “animal body” needs to be overcome so that we can “rise” or “ascend” from lower, physical planes to “higher” spiritual planes of existence. Rabbi Glick sometimes makes use of this type of language as well, but then overturns it with surprising statements such as, for example, “in fact, there is really no higher or lower plane; the different planes are only different states of consciousness” (p.109). He advises the reader to think of the body as a “holy ground” for the light of the soul (p.104). He gives the story of Vivekananda who first doubted that God was in all things – including “jugs and cups”

and then had a profound experience of the non-dualistic nature (*advaita*) of absolute reality, in which he experienced God's Oneness (p. 256). In fact, if one had to describe the message of Rabbi Glick's entire book in just one sentence, it would be this: It is a commentary in 338 pages on the words of the Shema: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One" and of the commandment "and you shall love the Lord, your God, with all of your heart, and all of your soul and all of your might." If ultimate reality is One, if it is Love, one may ask, what then is the use of any type of language that implies a dualistic attitude towards creation?

I recently came across the following statement by Rabbi Elie Kaplan Spitz in his book, *Does the Soul Survive? A Jewish Journey to Belief in Afterlife, Past Lives, and Living with Purpose*. (Woodstock, Vt : Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006). "Although Judaism is a rich soil in which to grow the soul, this terrain remains untilled by most today." Rabbi Glick has tilled this soil for many years, and the fruits of his work, which are being made available in the form of this first volume in a planned series of three, will undoubtedly continue to help many souls to grow.