

Chapter 6

Faith and Spirituality in the Workplace: A Jewish Perspective

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Abstract This chapter provides a brief introduction to some central concepts in Judaism that have relevance for work. Topics covered include the holiness of work, the concept of work as a spiritual gymnasium, the importance of shifting from greed to abundance in the business world, a spiritual understanding of difficulties as the chastenings of love, and the centrality of gratitude and service. This chapter concludes with suggestions for staying on the path through three practices of *avodah*: work, service, and prayer.

It's All Good!

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the sixth day. (Genesis 1:31)

Judaism is a radically non-dualistic religion. It sees that everything emanates from, and is animated by, the same Source, which in English we call God. Judaism categorically rejects the idea that physicality is inherently in conflict with spirit or that the body and physical activities are less sacred than the soul and religious activities. This non-duality is made clear by the first prayer that Jews recite as they enter a place of worship. This prayer, commonly referred to as *Ma Tovu* (from its first two Hebrew words), comes from the Book of Numbers and begins with the words

How good are your tents, Jacob; your dwelling places, Israel.

Surprisingly, the pagan priest Bilaam, who was sent by Balak, the king of Midian, to curse the Israelites in the wilderness, first said these words. When Bilaam saw the

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Israelite tents, though, words of blessing came out instead of curses. But this is a strange blessing. At first reading, it appears to be redundant. Aren't tents and dwelling places the same thing? And isn't Israel just another name for Jacob? When examined in Hebrew, though, these words begin to reveal their meaning.

Jacob—*Yaakov* in Hebrew—comes from the root word for “heel.” He was given this name because he was born holding onto his twin brother Esau’s heel, as if trying to pull Esau back so that he would come out first. The name Jacob, then, represents our physical yearnings and the competition for resources. Israel—*Yisrael* in Hebrew—literally means “God wrestler” and is the name that was given to Jacob after his nightlong battle with a mysterious being, in which Jacob’s hip was wrenched. The name Israel, then, represents our spiritual longings and our desire to understand the purpose of our lives and the fact that these longings will wrench something in us.

Similarly, a tent—*ohel* in Hebrew—is a structure that is built to care for our corporeal needs. Like our bodies, it is a solid, but temporary, edifice and so is associated with physicality. And the word for “dwelling place”—*mishkan* in Hebrew—shares the same root as the word for God’s indwelling presence (*Shechinah*), which is embedded in our soul and so represents our nonphysical, spiritual nature.

This prayer, then, tells us that both essential aspects of our being are good—our bodies and our souls, the temporary and the eternal. It is appropriate that we say these words when first entering a prayer service so that we will bring all of ourselves to our prayers, with the knowledge that all is good.

For those who may find this reading a stretch or spin, please indulge a rabbi as I quickly explore another text. The central prayer that Jews are told to recite three times a day, commonly referred to as the *Sh'ma*, comes from Moses’s final speech in the Book of Deuteronomy to the Children of Israel as they prepare to enter Canaan:

Hear, Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one.

Like *Ma Tov*, this prayer loses much of its power in translation and must be examined in Hebrew to grasp its full meaning because each word carries great significance:

- “Hear”: We must listen to this deeply, with the intent to understand.
- “Israel”: The word Israel, as noted earlier, signifies our spiritual yearnings for connection and meaning, so this is an appeal to our highest selves.
- “The Lord,” *Adonai* in Hebrew: This is the name used to signify God’s aspect of mercy, which is manifest in our loving spiritual nature—our souls.
- “Our God,” *Eloheinu* in Hebrew: This is the name used to signify God’s attribute of justice, which is manifest in our creative physical nature—our bodies.
- “One”: Although it may seem that mercy and justice are opposites and come from different sources, everything emanates from the one God, Who created the universe in love. In the same way, both aspects of ourselves come from God and were created for a purpose, in love.

What both of these prayers tell is that all of creation is good; that, paradoxically, we are at once completely connected to, and completely distant from, God and from each other; that we are all here for a sacred purpose; and that even those things that appear to be opposite are, in actuality, manifestation of the Divine. These themes percolate through all Jewish thought and through all Jewish law. The essence of Jewish teachings is to constantly remind us that our eternal souls have agreed to incarnate in temporary bodies in order to accomplish something meaningful and transformative in the physical world. Judaism tells us that we can accomplish this task through the actions and intentions of the *mitzvot* (plural for *mitzvah*).

Although many people think of a *mitzvah* as a “good deed,” a *mitzvah* is literally a “commandment”—it is something that we must do, in accordance with the Jewish understanding of the Bible. While some are purely ritualistic (like lighting Sabbath candles or following the dietary restriction), the *mitzvot* are predominantly activities that we do in order to open our hearts to others and to improve the world. This includes giving money to the needy, telling the truth, honoring our families and communities, being faithful to our commitments, being kind to animals, treating the Earth with respect, improving our minds, sharing our knowledge, healing the sick, comforting the bereaved, asking those that we have hurt for forgiveness, forgiving others, and thanking all who have contributed to our lives. These physical acts, done in our everyday environments, are how we bring holiness to the world and how we make our lives a blessing.

From a Jewish perspective, then, holiness is not something that can only happen separate from the world in soulful prayer and meditation. Holiness is something that can—and ought to—occur at every moment of our lives, as we choose to act from our highest selves in service to others, instead of indulging our urges toward selfishness or apathy. This choice does not come from a momentary good feeling or from guilt and shame, but is a deliberate and systematic mechanism for growth and contribution; the more difficult the challenge, the greater is the impact, and the holier is the act.

And Judaism sees that the place in which the choice of holiness is most difficult, and therefore most needed, is the environment of business and work.

The Holiness of Work

It is not your responsibility to finish the work [of perfecting the world], but you are not free to desist from it either. (Talmud: Pirkei Avot)

There is an illuminating argument written in the Talmud—the Jewish record of ethical and legal discussion—that emphasizes the crucial role of business and work. In this debate, the rabbis wonder, “What is the first question that one is asked when standing in front of the heavenly court?” In other words, what’s the most important question that determines how well you lived your life? Behind the scenes, the rabbis argue; one says that the first question must be, “Did you pray every day?” Another

asserts that it is, “Did you study?” and another, “Did you give money to charity?” Finally, one suggests, “Did you conduct your business affairs honestly?”

Immediately, all agree that this is the correct first question. The rabbis recognize that, although the other activities are absolutely essential, business success is such a powerful goal that one can be easily tempted to do “whatever it takes” to succeed. The person who can resist these temptations and conduct business in an honest fashion, though, has truly lived according to the highest standard. This person will naturally, and effectively, study, pray, and give money and time to charity. Conversely, if one is dishonest in business, then prayer is insincere, study is ineffective, and charity is tainted.

How, then, can one become rich, happy, and achieve business success while staying on the route of a higher path—an ethical, moral path? There is a common misconception that to be spiritual is to spurn wealth, but in general, this is not true. Most spiritual traditions spurn ingratitude, hoarding, and cheating, with the recognition that gratitude, generosity, and honesty always lead to the good for all. This is clearly the case for Judaism. In Hebrew, the word for work is *avodah*, which also, surprisingly, means “prayer” and “service.” This teaches us that there is a direct connection between the physical world of work and the nonphysical world of the spirit. Both are seen as instruments of personal and social change which, when operated in harmony, reinforce each other. Just as we pray for the blessings of spiritual sustenance, we work for the blessings of physical sustenance. And this must always be done in the spirit of service. The connection of these words creates an understanding that work must be approached with the same reverence that we give to prayer (and, conversely, that prayer requires work, commitment, dedication, and regular practice).

In this model, success at work is a blessing that eases our lives and supports and enriches those around us. This model states that just as the world, if treated with respect, is filled with endless abundance, when work is approached with reverence, there is more than enough for all. Spiritual business is based on the premise that, contrary to the common paradigm, one person’s gain need not be another’s loss— that success and abundance for one do not create scarcity for others.

A story is told of Safra, a poor, pious shopkeeper, who was trying to sell his donkey. One morning, as Safra was praying, a man in desperate need of a donkey approached him and offered him a price for the donkey. Because Safra was in the middle of his prayers, he could not answer. When the man saw that Safra did not respond, he assumed that his price was too low and doubled it. Again Safra did not answer, so the man tripled his price. Finally, Safra finished his prayer and said to the man, “Your first offer was the amount that I had hoped for, and I will not use the fact that I was praying as an opportunity to get more than my asking price. I accept your first offer.”

Safra received the price he needed, and the man was not exploited, a successful, ethical transaction. I like to imagine that the story continues. In my imagining, the buyer, who is clearly wealthy, recognizes in Safra a man who deals fairly. He continues to shop with Safra in the future and even directs his business associates to shop there. Soon, Safra’s shop is teeming with business, the man who bought the donkey prospers, and the two men develop a friendship of trust and respect.

Safra's example sets a standard that is difficult to achieve. How many of us would have the determination to so readily turn down such an unexpected, though unearned, windfall? But this is exactly the opportunity for spiritual growth that business presents to us because when business is approached with the same spirit as prayer—with intention, honesty, and humility—a deeper and lasting success will naturally emerge.

The Bible itself is explicit in its insistence that we act ethically and fairly in business and contains many instructions for conducting commerce in ways that restrain exploitation and foster prosperity for all. These were radical ideas three millennia ago, at a time when the few rich and powerful elite could take whatever they liked and when the vast majority of those who were poor had no rights or protection. The following are several examples from the Bible and Talmud:

On fair measurement and honest advertisement:

You shall not falsify measures of length, weight, or capacity. You shall have an honest balance, an honest weight, an honest ephah, and an honest hin. (Lev. 19:35–36)

On open disclosure:

If you sell something to your neighbor or buy something from your neighbor's hand, you shall not wrong one another. (Lev. 25:14)

On providing for the poor:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the corner of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger. (Lev. 19:9)

On prompt payment for services:

You shall not oppress your neighbor, nor rob him; the wages of a hired servant shall not abide with you all night until the morning. (Lev. 19:13)

On compassion and fair lending:

If there be among you a needy man from among your brethren within any of your gates in your land which the Eternal your God gives you, you shall not harden your heart nor close your hand from your needy brother. You must definitely open your hand to him, and must definitely lend him on pledge sufficient for the needs in which he is lacking. (Deut. 15:7,8)

On protecting ownership:

You shall not remove your neighbor's landmark, which they of old time have set, in your inheritance which you shall inherit, in the land that the Lord your God gives you to possess it. (Deut. 19:14)

On the holiness of business:

Whoever wishes to live in sanctity, may he live according to the true laws of commerce and finance. (Talmud, Bava Kama 30a)

On the primacy of charity:

Charity and acts of kindness are the equivalent of all the commandments of the Torah. (Jerusalem Talmud, Pe'ah 1)

The unity of body and spirit and the call for conscious actions that improve the world are the core teachings of Judaism, and, as the Bible demonstrates, long ago, it was recognized that the world of work is where “the rubber hits the road.”

The Spiritual Gymnasium

That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn. (Talmud: Shabbat 31a)

Much has been written and said about the recent Occupy Wall Street movement. Whatever your perspective, however, we can all agree that greed and corruption in the business sector need to be identified and fixed, and I trust in the natural balance of our great country and the power of human goodness to enact the required changes. But as much as we can attempt to legislate good behavior in business and enforce consequences, lasting and meaningful change can only come from within the individual. We will see greed and corruption finally disappear only when those involved begin to see their work in a radically different way.

Instead of viewing work as only a means to gain wealth, prestige, and power, we need to see that work is something much more profound than this. Thinking of work in spiritual terms, though, often creates negative or suspicious responses. Many businesses are wary of such terms as “faith” and “spirituality,” fearing that use of these terms might label them as “religious organizations, resulting in misunderstanding among their employees and customers.” These concerns are reasonable. I often hear such comments as “I don’t want any bible-thumping proselyting in my office,” “the next thing you know they’ll be forcing me to go to yoga class in the boardroom at noon,” or “I barely have time to do what needs to be done, and now they’ve added another program.” Clearly, religion, whether traditional or New Age, can be incompatible with an open, diverse workplace and can cause discomfort for many. At its core, though, spirituality is not about religion or any overt practice of any kind, because spirituality is not something that is added or mandated but is an essential orientation toward life and toward what it means to be a human being.

As discussed earlier, we are essentially two-part beings—body and soul, physical and nonphysical—and these two aspects are perceived internally as senses of self, which we can label as “ego-self” and “spirit-self.”

The ego-self is designed to ensure our physical survival by devising strategies to protect us from dangers. It constantly scans the environment to identify perceived threats, which it sees as coming primarily from the possibility of rejection and abandonment. The ego-self, therefore, sees others as either threats or tools and may need to impress, dominate, or control, in order to avoid being rejected or abandoned, which it fears will lead to death.

It is crucial that we know, as the *Ma Tov* and *Sh’ma* remind us, that there is nothing wrong with the ego-self. As a matter of fact, Jewish teachings tell us that the ego-self is inherently “very good.” It is a necessary structure put in place so that we

can survive in physical reality. It is also the source of our drive to construct a home, engage in sex, and build a career. And without it, our soul, which knows nothing of physicality, would be oblivious to risk (and would desire to connect in love to a charging lion or oncoming freight train). But we must know that the ego-self is not who we really are in our essence and that we cannot make any meaningful connections from it.

Our spirit-self, however, is in constant connection with Universal Spirit/Consciousness/Ground of Being/Creation/God. It sees others as fellow souls with equally needed purposes and has compassion for the suffering that comes from the ego-self's attachment to things. It contains the very purpose that we incarnated. Simply stated, then, something is "spiritual" when it connects to the spirit-self. We know when we have made this connection because those are the moments when we feel most energetic, most free, most generous, creative, and flowing. In those moments, we "lose ourselves" and feel connected to something that exists simultaneously inside and outside ourselves.

My acting definition of "spirituality" then is

The experience of a transformative connection.

In other words, spirituality is experienced—it is not a concept or construct. It transforms us—it changes how we act, think, and feel in all environments. And it is a connection—a profound contact with something and someone outside of ourselves.

All three of these components are needed in order for spirituality to occur, but the most essential is that it is a connection—between a person and the Divine or between one person and another. We touch spiritual reality when we encounter another person, life, and the world, as directly as possible, and spiritual practices are designed to facilitate these connections. This is the essence of spirituality, which informs every aspect of our lives. It is the awareness that we are more than our momentary desires and our unconscious response to fear and that all life is part of an interlinked system for which we are responsible. With this awareness, we become happier, more effective, more loving, and more fully realized human beings. And we grow spiritually by choosing this awareness in the face of internal, egoic pressure not to.

Spiritual practices help us to loosen the grip of the ego-self and to connect to the spirit-self, so that we can live purposefully, be of service, and participate in love. The central biblical injunction to "love your neighbor as yourself" is usually interpreted to mean that we must learn to love others, with the assumption that we already love ourselves. Literally translated, though, this line actually reads

And you will [in the future tense] love your fellow in the same way that you love yourself.

In other words, you will love another to the extent and in the way that you love yourself. If you are harsh with yourself, you will be harsh with others. If you cannot forgive yourself, you cannot forgive others. In this way, this line is not a commandment but is a statement of fact. The truth is that most of us do not love ourselves very well, and consequently, we hurt others. This is why spiritual practices so often seek to

teach us how to love ourselves, so that we can better love others. Real love naturally flows in two directions and begins with true self-love.

Rarely, though, do we experience this two-way flow of love at work. To even suggest that love is an appropriate emotion at work evokes giggles and head shaking. This is because we have fallen into the false belief that work and spirituality are incompatible, that one feeds the spirit and one feeds the body, and that one is about feelings and the other about facts. This dualistic thinking is a tragic delusion and the cause of so much unhappiness and corruption in business.

Work, in fact, presents the most powerful environment for spiritual development because it is the environment that most appeals to the fears and goals of our egos; the fear of lack, competition, obsolescence, loss, and failure; and the goals of fame, power, control, domination, and hoarding. Like a gym, in which you grow physically by consciously pushing your body beyond that which it could do the day before, work presents situations in which you can consciously choose to loosen the pull of ego and push your spirits beyond its previous boundaries. This is why I call work a “spiritual gymnasium.”

As we have all dramatically witnessed, work is also the environment that most needs the correction of spirit so that business can be conducted with honesty, integrity, and respect for workers and the environment. I often tell business leaders that they have more spiritual power than any minister or rabbi because their actions have more direct effect on more people’s happiness, security, and sense of well-being.

For most of us, though, the pressures of work have created response patterns that are deeply entrenched, and we often act immediately without stopping to consider the source of our reaction. How, then, can we identify, stop, and change this course? Are we destined to be honest but unsuccessful and spiritual but not rich?

From Greed to Abundance

Who is rich?

Rabbi Yose used to say: One who has a bathroom near his dining room

Rabbi Meir used to say: He who is satisfied with his lot. (Talmud: Pirkei Avot)

A recent issue of the *New Yorker* featured a cartoon that showed a depressed man lying on a psychiatrist’s sofa, staring aimlessly at the ceiling. The psychiatrist looks at him and says

Just because you work at a bad bank doesn’t mean that you are a bad banker.

We have learned the devastating results of an unrestricted selfish focus on short-term monetary gain: of bad bankers doing bad things. And we are seeing the public’s anger at the people who pursued vast quantities of wealth, seemingly without concern for consequences to others. As the cartoon suggests, then, does the pursuit of wealth necessarily label us as “bad”? This may lead us to believe that we have only two options: to relentlessly pursue wealth and risk following the path of those whose irresponsibility led us to this point (and become a “bad banker”) or reject

wealth as inherently corrupting and focus instead on the development of morality and spirit?

The best of philosophical and spiritual teachings tell us that there is a higher resolution, which leads to an understanding that allows us to experience wealth while maintaining a path of growth and concern for others. These teachings urge us to move from a mode of greed to one of abundance.

To many, these terms may sound similar because both are associated with wealth and prosperity. It's not surprising, therefore, how much confusion—in my experience—there seems to be around this distinction between greed and abundance. The differences, however, are dramatic and clear and come from one's core beliefs in the fundamental workings of the cosmos. We can distinguish between greed and abundance as follows.

Greed:

- Begins with belief that there are *limited resources*, leading to a feeling of *lack*—that there is not enough for everyone.
- Flows from the *fear* of not being good enough as one is, and with what one already has, leading to *hoarding* and accumulation for its own sake, with the hope that “someday I will have enough to feel secure.”
- Builds the desire to *only receive*, leading to *selfishness* and sole reliance on one's own limited energy source, producing fatigue.
- Sees wealth as an *end in itself*, stemming from the sense that life is basically meaningless, leading to *depression*.

The “poster child” for greed in the Bible is Pharaoh, who enslaves the Jews out of fear that they will someday challenge his authority, orders the slaughter of firstborn Hebrew babies in order to secure his position in the future, and, even in the face of extraordinary miracles that tell him explicitly that he is in the wrong, refuses to ever consider changing his position. The Pharaoh is ego personified. He views everything in terms of gain or loss, power or submission, and his will or Divine will. The total take-over by his ego eventually leads to the inevitable loss of the greatest freedom that we have as human beings and that marks us as being created “in the image of God,” the gift of free will.

In contrast to greed, which is a manifestation of the ego, is abundance, which has the following characteristics. Abundance:

- Begins with recognition of the *incredible richness and diversity* of creation, leading to knowledge that, if treated with respect, there is *more than enough* for everyone.
- Flows from a *love* that comes through the recognition that wonderful gifts are given to us “unmerited,” leading to *gratitude*.
- Builds the desire to *participate*, leading to the *urge to give*, and increased energy from a limitless Source.
- Sees wealth as a *tool and a gift*, stemming from the knowledge that life is inherently purposeful and gracious, leading to *happiness*.

Abundance is not an attainment or a goal, but is the consequence of living in gratitude. And Judaism sees gratitude as the foundation of faith and the highest state of being. The first prayer that an observant Jew says upon awakening is, “I am grateful to you, Living God, for returning my soul to my body.” This prayer sets the tone for the day, as we begin in gratitude. A wonderful Jewish teaching encourages us to say one hundred “thank you’s” every day. While at first, this seems like a daunting task, one can easily fill this requirement before breakfast: “Thank you for my bed, thank you for my home, thank you for my wife/husband/partner, thank you for my health, my eyesight, my hearing, my sense of taste and touch, my job, my food, the weather (whatever it may be), my clothing, my family, this Earth, my life...”

In contrast to Pharaoh, the model of abundance is Moses, who is described in the Bible as “the most humble man on the face of the Earth.” This is not an “aw shucks” kind of humility but one that comes from a deep connection to, and love of, the Divine and the recognition that everything in creation has a purpose—for which each of us has a role, none “better” than the other.

When we look at the incalculable vastness of space and the unbelievable diversity of species and resources on our planet, we see that the essential urge of creation is endless abundance. And this abundance has been provided to us as a blessing of our birth. The first blessing given by God to humans is to “be fruitful and multiply”—to be abundant. We do not need to be “worthy” of it, because abundance already exists, just waiting for us to recognize it.

The ancient Jewish book of wisdom, *Pirkei Avot*—“Saying of the Ancestors”—asks, “Who is rich?” and answers, “One who is happy with his lot.” This does not mean that we should be complacent, eschew ambition, and not strive to increase our wealth but tells us that abundance cannot flow when we are not grateful for the gifts that we already have. Like a child who sits amid a pile of presents and complains that he does not have enough, ingratitude shuts out abundance because a good, loving parent will not give any more gifts to one who is ungrateful for what he has.

There has been much written recently about how to tune in to and attract abundance. Unfortunately, much of this has focused merely on receiving desired material gains, as if there is a magic secret for manipulating the universe into giving you the stuff that you want. True abundance, though, is a two-way flow of giving and receiving—not only material wealth but also attention, concern, and love. The greatest abundance flows when we too desire to be a blessing to others, paradoxically creating more abundance for us.

The biblical commandment “You shall not covet,” which is the last of the ten Commandments, is often pointed to as an imperative to not feel greedy. The list of commandments, however, can be read as a natural flow of consequences because “you shall” can be better translated as “you will.” Read this way: The first commandment assures us that there is order, purpose, and Divine grace in the universe that desire our prosperity. When we start with this knowledge, we will then not be tempted toward breaking the second item on the list—“You will not worship idols.” Idolatry does not mean bowing to statues but occurs when we place something in a higher position than the Divine—the best that is within us—when we become

attached to physical objects or emotions in order to feel better about ourselves and to feed our egos.

With an acceptance of a higher purpose and order, we will naturally respect and care for others and avoid harming them. Finally, we will not feel jealous of other people's possessions, because we will feel grateful for what we have, knowing that possessions and prosperity are vehicles for growth. Wealth, then, is a blessing that facilitates our purpose and supports others. From this perspective, greed is a distortion of the intuition of infinite abundance, when we project that intuition onto physical objects and our own fleeting needs.

This is the sacred opportunity that work offer to us.

Chastenings of Love

Every blade of grass has its angel that bends over it and whispers "grow, grow."
Talmud

Spiritual teachings about business may be interesting, and even enlightening, but in difficult times, these often fall to the side as we hunker down in fear and uncertainty, returning to the familiar old patterns. We do this out of fear, and in a fearful state of mind, it is very difficult to find wisdom because when such a strong, raw, negative emotion arises, our ego-self takes over, dampening our deeper knowing that comes from spirit and unseating our sense of confidence and connection.

Fear is a very powerful emotion and is embedded in our very makeup as physical beings in order to warn us of danger. There are times when fear is reasonable and motivates us toward action or self-protection. You'd be in great danger if you felt no fear at all, and without reasonable fear, we can act recklessly. (Perhaps, this is one of the roots of our recent crisis—individuals acting from the arrogant, irresponsible belief that their reckless actions would have no consequences and with no fear of hurting others or themselves.) We experience problems, though, when, out of a sense of insecurity or powerlessness, we feel fearful of things that are either not inherently dangerous or that we cannot do anything about. Then fear becomes a downward spiral, leading to panic and paralysis. So, what to do?

There are very useful spiritual teachings about how to respond to this type of fear. Most of these teachings recommend a threefold approach that addresses all aspects of our being: body, mind, and spirit—as expressed in action, thought, and faith. The Talmud incorporates this approach when it advises

If a man sees that painful suffering visits him, let him examine his conduct [body/action]...
If he examines and finds nothing, let him attribute it to the neglect of study [mind/thought]...
If he did attribute thus, and still did not find anything, let him be sure that these are the chastening of love [spirit/faith]...

Let's take a quick look at this approach.

Action: We are physical beings and are built for action. In fearful situations, when there is no clear action that can be taken, though, we may be tempted to hide, freeze,

or simply give up, waiting for the perceived danger to pass. The problem with this reaction is that, like the proverbial deer and headlights, if we stand still, we can be run over by oncoming events. In fearful times, we need to keep moving and stay focused on our goals and obligations. We may even need to redouble our efforts because there is both more resistance, and more opportunity, in fearful times. Lao Tzu's famous aphorism that "a journey of a thousand miles [a long, difficult endeavor] begins with a single step" speaks directly to this point. The often missed implication, however, is that the journey requires millions of consistent, determined steps after this initial one. There is no promise that the journey will be easy and smooth, but there is a requirement to keep moving if we hope to reach the destination.

Thought: Fear is a product of the mind in reaction to a perceived threat. All spiritual traditions teach that we can have absolute control over our mind and its reactions and that we can choose to react either with pessimism and fear or with optimism and courage. For many (yours truly included), this can be very difficult to put into practice because after many years of the same patterned responses, we can believe that our reactions are simply natural responses to events. We know, though, that individuals react very differently to the same stimuli because how we view ourselves, the world, and the people in it dramatically colors our reactions to events. The teaching on how to overcome this is relatively simple: Use your mind to gather information, and evaluate the situation as objectively as possible. This will allow you to react to the facts, instead of your perceptions or inclinations. Also, become conscious of your internal mental dialogue, and challenge fear-based assumptions against reality. If dramatic action is needed, you will then take it based on information, not reactionary fear.

Faith: When we face difficult times, the Talmudic teaching encourages us to first examine our actions and then our thoughts. This is a very practical approach that allows us to be effective in the physical realm. If control of body and mind is not enough to address the fear, this teaching directs us of the conscious support of faith. Although we may not understand why fearful events are unfolding, faith in the proposition that we are watched, guided, and protected and that our lives are purposeful and meaningful gives us confidence and peace. "The chastening of love" are the stresses in our lives that, presented to us in grace, lead to growth. Like a parent who insists that her child turn off the TV (or log off of Facebook) and put down the Snickers bar in order to exercise, study, get restful sleep, and eat good food, we are often restrained and challenged, out of a love that desires our healthy development. We always emerge stronger after difficult times, and, as history has taught us, so, ultimately, does the world.

Once fear is recognized and addressed, we can then turn, in the spirit of abundance, to meaningful growth. By noting that even every blade of grass is imbued with the urge to grow, the Talmudic saying teaches that, like light, gravity, and electromagnetism, growth is a ubiquitous force of nature.

Growth, not fear, is our natural state. Everything yearns to grow; it is an inherent drive embedded in all creation. All you need to do is see a seed push through the earth or watch a child's relentless urge to walk, to understand that everything is

pulled forward by the call to growth, like a plant leaning toward the sun. As the Talmud writer implies, the persistent whisper “Grow! Grow!!” calls to all creation. Like grass, we grow physicality because physical growth is naturally built into the cycle of all life. Unlike grass, though, we also have the capacity to grow in another, more crucial way. We can grow in consciousness—in our ability to connect to others, to live meaningfully, and to have a positive impact. This force of conscious growth is what drives us forward to create a personal and communal future that is better than what we had yesterday and what we have today.

Conscious growth, then, begins when we chose to listen to its call and invite it in. We invite growth in when we courageously put aside our fear and connect with others as deeply as we can. There are, essentially, two different ways that we can relate to others: as objects or as fellow beings who share needs and desires. The great teacher of these types of relationship is the theologian Martin Buber. In 1923, Buber wrote his famous essay *Ich und Du* usually translated as *I and Thou*. In this essay, Buber labeled the first type of relationship as “I-It” and the second as “I-Thou.”

I-It relationships, Buber taught, are the type that we have with inanimate objects but also can be how we relate to others—as objects of our needs. One who cares about the opinions of others out of fear of abandonment, for example, is relating in this way, relying on other people in order to feel better about himself and to confirm or reject his worth. Although it seems that I-It is a two-way relationship, it is essentially a monologue, since the only feelings that objects have are the ones that we project on them.

The Bible displays this dynamic in the famous story of the spies: Moses sends 12 spies into Canaan in order to bring back a report of the inhabitants. Ten of the spies return in panic, saying that the land is filled with giants. “We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them,” they say. Of course, there were no giants, but the spy’s own self-perception as small and weak led to them believe that others saw them the same way, sapping their confidence and undermining the needs of the community. Because of this negative self-image, the entire generation was deemed unworthy to enter the Promised Land, and the Israelites had to wait for the next generation, born in the wilderness, to enter the next stage of human development—freedom.

In I-Thou relationships, we engage others as fellow human beings who have the same needs and desires as we do. In this way, instead of looking to others for self-validation, we can create healthy relationships of support and nurturing where we care about what the others think because we value their opinion and know that their input is for our benefit. This is the only relationship that is truly a dialogue. Buber asserts that I-Thou relationships happen when people meet without agenda, without pretense, in honesty and authenticity.

Buber notes that such encounters are powerfully transformational because in those moments of deep connection, we experience the Divine in the other. That spark of recognition is God’s presence in the world. At that moment, we are quite literally looking at the face of God in the full presence of another human being. Buber writes (in a style that is poetic and mystical)

The basic expression, I-You can be spoken only with one's whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, and can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become me; becoming me, I say You. All actual life is [this type of] encounter.

In other words, the only way that I can truly know myself is in relationship to another. I am incomplete alone because I need the dynamic of a deep relationship with another to become myself as an image of the Divine. In this way, I do care deeply about the regard that others have for me, not in order to control or be controlled but so that I can rise to my true self.

This type of connection is especially difficult in business, since most of our relationships are transactional, and we naturally tend to fall into an I-It approach. But an I-Thou connection will create a stronger bond of loyalty and help us to better understand the deeper needs of our coworkers, clients, and peers; to feel their concerns as our own; and to grow together. It requires the courage and existential confidence to drop our shields of defense and let another person see us fully, so that we can see them fully.

Work presents the profound challenge to see others as sacred "Thous." When we choose to make this shift, everything changes. Instead of fighting for position, we support each other's growth. Instead of competing for attention, we seek understanding. Instead of asking "What's in it for me?" we ask "Why were we brought together, and what can I contribute?"

Enter in Gratitude and Service

Go forth, from your land, and from your birth, and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. (Gen. 12:1)

According to the Bible, one lone man heard a call and immediately packed his belongings; gathered his wife, his nephew, and his followers; and headed for Canaan—Israel. There, he established a new faith that proclaimed that there is one God, who created us, sustains us, and loves us. Of course, the world knows this lone man as Abraham, father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For Jews, Abraham's journey is the model for answering the spiritual call. As the story of his life demonstrates, it is not always an easy journey and is filled with unexpected challenges, setbacks, and vast promise. Abraham did not know exactly where he was going, but he said "yes" to the journey and was sustained by the faith that God will show him the way.

We too are called to say "yes" to the spiritual call. Interestingly, Judaism teaches that we actually must say two "yeses." This is the path of all the Bible prophets. The first "yes" comes with the initial encounter—the revelation—when one first realizes the existence of spiritual reality. Here, one is called to say "yes" to this reality and to commit to following its path. This typically includes a commitment to a spiritual

practice and to integrating spiritual teachings into one's life. Often, however, the ego will take a ride on this "yes," claiming that it is somehow special and was personally selected by the universe because of some kind of merit. The ego loves to look for spiritual powers and mystical experiences as badges of superiority. This is a pathetic and tragic dead end.

But, if you have the strength and courage to stay committed to the reality that was revealed to you at the first "yes," you will, at some time later, be faced with saying the second "yes." The second "yes" is to surrendering the images of a "spiritual life" that you created and to accepting this painful and liberating realization: It's not about you! It's not about you in the way that you defined yourself. This second "yes" is a paradoxical surrender of self because you say "yes" to giving up your identification with your lower ego-self, in order to allow your higher spirit-self to emerge. Then you begin to see that there is a dimension of yourself of which you had little idea and that you are more than you could have imagined. This "yes" is not about giving up ambition or passion, quite the contrary. It is about living in alignment with your true passion and ambition, which both fulfill and transcend yourself.

These two "yeses" must come in steps, like moving from crawling, to walking, to running. And frankly, if we knew of the second "yes," very few of us would ever say the first "yes." This second "yes" is one of the most difficult changes in our lives and is the one that most people (myself very much included) have tremendous resistance to answering fully. Both of these "yeses," though, are needed. This is why when God called out to Abraham and Moses; their names were repeated: "Abraham, Abraham; Moses, Moses." To this call, they simply responded, "Here I am!" in service.

The call that went out to Abraham to leave his limitations behind and to follow the uncertain but ultimately fulfilling path of spirit goes out to each of us, and there are those today who have answered fully. Such extraordinary people are instantly recognizable: They are fully present to others, naturally look for ways to be of service, feel purposeful, live in gratitude, listen deeply, do not indulge fear, and flow easily with life's inevitable changes. We may think that such elevated people are only to be found in rarified spiritual environments or on a national stage, but such people may be found anywhere—parents, businessmen, political leaders, teachers, and religious figures. I have had the great privilege to know a few, and, surprisingly, these were business people, not clergy. And these were very successful, very competent, and very worldly people.

Perhaps, though, it is not so surprising. After all, it is much easier to say these "yeses" when one is a religious or spiritual teacher because this is expected. But to get this far on the spiritual path in the hard-nosed world of business and success is a truly inspiring thing to see. And the discipline and courage that are required to attain this sacred level serve them very well in business, leading to fearless innovation, respectful collaboration, resiliency to stress, a focus on the things that really matter, and the commitment to service in truth.

Staying on the Path

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, and you will be a blessing. (Gen. 12:2)

As we travel through life, we inevitably come to forks in the road when we cannot see where the road leads, moments when we are faced with two choices, and we must decide which is the right direction to follow. In these moments, the pull of fear can lead us to destructive choices, and this is when it is most crucial that we renew the commitment to the spiritual path. This can be difficult, but Judaism, along with many other spiritual traditions, has a profound insight into the way to stay pointed in the right direction.

The Hebrew word for “direction” (*keevun*) has the same root as the word for “intention” (*kavannah*). The connection of these words comes from the recognition that the direction we choose is a result of our intentions—that the reasons we use for making our choices determine the outcome. This teaches us that we must become conscious of our intentions before we act, and the more aware we are of this dynamic, the more able we will be to affect the results. Judaism, of course, is not alone in this realization. One of the Buddha’s core teachings is that right intention leads to right, effective action. When we face a choice with primarily egoic intentions—to feel safe and special—we will move in the direction of stagnation and isolation. When we face a choice with primarily spiritual intentions—to connect deeply with another and with the Divine—we will move in the direction of growth and joy.

There are three spiritual intentions that I have found to be very effective in the work environment. These align with the three definitions of the Hebrew word *avodah*: work, service, and prayer. Each appears to be simple and can easily be misunderstood, but when embraced, they are very powerful and continually reveal new depths:

1. *Work: Intend to produce quality*

This is not about meeting some external measure of acceptability but is the act of honoring work itself. Whether developing a multimillion-dollar business strategy, leading a meeting, writing an e-mail, or sweeping a floor, doing good work is about facing the task at hand in love and gratitude.

2. *Service: Intend to contribute*

This does not mean that we should be martyrs, putting aside our own interest for the sake of others, but it does mean that every choice presents the opportunity to be of service. This is an especially powerful intention at the moments when we feel least inclined to do so.

3. *Prayer: Intend to stay present*

When we feel stressed, we tend to worry about the future or obsess about the past and consequently lose contact with what is actually happening at the moment. In this loss of contact, we withdraw from others and miss the possibilities that are presented to us. When this happens, we can simply stop and move our focus back to the present, which is the only reality.

We tend to resist these three practices because we have other predetermined agendas and fear that by dropping these agendas, we will not know what to do or will lose our power. But, by entering with the intention to do good work, be of service, and stay present, we will find that directions for action will reveal themselves naturally and will most likely be something that is more creative and more effective than the agenda that we dropped. We will not need to choose between our will and the Divine will, because we will see that these merge and are in alignment. Then, the realization that work, prayer, and service are really the same thing will be abundantly clear.

Whenever I am called to lead a prayer service, conduct a wedding or funeral, or speak in public, I say this short prayer:

May I be a conduit for wisdom, and my words and actions be for the benefit of those who are here.

I have found that whenever I say this prayer with conviction and sincerity, somehow, the right words and actions come to me. In these moments, I am far more effective and more fulfilled than when I seek personal recognition and gain. Imagine saying this prayer before walking into a business meeting, into our office, and at our job at every moment! While this may sound like a rose-colored vision, I have started to do this and have found that when I do the entire energy in the room changes, suddenly, people relax and open up, as do I.

To compartmentalize work and spirit is to dishonor and misunderstand both. Judaism has taken a strong stance against such dualism and clearly proclaims that work is, in fact, a holy endeavor and the place where we are most deeply called to our highest selves. This is more than imposed ethics and values, although both, of course, are critically needed. The choice to see work as a holy activity is a profound shift in consciousness that awakens us to who we really are and why we are here, and from this consciousness, impeccable ethics and values naturally flow. Bringing our full selves to work in this way is a lifelong commitment and is not easy. We will make missteps along the way, but with every choice of spirit over ego—especially when we are afraid or insecure—we grow stronger.

As a species, we seem to be at a major decision point that will determine whether our future is heaven on Earth or a living hell. This future is completely in our hands to create and begins with a commitment to honoring spirit. And the place where this commitment will make the deepest impact for ourselves, for others, and for our increasingly fragile planet is at our work. This is something that each of us must do and is how we truly live our lives as a blessing, which is our heart's deepest desire.

I wish you the blessings of health, joy, and prosperity in all you do.