



“Finding My Jewish Soul”  
Personal Essay on Yom Kippur 2020/5781  
By Erica Walsh

I was fifteen years old when I first entered Temple Beth Torah on a Friday night. It was a dark time in our family and Judaism was a vague concept to me. I didn't know Hebrew, had not really heard much of it said out loud, my Yiddish was even scant, had never read the Torah, did not understand the prayer “choreography” when to bow, sit, stand.

But...

My soul was brought to life. My soul understood everything. I understood that there is the Jewish religion, there is Jewish ritual, there is Jewish tradition, but at the core is the Jewish soul. It had nothing to do with my DNA, if I did not go to Hebrew school or summer camp as a child, if I knew Hebrew, or knowing the Torah. In that moment I knew my soul was Jewish. While intellectually and emotionally I was lost. My soul was found and I was home.

Since then, I found difficulty understanding Jewish prayer in practice and how to figure it out. The more I learn about Judaism, Jewish people, and Jewish History I found out...I am not unique. As soon as Jews existed there was a complicated relationship with our spirituality. The beautiful part is not only is this complicated relationship acknowledged, but it is explicitly encouraged to confront or wrestle with it. Yom Kippur has many aspects, but at its core is continuing to wrestle not only with our spirituality, but the world around us and ourselves. Striving for better in ourselves, those around us, and the world is a constant journey.

Three years ago I was asked to organize the Yom Kippur meditation/reflection room. By providing a place and materials for others in the congregation I in turn helped myself. I'm the kind of person that learns from others' life experiences and practical advice. It is not required to reinvent the wheel. Our ancestors have been working on this for a while. This year I found a few articles on different aspects I found helpful. Questions to ask or journal on, a take on G-d and the Coronavirus from a Jewish perspective, and how Jews in history kept Yom Kippur and traditions alive in hard times.

I also delved into Kabbalah recently and that is a can of worms, oy vey! But overwhelming in a good way. One of the many things I found utterly fascinating is the Kabbalist masters teach us that the soul as it were is comprised of five dimensions: 1. The surface level of the soul is *Nefesh* – sensory life. The medical definition of biological life: a beating heart, a live brain, a breathing organism. In anxiety treatment they teach “grounding exercises” to tap into the mindfulness of the senses. 2. Layer two is *Ruach* – emotional life. Emotions are not either good or bad. It helps to have a well-rounded view on the purpose and root of our emotionality. 3. *Neshomo* – intellectual life. G-d gave us *seikhel* to use it for the betterment of ourselves and others. These first three levels are immanent, conscious and localized dimensions (*kochos penimi'im*). Then comes the transcendent, non-localized powers of *keter* (the crown above the head): 4. *Chaya* – transcendent life. 5. And finally *Yechida* – oneness – the pure essence of the soul. *Yechida*, oneness, is the *pintele yid* – the inner dot, the purest point of your most intimate self. The inner child of innocence. Your core.

There is a lot there! I encourage further exploration of any of these topics and see this as a jumping off point. Spirituality is a personal relationship with G-d, you, and your soul. Listen to what brings YOUR soul to life.

Good Yuntif, have a happy, safe, healthy, sweet new year.

Erica Walsh