

FOCUSING, JEWISH SPIRITUALITY AND MY SEARCH FOR MEANING

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INTRODUCTION

It was spring, 1978. Under a cloudless, African sky I'd just ridden an old 3-speed American bike out over dusty dirt roads in Niger's capital, Niamey, to visit my friend Kitty. I always enjoyed visiting Kitty, mostly because we enjoyed each other's company, and also because it was a treat for me as a Peace Corps Volunteer to spend even a small amount of time in an area of the city with nice homes and lawns. A respite from the rural village where I was living and working as a Health Educator, setting up and running small maternal and infant care clinics.

After catching up with each other's news, Kitty casually mentioned that she and her husband were planning a Seder and that they would like to invite me.

"A what?" I replied.

"A Passover Seder," answered Kitty.

"But I'm not Jewish."

Kitty looked at me with surprise and incredulity.

Sensing her confusion, I shared what I knew of my past which is that my father had been raised Jewish, and that my mother's father had been Jewish, but that they'd decided to leave the religion soon after they married. I'd always figured that being Jewish was something one could opt out of.

I was 24 years old and did not know that I was Jewish. It was to be another 22 years before I learned the truth of my identity, which is that my maternal grandmother — for whom I was named — actually had been Jewish, and therefore, so was my mother, and so am I. I also learned that while it is possible to choose to be Jewish, when one is born into the tribe, one is Jewish for life, regardless of observance.

I am reminded here of a friend's comment upon my sharing with him soon after learning that I was Jewish: "With a name like yours, and a face like yours, how could you not know?!" That line always struck me as funny.

Humor aside, the descriptors confusing, convoluted, and love-hate would not be overstating the complexity of my relationship with the religion of my ancestors.

Given this, it continues to feel like a miracle that I am where I am today — happily living a fulfilling Jewish life in the middle of Jerusalem.

Focusing played an integral part in this miracle.

My relationship with Focusing and Jewish spirituality began to flower at about the same time a little over 20 years ago. In 1994, I began to study and learn Focusing, and also made a social, religious, and time commitment to my Jewish practice by becoming a member of a synagogue for the first time in my life.

Looking back over the past 20 years, I can see that the evolution of my understanding of Focusing and my connection to Jewish spirituality have been interdependent, each having informed the growth of the other. To a great extent, Focusing has played an important role in supporting my growing involvement with Jewish life. Likewise, my understanding of Jewish spirituality has deepened my understanding and practice of Focusing.

My goal in this piece is to explore some of the values that are shared by both Focusing and Jewish spirituality, and to offer some examples of the many ways that Focusing has supported my understanding and observance of Jewish spirituality. I will also look at a pivotal point in my developing connection with Judaism that shaped my understanding and practice of Focusing.

WHAT DO I MEAN BY “FOCUSING”?

I’ll begin with my understanding of Focusing, which was and continues to be so important in permitting, supporting, and nurturing my spiritual growth. I will define what it is for me — and why it has been so important as a tool for healing and growth in my life.

Focusing is a process of helping us find what is alive in us. It is distinguished from other forms of inner relationship approaches to healing and growth through the felt sense, the body’s way of manifesting the gestalt of some issue.

Focusing is a process of *allowing* what is true for us, at levels deeper than what might immediately bubble up into conscious awareness. We do this by becoming aware of our bodies — and through our bodies becoming aware of what wisdom, or truth, is literally embodied within us.

Finding what is alive in us doesn’t necessarily mean what is happy and vibrant, but rather, what it is that is actually *living* within us. When we are able to spend time with what is present within us, including those parts we might fear or wish to push away, we open ourselves to the potential of bringing more aliveness into our lives than we might ever have imagined.

Focusing is an art in which we become aware that reality holds much more possibility and beauty than we might have believed. With Focusing we no longer see one, or two, or more aspects of ourselves as who we are. Rather, we begin to understand that the truth of who we are is so much more vast, so much more exciting, so much more alive than we had previously suspected.

This knowing that came from my Focusing — that I was so much more than my limited sense about who I was — made space for what was to come.

Focusing involves the opposite of our typical fast pace and tendency to rush. We need to slow down, to pause. With the usual pace of our lives we miss much that is precious. As one colleague put it, “Focusing is a process that takes us much more deeply into life.”

Focusing offers a safe space, a container that at times can feel womb-like, where what is true can begin to emerge into consciousness. To Focus requires that we be able to make space for what is true for us *now*, in the present moment.

It is a practice that necessitates a level of intimacy and faith — of trusting ourselves, and also trusting that what comes is, in some respect, valid. We’re rewarded with being able to see and feel beauty within ourselves as well as in others, and by a sense of peace, balance, and spaciousness that we might never have imagined possible for us.

It has often felt to me as though Focusing is a way for God to speak to me. That is, by listening within, at times I’ve felt as though I’ve been able to hear the wisdom of the Divine as it has connected with my own body, heart and soul. The following is an example of this experience, which, incidentally, led to my first trip to Israel 14 years ago.

Stopping by my friend Jody’s home one morning to pick up the mittens I’d inadvertently left at a lecture the day before, I asked her if she had a few minutes to talk, as I’d like to ask her a few questions that had come up for me at the lecture.

She invited me in, and the two of us sat on the old sofa by the window in her wood-paneled Berkeley living room. Soon, after answering one or two questions, she looked me in the eyes and said, “You should go to Israel.”

Up to that point, the possibility of me visiting Israel wasn’t even in the realm of possibility for me. As soon as she said it, however, I began to cry. While such a trip certainly did not ‘make sense’ for me, financially or logistically, I experienced a sudden very powerful feeling — that even now comes as I recall this moment.

At the core of Focusing is the *bodily felt sense* — a palpable physical feeling one gets of a whole situation. The powerful feeling that came for me was my body’s felt response to her simple statement.

It almost stopped my breath. There was a strong feeling of, “Yes” — and amazement.

Then Jody also began to cry. When I asked her why she was crying, she responded that she had chills — and that her suggestion felt deeply right to her, too.

My felt sense was so clear about the rightness of this idea that I soon began to move forward with making plans. That conversation took place on the 24th of December in 1999. Less than seven weeks later I was in Jerusalem, looking forward to a nine week visit in Israel.

This visit, by the way, was unplanned. Other than purchasing a ticket and arranging for a place to stay, I’d made no plans at all for what I’d be doing during that time. Further, my traveling budget was miniscule. What I did have was an intention to see as much as I could, to meet folks, and to share Focusing and Conscious Touch with other body-workers and therapists. In those nine weeks, I was able to do all of this — and more.

Without Focusing, I don't know whether I would ever have visited Israel. It is highly doubtful that I'd have been able, just two years later, to leave my home of 18 years in the San Francisco Bay Area to move to what was at the time, a virtual war zone in Jerusalem.

Making the decision to move to Israel involved many Focusing sessions during another visit to Israel, primarily with my very supportive Focusing partner, and also on my own. I discuss this process in more detail in another essay entitled "The Decision" which is available by request.

In Focusing there is a sense of spaciousness, curiosity, really wanting to know what is there beneath the level of conscious awareness. In retrospect, I believe that it was this aspect of Focusing that was most significant in helping me to make this decision: *whatever arises to consciousness, whatever is within us, is welcome*. I find this particular attitude very helpful when it comes to making decisions because it precludes what is often a tendency to favor one choice or another that would be preferred by one's friends and/or family, or socially acceptable, or best for one's career, etc.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN FOCUSING AND JEWISH SPIRITUALITY

There are four important areas of similarity, including:

- fostering aliveness
- the idea of a container
- a connection to the body, and
- the idea that everything/everyone is unique, worthy of attention

Aliveness. I see the essence of Focusing as fostering aliveness. When that which has previously been unrecognized on a conscious level can come to awareness, we are able to be more alive. After Focusing, there is often a sense that something has shifted from being two dimensional to being multi-dimensional. There is a sense of greater possibility, and often of increased vitality as well.

The Jewish people are sometimes referred to as The People of the Book. This book, the Torah, or Jewish Bible, a core guide for observant Jewish life, is often symbolized as The Tree of Life.



Jewish spirituality is basically a celebration of aliveness. Practicing Judaism has certainly brought more vitality into my life. Judaism, perhaps to a greater degree than other major religions, celebrates being alive. We are meant to enjoy life. At the same time, we are meant to understand that everything in the world was created by God — including us!

How does Jewish spirituality bring more vitality to my own life? My sense is that it is a combination of two factors.

One is the reality that Jewish practice views all aspects of human life as spiritual, from getting up in the morning to going to bed at night.

The other is that being an observant Jew involves being much more conscious of aspects of living than I'd ever been aware of before. Living in this new way made possible a recognition of the richness inherent in everyday life.

For me, a sense of vitality is directly related to the extent of awareness of my external and internal worlds. My experience with facilitating Focusing for many hundreds of others has confirmed that it may be a universal reality that *awareness fosters a sense of vitality*.

Container. In Focusing, the idea of creating safe space is requisite. We pay attention to what needs to happen in order for *what lives within us* to have the best chance of coming to light. We do our best to create a sense of safe space — which is fundamentally a metaphorical container into which something can have the best chance of breaking ground, of coming into conscious awareness.

The Torah states, “They shall make a Sanctuary (*mikdash*) for me, so that I may dwell among them.” In other words, God is commanding the Jewish people to create a place of holiness that will allow God to dwell with them.

My sense is that when we Focus, we allow ourselves to be open to God's presence, wisdom, compassion, and more.

The practice of Judaism has acted like a container for me, for my life. The tradition, community, commandments, and practices have created a substrate in which I can grow and thrive, spiritually and in other ways as well.

The Body. Little need be written about Focusing's connection with the body. The process of Focusing is based on connection with a felt sense that is by definition connected with the body.

Judaism is an embodied religion. In Jewish spirituality, the body is highly valued in that it is believed that through our physical bodies we can experience, as well as enhance and deepen, spirituality. In commanding us to “choose life,” the Torah is indicating that it is important to both respect and enjoy the physical aspect of life, and that it, too, is sacred.

The practice of *kashrut*, or keeping kosher is just one example of how the practice of Judaism engages the body, and at the same time, the mind and spirit. While the scope of this article doesn't allow going into detail about the practice of keeping kosher, it is important to know that commentators have delineated a range of reasons for the observance, including hygiene, ethics, national unity, mystical aspects, and discipline.

Since bringing Focusing to my Jewish observance, I've felt increasingly comfortable in my body. At the same time, Focusing has helped me to better connect with the divine, with God. When praying with a prayer book, I often find it hard to “connect.” At such times, it has become a custom for me to sense inside myself, and to pray from there. This has resulted in experiences that often feel profound to me. Something opens up; it feels as though I've shifted to another realm of existence where I can connect much more deeply.

All-embracing acceptance, that everything/everyone has value. An important ingredient for successful Focusing is being able to have an attitude of acceptance:

that whatever might come is not only worthy of attention, but also has a good reason for being there. And it is our curiosity and acceptance that will ultimately lead to change and transformation.

In Judaism, there is a tradition that holds that each letter in the Torah corresponds to one of the souls of the Jewish people. The meaning of this is that each soul is important in its own right. Each has something unique to contribute. Each has its own special value.

Among the many other values shared by both Focusing and Jewish spirituality in addition to acceptance are the importance of humility, respect, and truth.

HOW FOCUSING SUPPORTS MY CONNECTION WITH JEWISH SPIRITUALITY

Perhaps the most significant of the many ways that Focusing has influenced and enhanced my relationship with Jewish spirituality is in my ongoing struggle with my identity as a Jew.

Growing up with believing that I was “half-Jewish,” I felt as though I didn’t quite belong anywhere. Further, I grew up in an environment of anti-semitism: to this day, my mother describes herself as anti-semitic, and claims that my father was, as well.

I’ve grappled with internalized anti-semitism since I was a child. And yet now, when I look around me in my home in Jerusalem, I feel love, awe, and amazement — of my fellow Jews, Jewish philosophy, and the beauty, joy, and vibrancy of the Jewish life-style, religion, and culture.

So this is the paradox: On the one hand I was taught that Judaism is a religion that is old, dusty, and something to be ashamed of, while for the past 14 years I have been living a Jewish life and have never been happier.

The Jewish Bible teaches that we are each made in the image of God. What does this mean in terms of identity, and in particular, my sense of who I am?

While our sense of identity is colored by the past, at the same time it also goes through a process of evolution as we live our lives. Focusing is one of the primary tools I use to connect and more deeply understand myself, including aspects related to Judaism, spirituality, and meaning. By bringing the light of the present into the felt sense of the past, Focusing helped me to better understand myself, and to also actually facilitate a transformation of how I view myself.

A few words on how this works. Focusing is a process rooted in the present. We sit with and attend to the body-mind felt sense as it unveils itself to us in the moment. This felt sense is often a reflection of an integration of what our body-mind holds from the past — albeit as it appears in the present.

For me, by Focusing, my sense of myself as a Jewish woman shifted from feeling not OK, tainted, not belonging, to something quite different as I became aware that my heritage was actually an amazing gift.

This process was not spontaneous, but rather continues to this day. A quote by the philosopher Thomas Metzinger offers an apt description of the philosophy of Focusing: “Nobody ever had or was a self. The self is not a thing, but a process.”

My quest to connect to something bigger than myself, something with meaning and truth, has guided me in living my life since my teens.

After years of studying and practicing Eastern religions, Focusing quickly became the primary tool in my search. I used Focusing to feel into the rightness of my spiritual path. In this way it soon became clear that while I’d benefited from other paths, Judaism was the right path for me.

Focusing gave me this: I could sense inside, open myself to listening mode, and receive what came. Most often, the first thing that came was a wave of peace. By staying open, more comes. Jewish practice and community gave me something more. Following is one such example.

Every time I’ve been blessed to carry a Torah scroll, I’ve experienced a joy and sense of elevation that is palpable, and often wondered, “Where does this deep joy come from?” After all, I wasn’t brought up in this tradition.

Last year on the holiday of *Simchat Torah* I had the opportunity to sing and dance with the scroll, in the center of over a hundred women dancing in concentric circles and accompanying me in a joyful, uplifting chant.

The bliss I experienced was made even more sublime by sensing inside, and allowing the feelings of love and joy to flow through all of me — body, mind, heart, and soul.

Reflecting on this experience, I was struck by the sense that those dancing, chanting women formed a container within which I was able to have a deep bodily-felt spiritual experience.

HOW JEWISH SPIRITUALITY HAS TAUGHT ME MORE ABOUT FOCUSING

The idea of “container” first formed within me in relation to Judaism. It became evident to me that the Jewish religion is a container within which spirituality can grow and thrive.

An example of this is my ever-evolving relationship with *Halacha*, a Hebrew word meaning “way” or “path” that refers to the application of Jewish law to life. It is the aspect of Jewish practice that I most grapple with.

Having been raised in a home in which the idea of keeping any commandments was anathema, the idea of conforming to what felt like largely arbitrary rules imposed from external sources was — and in some senses continues — to be a challenge. Yet each time I have considered ousting one or another commandment from my life, before taking any action, I’ve sat to Focus on the decision.

So far, each time my inner being has contradicted the parts in me that have sought emancipation from the commandments. Each time, my body, my soul, seemed to have one voice. The rightness was not only palpable; it brought a sense of peace, of calm, of groundedness in me.

It was one such time that it became clear to me that the idea of *halacha*, rather than being limiting in a negative way, is actually a container within which I might grow and thrive.

This awareness has helped me to understand even more deeply than I had previously, how pivotal the qualities of safety, unconditional acceptance and compassion are in Focusing. It is these attitudes that make Focusing possible. Without them, there might be technique, but the process will lack the power made possible by creating a sense of a safe container, within which, what is there might be able to come to conscious awareness.

IN CONCLUSION

I feel incredibly grateful to have both Focusing and Judaism in my life.

I am grateful for Focusing because it continues to support me in finding and clarifying a personal sense of meaning. It supports my relationship with my cultural and spiritual heritage, which at times feels confusing and challenging. Focusing helps me to feel and be more whole.

And I feel grateful for the Jewish religion because it is both incredibly beautiful and compelling. For me, being Jewish is a process characterized by growth, development, and flowering. Through the inner wisdom that Focusing makes available to me, this process has been able to develop in a way that is in integrity with my whole being.

My understanding of both Jewish spirituality and Focusing continue to evolve. I look forward to the continuing blossoming of both in my life.

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