

Listening for the Spirit of God in Our Pursuit of Justice
Jay Phillips Center Programs
April 28, 2014

John Merkle:

Well, each of you is most welcome tonight. My name is John Merkle, and I have the pleasure of directing the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning. And I see a number of you who have been associated with our Center, not only those employed by it as student employees. In fact, I'd like to recognize the two Jay Phillips Center student leadership coordinators for this year. Jing Shi Han who is graduating where are you, Jing Shi? You were just here helping with chairs...there she is. Okay. And Hannah Hauch's right there. Hannah will be returning after study abroad in Chile next year. But any of you who would like to become involved with our Center, and we do a lot of very interesting things, not only host public lectures and programs. Like, we're gonna have, Thursday night, an interfaith concert where we have outstanding Judeo-Spanish musicians teaming up with remarkable South Indian Hindu musicians. That's going to be 6:30 in the Sacred Heart Chapel over at St. Benedict's on Thursday night. A one-hour concert. It's not to be missed. But we do that type of thing. We went recently to a Sikh gurdwara. We've been to Buddhist temples and synagogues and mosques. And these student leaders have coordinated so much of that, as well as wonderful interfaith dinner programs. Like, we just did one on Ethiopian Orthodoxy and interfaith work in Ethiopia, and they had a dinner connected with that. So look for that next year. We're coming down to the end of the semester now, and this is our last public lecture. And then, as I said, we have this musical program on Thursday evening, but we'd love to have as many of you as possible involved. I also just want to say thanks, publicly, at this last public lecture to Hans Christoffersen. Where's my associate Hans? Are you out here? He was helping with the chairs, too. And then David Wirtschafter, our rabbi in residence. And thanks so much for all the great work that you've done.

So, you've gathered for a very important topic tonight on spirituality and justice. The title being, "Listening for the Spirit of God in Our Pursuit of Justice," subtitle "Spirituality and Justice in the Jewish Tradition. And we have a very remarkable rabbi here from Los Angeles to talk to you about this topic. And it's a great pleasure for me to welcome tonight rabbi Rachel Timoner. She is the associate rabbi at Leo Baeck temple out in Los Angeles, and we were talking briefly about the name of that synagogue, Leo Baeck. Leo Baeck was one of the great scholars and social activists and humanitarians of the 20th century, and that temple is named after him. And I can tell from getting to know Timoner that Leo Baeck would be very proud of the work she's doing as she focuses in on social justice and spiritual life in her work at that synagogue. And we'll be addressing that topic tonight. She's the author of a remarkable book, *Breath of Life*. I see that the bookstore has it over here on sale. *Breath of Life: The Spirit of God in Judaism*. My class read it, Rabbi Wirtschafter's class—now I see you over there, David, and I see Hans right here—that class read it. But I highly recommend it to many, and a lot of you here and among the faculty have read it. But I highly recommend that particular book. Rabbi Timoner grew up in Miami, and now she's working in Southern California. And here she is on one of our lovely spring days. But she did have a little bit of time in a non-subtropical climate when she was at Yale University, I just found out today, from age 16 to age 20. So, she was more precocious than I. So she got her BA at Yale, and then went on eventually, after a number of years working for nonprofit organizations doing justice work, social justice work for those organizations, she went on to Hebrew Union College, the Jewish Institute of

Religion in Los Angeles, where she received numerous awards. I'll just mention two: one for excellence in Biblical Studies—and you can really see that come through in the book that she wrote—and another award for scholarly writing. She also, when she was working in the nonprofit sector out in San Francisco, she was named by the San Francisco Examiner and KQED, that's a PBS station, as an unsung hero for working to break the isolation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered youth and to empower these young people to feel good about who they are. She also received a Next-Generation Leadership—she was a Next Generation Leadership Fellow with the Rockefeller Institute, or the Rockefeller Foundation, I should say, and received the Do Something National BRICK Award for community leadership. And I know you want to welcome her, now, as much as I do. So please welcome Rachel Timoner. ***audience applause***

Rachel Timoner:

Hi everybody.

Many Voices from the Audience:

Hi.

Rachel Timoner:

It's wonderful to be here, and it's wonderful to have a problem of not enough chairs. Thank you all for coming tonight. Can you hear me, in the back? Right. So I just want to begin by thanking you, John, for being so kind and thoughtful and welcoming from our very first conversation all the way through this visit. We did have—our first conversation was, when might I come, and John was suggesting February. And you know, you heard that I'm from Miami and Los Angeles, and I happen to be pretty busy in February, but I also was thinking, late April sounds better... ***audience laughter*** And I hear that this was a particularly grueling winter... and seventy-three days below zero? Is that right? So, I hope this is the beginning of the thaw for you all, and you get some warm time coming soon. And I'm glad for your flexibility that I could be here now.

I was taught as a child that we don't speak about religion or politics in polite company. So tonight we're doing a two-for-one special, and I hope that you won't find me impolite as we look at the soul of religion, the heart of religion, which I think of as the life of the Spirit. And we look at the center of politics which, at least, ought to be the pursuit of social justice. Before I start sharing my own thoughts with you about how these two ideas, concepts, ways of life interact with one another, I want to ground what could be a very abstract conversation into the real stuff of your lives. So I'm going to ask you to do a little thinking with me, a little reflection with me. We're going to take a little bit of quiet time. I'm going to ask you some questions, and I want you to think about experiences you've had in your own life. And then you're going to have a chance to share with someone next to you, what you thought about. So, the first thing I want to ask you, is to think about a time in your life when you felt pulled to an act of justice or compassion. It could have been something small. It could have been speaking out for someone in need, or volunteering your time. Or something big, like taking on City Hall. The person in need could have been a neighbor, or a friend, or another kid on the playground. Or it could have been the group on the other side of town or the other side of the world. Sometime when you saw something that you knew was not right. Something that you knew had to change, and you felt that you were personally called to act. See if you can identify such a moment in your life. And we'll take some quiet time now to do that.

Did you find something? Yeah? Okay, so next, I want to ask you, when you think about that experience, I want you to back up from whatever the action was that you took. And I don't want you to judge whether it was, you know, not a big deal, "What I did was so small—" It doesn't matter. Whatever it was. I want you to back up from the action, and I want you to think about the first flicker of awareness that you had that there was something wrong. The first moment that you felt, somebody's got to do something here. I gotta do something here. And what was that like? What were the thoughts, what were the feelings? Did you feel like it was something that you were generating yourself? Did it feel like it was something that was coming through you? Was there a dialogue between the thoughts and your feelings? Can you remember what it felt like in your body? Take a few quiet moments to think about that now.

So, in a moment, I'm going to ask you to turn to someone next to you. I want you to be in pairs, so even if you have to move a little bit, find somebody that you can talk to. But first, let me tell you what I want you to do. It's not going to be long. Each of you will have just one a minute. In that minute, first introduce yourself. That's always nice. And then, take one sentence to say what it was that you did. Whatever the action was that you took. Helping somebody up who fell down, speaking out, whatever it was. That's not the important part for our conversation. I want you to take the rest of the minute to say whatever you were just able to identify about what you felt or what you thought. If it was a complex set of thoughts and emotions, whatever it was. If it was simple, complex, what went through your mind, what went through your body, what was it like to feel like you had to do something? Okay? Did people understand what I'm asking of you? Great. You'll have one minute, and then I want you to switch. So, one person talks for a minute, I'll tell you when the minute's up, then the other person talks for a minute. Okay? Are we good? Go for it.

audience chatter

Rachel Timoner:

Okay, stop! Okay, stop! Thank you. Now, the second person, go.

audience chatter

Rachel Timoner:

Okay, stop! So, I would love to hear— Thank you all, first of all, for participating in that. I would love to hear from a few people, the feelings or thoughts that you had. Just in a few words. What you were just sharing with each other. What did you feel, what did you think, what was it like to feel compelled to act? What was that experience?

Audience Member:

Hi there. ***clears throat*** Well, for John and I, we discussed how we were both uncomfortable with being bystanders to the situation that we were witnessing. And so we knew that we could make a difference, even if it was small. And to not make a difference would, we knew, we just couldn't pass up a chance like that.

Rachel Timoner:

Thank you. So, there is this feeling of knowing, and this feeling of discomfort. It's discomfort at what you were witnessing. And knowing that you had to not just stand by. Okay, thank you. Anybody else? What did you feel? What do you think?

Audience Member:

I kind of felt a little bit angered and sad at the same time, because to witness some of the things that people were doing, I just felt like, felt like I was in their shoes, and I felt I had to—compelled to, like, stand up them.

Rachel Timoner:

Mmm-hmm. So, angry, sad, and feeling empathy. Feeling like, I've been in your shoes, I know what that's like, I have to do something. Thank you. Was there a hand over here?

Audience Member:

I felt really maternal in the situation, like I had to take care of the person that I was sticking up for.

Rachel Timoner:

Thank you. So, a feeling of caring for another in a protective kind of way, maternal kind of way. That's beautiful. Any other feelings or thoughts that you want to share?

Audience Member:

In my case, it was kind of zealousness and enthusiasm, I would say, in dealing with the issue.

Rachel Timoner:

Great. So a feeling of, in Hebrew we call that *zerizut*. So just, I need, you know, just, enthusiasm. I've got to go do this. Okay, question. Just a raise of hands. How many people, if pressed, I'm going to press you into two categories, here, that probably are inorganic. But, if you had to say whether these thoughts and feelings were coming from you or coming from beyond you, through you, which would you say? So, how many people— Do you understand the question? How many people feel like, yeah I just, it was just me, and I just thought this, and I just felt this, and it was just, just me? And how many people felt like, there was something pulling me, through me, beyond me? Okay, so—and there's not a right answer or a wrong answer. It's always going to be some kind of combination. It's a false dichotomy. But I'm making you do it anyway! So, if it was the first, it was just, you know, it was just me, that was what was going on, it was me. Okay, and the second. There was something pulling me, beyond me. Interesting. Great, thank you.

So, now we know this isn't just abstract, right? We've all had something in our lives, maybe many such experiences, when we felt pulled to act. For some form of compassion or justice. And so, let's think about that a little bit. Where does that come from, what is it about. So, as John said, I wrote a book. It's called *Breath of Life: God as Spirit in Judaism*, and it's about the ways that God shows up in the Torah and the Hebrew Bible, which we call "Tanakh," as *ruach*, the word "ruach." In Hebrew, it means spirit, breath, or wind. And it appears 378 times in the Hebrew Bible. And if everything from the very beginning of the Torah, of the Hebrew Bible, where *v'ruach Elohim m'rachefet al p'nai hamayim*. I'll

translate it as “the Spirit of God hovered, or fluttered, over the water.” When everything was unformed and void. All the way from that to, you have the prophet Isaiah talking about a future leader of Israel—some understand that person to be the Messiah—Isaiah says, “ruach Adonai” will rest on him. *Ruach* of wisdom and insight, a *ruach* of counsel and valor, a *ruach* of knowledge and awe for *Adonai*. So, from the beginning of time to what some might imagine is the end of time, we have this idea of ruach. *Ruach Elohim* or *ruach Adonai*, *ruach* of God, the spirit of God, present. And so, what is that, what is it about, and what does it have to do with us? That's the question.

So, let me start out by just being very clear about the Jewish meaning and understanding of these verses. So, in Judaism, the most basic idea, an important fundamental idea, is that God is one. There are not multiple persons of God in Judaism. And so, and in the second of the Ten Commandments, we have a very strong imperative that we don't create images of God, in Judaism. So, that means, even any kind of creative thing, any kind of mediator that we might imagine between us and God, we're not to do in Judaism. It's understood to be idolatry. And even if we were to use the intermediary to direct our hearts toward the One, it's thought of as being dangerous, because it concretizes what's intangible, and it could stand between us and God. So, when I say that, “God as Spirit,” I'm not speaking of God's third person, like in Christianity there's the Holy Spirit. We don't have the idea of different persons. And I've learned on this trip that that there's a question of whether, even in Christianity, there's different persons or personae. This is beyond my realm of expertise, but certainly in Judaism, we don't have that. And the most important idea is that God is a single, indivisible unity. In fact, the Jewish name for God, the intimate name for God is four letters, *Yōd*, *Hē*, *Vav*, *Hē*, and together they're unpronounceable, intentionally unpronounceable. Saying that we.. God's concept is beyond our capacity for language or speech. And once we name things, it's as if we can control them, or as if we know what we're saying. And this is beyond us. And in fact, if we look at the four letters, they come from the verb “to be,” in the present tense, moving into the future tense. Some idea of being becoming. But, if you actually take those four letters, and you were going to try to sound them out, which we're not supposed to do, but if you're going to try to sound them out without vowels, which is how it's intended, it sounds like an exhale. Sounds like a deep released breath, or like a spirit hovering.

So, what does this mean for us, who are endowed with spirit and soul, that enters and leaves our bodies and animates us? In Judaism, there's thought to be three levels, at least three levels of soul. There's the *nephesh*, which is the closest to the body, it's the most connected to the body. And then there's the *ruach*, this is the word that I'm talking about, which is usually translated as spirit, and it's connected to the breath. And it's thought to be universal, something we share with all living beings. And then there's the *neshamah*, which is the highest level of soul, or in some thought, the highest level of soul. And it is the aspect that is particular to each person. It's understood to be how we have our personality and our particular essence and mission. And it is also traditionally thought to be an aspect of us that connects us to God. So, in the mornings, Jews traditionally will say a blessing upon waking, thanking God for returning our *neshama* to us, for when we slept our *neshama* rejoined God, and then it came back into us as we awake. So, the idea is that we have this quality of our being, which we might call “spirit” or “soul,” that we can attune ourselves to. That we can listen for. That we can feel. And that we can follow. And the words don't matter so much. You could call it “spirit,” we could call it “soul,” we could call it “the still small voice,” we could call it “conscience,” we could call it “awareness.” By tuning into this quality or aspect of our being, we touch that which is divine. And what I found when I traced the word

“*ruach*” through the Hebrew Bible, the concept of God as Spirit, is that it was present in the aspect of creation. So, I talked before about the Spirit of God hovering over the waters. It’s in the natural world, in the life of each person. And the aspect of us through which we yearn for God and reach for God. And then, it’s also present in Torah and Tanakh, as in the quality of Revelation. Meaning, that aspect of us that enables us to understand and discern, that part of us that says, “Why am I here? What is the meaning of my life? What is a good life? How could I live a good life?” That aspect of us, that’s trying to discern and listen for God’s presence, God’s will, our purpose, that also is attributed to the *ruach* of God. In fact, there are some people in Torah who are said to have God’s *ruach* placed upon them to give an extraordinary wisdom and extraordinary understanding and knowledge. Bezalel, who designs and creates the tabernacle, is described in that way. As I just said, also, in Isaiah’s description of Messiah, *meshiach*, is also the idea that this person has the *ruach* of God placed upon them. And so, the rabbis ask, is this just extraordinary people who have this? Only particularly exemplary people? Or is it all of us? And they determine from a few texts in Torah that it is actually all of us, to different degrees. And that this is, this *ruach* of Elohim is what, or of Adonai, is what enables us to have that deeper level of understanding, or wisdom. Or sense of our purpose.

And then, finally, it’s also through spirit that our role in the drama of redemption plays out. So, to paraphrase Dr. King, the way that the long arc of history bends toward justice through the actions of human beings. We feel—some of you just raised your hand to say—you feel a pull, a sense of obligation to repair what’s broken around us. So, whether that comes, whether we think of that is coming just from our own selves, or whether we experience that as coming through us from the Divine, there is this pull that’s natural to us. A feeling like, “I can’t just stand idly by. I can’t just see this and not do something,” or “I know what that felt like. I have to stand up for that person,” or “I feel like a mother to this person. I need to help.” All the different ways that we have experienced this. So, the Hebrew prophets, you may know, were pulled by God’s Spirit. And it’s described that way. To rail against corruption. To call for a world of justice and peace. Micah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Elijah, Zechariah. They’re all described as either being filled with God’s Spirit just before they speak, or they themselves describe the role of God’s Spirit and the human spirit in the redemption of the world.

The great 20th century Jewish thinker Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote a two-volume book about the prophets. And he said this: “the prophet’s ear is attuned to a cry imperceptible to others. Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony. A voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. The Prophet is intent on intensifying responsibility, is impatient of excuse, is contemptuous of pretense and self-pity.” And then he goes on to universalize this impulse from the prophets to all of humanity, to all of us.

I just realized I’m speaking in two microphones at the same time. I wonder if I put this down, if it’ll still work. Let’s see.

Audience Member:

inaudible

Rachel Timoner:

I'll put it back up! There you go, okay, good. So, he's talking about—so eloquently, right? Talking about the Prophet hearing this cry that most people are not paying attention to, aren't hearing. The agony in the world, the injustice, the suffering of the poor. The prophets are attuned to it, they hear it. It's unbearable to them. And so, they have to speak out, they have to cry out and be the voice, the amplified voice of the suffering. And then he goes on to say, this isn't just the Prophets. It's all of us. So, he says, "There is immense silent agony in the world. And the task of humanity is to be a voice for the plundered poor. To prevent the desecration of the soul and the violation of our dream of honesty." He goes on. "The more deeply immersed I became," he says, "in the thinking of the prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the prophets sought to convey: that morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings. That indifference to evil is worse than evil itself. That in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible." Now, one thing to know about Abraham Joshua Heschel is that he described himself as a "brand plucked from the fire." He was saved from Nazi Europe, and his entire family perished there. And so, when he talks about indifference to evil, he is not speaking in the abstract. When he talks about some being guilty but all being responsible, he's talking to people who stood by. He goes on to say that the pull to act comes from God. Listen carefully to this. He says, "He who is satisfied has never truly craved, and he who craves for the light of God neglects his ease for ardor. The great yearning that sweeps eternity is a yearning to praise, a yearning to serve." And, see if you can relate to this, he says, "when waves of that yearning swell in our souls, all barriers are pushed aside. The crust of callousness, the hysteria of vanity, the orgies of arrogance. For it is not the "I" that trembles alone. It is not a stir out of my soul, but an eternal flutter that sweeps us all. Reason may force the mind to accept intellectually its conclusions; yet, what is the power that will make me love to do what I ought to do? Let me say that last part again: "Reason may force the mind to accept intellectually its conclusions; yet, what is the power that will make me love to do what I ought to do?"

So, he's describing what we were just talking about. An eternal flutter that sweeps us all. Some power in us, through us, that makes me love to do what I ought to do. And he talks about something I've experienced, and I wonder if you did too when we had this exercise at the beginning. A tension between what my mind says and what my heart says. Or what I feel pulled to do. So often, when I—whether it was standing up to the bully on the school bus when I was a kid, or whether it was, you know, a three-year-long community organizing project to create a hundred thousand jobs. But, you know, anything in between, okay? There is the mind, in my experience, it's always saying I don't have time for this, it's not safe, I shouldn't stick my neck out, somebody else could take care of it, I'm too busy, whatever. And then there's this pull that is powerful. It says, you've got to do something. You can't just stand idly by. I have to do something. And there's often an argument between the two. And so, he's talking about reason that convinced you intellectually, you know, if you make a list of pros and cons, you could convince yourself, I shouldn't get involved. But then, what is that that pulls us anyway, beyond that. He's calling that God. So what we have here as an experience that we all can touch by listening to the still small voice, by feeling for that flutter inside of us, by hearing the call and responding to the pull that comes through us.

When I was in my 20s, after college, I was overwhelmed by the question of the meaning of my life. I don't know if any of you can relate to this. What was I here in the world to do? What did I have to contribute? Where should I place myself? How should I direct myself? How should I live to make

meaning of these few years that I have on the earth? It's one thing to know that I'm obligated to give myself to improve our world, and I knew that. But it's another thing to know how. How do I do that? So, I found some answers in the Jewish tradition that I'd like to share with you, and you know, always in the Jewish tradition, you've got answers which are really just more questions. You know. Nothing gets wrapped up too tightly. So, my favorite text from the Mishnah, which is the oldest collection we have of Jewish Law, it was codified right around the year 200 of the Common Era. It speaks of the uniqueness of every human being. So, it's from Sanhedrin, and it asks well, why is it that humanity comes from a single ancestor? Talking about Adam. Or in Hebrew, *adam*, which literally means "earthling" or "earth being." But, Adam. "Okay, why do we all come from a single ancestor?" the rabbis ask. Well, it's so that no one could say, to his or her fellow human being, my parent was better than your parent. If we all had the same ancestor, we've all got the same parents. We're all equal, fundamentally. But then they go on: if all of humanity comes from one ancestor, they argue, then that means that anyone who destroys a single life, it's as if he or she destroyed an entire world. And anyone who saves a single life, it's as if he or she saved an entire world, right? Because if anyone had destroyed that one life of Adam, there'd be no humanity. And any of us could create a world that follows us like, just Adam did. Adam and Eve. And then they go on. And they say, even though we all come from a single ancestor—two ancestors, right— even though we all come from the same source, every human being is different from every other human being. And that in itself is a miracle. Right? So, so far we've got we've got fundamental equality, the idea that same parentage means your parents aren't better than mine and mine aren't better than yours. We have the idea of the infinite value of human life. If you destroy one life, it's as if you destroy the entire world. And then we have this idea of the value of human diversity. Amazing that we all came from the same ancestors, and yet. how different are we? In every way. We are utterly unique. And they go on to say, therefore we are obligated, every person born into the world is obligated to say, "The entire world was created for me." That's a little bit of a leap. Let me help you get there. Okay, so if you're different than every other person, there's no redundancy. Then, the world must have existed so that you could exist. You have a particular purpose that you came into the world for. And the world was created so you would be here, in it. That means you've got something to give, or something to bring, something to offer that no one else is capable of offering.

So, Martin Buber 20th century thinker, Jewish thinker, says this in these words. "Every person born into the world represents something new, something that never existed before. Something original and unique. And it is the duty of every person to know and consider that she," he said "he" but let's say she— "she is unique in the world. In her particular character. And there's never been someone like her before. For if there had been someone like her before, there would be no need for her to be in the world at all." So you exist for a reason, or else you wouldn't exist. And one of the core tasks of your life is to listen for and find what it is that you're here to do. And that is the task of the spirit. You may have heard of Lurianic Kabbalah, or just Kabbalah. Kabbalah, it's sometimes called. It's a mystical tradition within Judaism. And it teaches that the task of humanity, writ large, all of us together, in partnership with God, is to repair the broken world. You may have heard the phrase "tikkun olam," it means "repair of the world." And it comes from Lurianic Kabbalah, and the Ari. Isaac Luria who was the founder of Lurianic Kabbalah, he said this. From the moment that we are created, each one of us has a unique role and purpose in repairing the world. A unique mission given to us from heaven. No one can fulfill the mission of another, to repair that which is required of another. Thus, even the least person has a unique mission that no one else is able to complete. "Happy are they who, while in this world, discern their

Earthly mission and fulfill it properly.” So, I don't know about you, but when I hear this kind of texts, it reminds me of elementary school, and the posters on the wall that said things like, “You're special!” Anybody have those? You know, the self-esteem boosting, “Everyone's unique! You have something to give!” Right? But the thing—if you look at it from that perspective, it sounds kind of corny, and like it's just about making you feel good about yourself. But if we actually think about it, if we actually give this thought some room and some benefit of the doubt, this is about nothing less than survival. Because we know that our species is in a perilous state. We know that our future on this planet is at risk, right? And if every person is necessary, if each one of us has a specific purpose to fulfill for the healing and the repair of the world, but many of us are growing up without enough food to eat, or adequate shelter, or parenting to guide us, or education to develop our skills, or in other parts of the world are serving as child soldiers, or slaves, or are being trafficked or imprisoned or slaughtered, that means that lots of people are not in a position to be able to fulfill their purpose. And that means that our society and every society on the earth has artificial barriers against the healing and repair of the world. On which the future of our species depends. So, this isn't just an inspiring talk about your gifts, and my gifts, and letting your light shine so that you can feel good about who you are, and that you matter. That's all real. That's all true. But it's more than that. You are needed, as is every other human being on the planet.

A week ago, the Jewish people celebrated Passover. And that's the story of our becoming a free people. What's often missed in the story is that we didn't become free just to sit on the beach with a Maitai. You know, kick our feet up. We became free to serve God. We became free to enter covenant. And that's understood as an obligation to partner with God to heal and repair this world. And the stakes are not small. Yesterday was Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, on which we remember the six million Jews who perished, and all of Hitler's victims. And we remember how the world stood idly by. By the blood of their neighbors. And when the ashes of one million children filled the skies of Europe, one million worlds perished with them. Some of those children may have been the ones to bring us solutions to global hunger, or global warming, or cures for disease or war. And the same can be said for the victims of every genocide before and since.

So, the spiritual life, our capacity to listen for and discern our own purpose, the capacity to feel the infinite value of every human life, the ability to listen for the fluttering within us and see that holiness and another person, the ability to get ourselves out of the way, all those rationalizations out of the way, so that God's *ruach*, the Spirit can come through us, the ability to remove the barriers for others to similarly contribute their parts to making our world whole. This is what enables us to be agents of justice, the agents of justice that we were born to be. And this is what's needed, and this is what we're called to do. We cannot separate the life of the Spirit from the pursuit of social justice. Neither alone can stand.

Jews read the book of Esther in the spring. On the holiday of Purim. In the story of Esther, you might know, that God is in hiding. God does not actually appear anywhere in the story. God's name does not appear. Esther is also in hiding. She's the Queen of all of Persia, but no one knows that she's Jewish. And Haman, who is the Hitler of his time, advocates for the annihilation of the entire population of Jews throughout the kingdom. And the king signs a decree ordering the genocide. And when Mordecai, Esther's uncle, learns of this news, he sends a messenger to the Queen, desperately appealing to her to come out as a Jew to the King, to stop him from massacring all the Jews. And at first Esther is afraid.

Does she have enough power to make a difference? Will she be able to influence the king and change his mind? Or will she just perish? Will she stick her neck out and die for her effort? And then Mordecai sends her this message: "*Mi yodea im la'et kazot higa'at la'malchut.*" Who knows if it was just for this reason that you have arrived at royalty? This is a message to every one of us, wherever we stand. Whatever position we hold. Whoever we are. There will be opportunities for courage. There will be opportunities to act for justice. We always will have the ability to say, "Who me? What can I do? It won't make any difference, anyway. It's too risky." But who knows if it was just for this very reason that you are where you are. Here on this campus, today. Or maybe in a few years, at whatever work you'll find yourself doing. Wherever you stand. Will you stand idly by? Or will you stand up, and speak out, and act for justice? *Ken y'hi ratzon.* May it be God's will that you do. Thank you. ***audience applause***

John Merkle:

So, for the next 20 minutes or so, Rabbi Timoner will entertain questions you have or listen to comments that you have in response. But before we do that, my colleague Rabbi Wirtschafter wants to come up here and make a presentation. Here, David.

David Wirtschafter:

Thank you, Professor Merkle. Thank you to everyone who turned out tonight, particularly my students in 303-61. Props for showing up. ***audience laughter*** It is heartening to see the community, the faculty, the undergrads, the graduate students support these programs. That's what makes it possible to have a Jay Phillips Center. One of the things we talk about constantly in our work is the importance of having an impact. I think we can fairly say that tonight's speaker has had a profound impact. I've seldom been prouder to be a Reform rabbi than I am right now, in your presence. You come from a congregation named for a great man, a great person, Rabbi Leo Baeck. *Alav ha-shalom*, may peace be upon him. And Baeck is so apt for you, Rachel, because your work, your book, and your congregation are about the meaning of philosophy and praxis. That it's not just enough to have noble ideas and to have an inspiring theology. But we have to actually practice what we preach. Nobody did that like Baeck. He could have gotten out. People implored, people begged, people cajoled. Leo Beck refused to leave Germany. He had been Chief Rabbi of Berlin. He had served as a chaplain, a rabbi in the German army during World War One, and he never retracted a word of what he wrote. He went on to be a teacher and organizer. Your congregation is named for him. The only Reform high school in Israel named for him. And, just as you mentioned, the importance of being here today, and there's a reason that we're here. You know, I woke up this morning, and my reason for being here was to represent the Jay Phillips Center, and to make sure my students turned out, but once I picked you up at the hotel, the reason changed. And the reason was, is that I finally got to meet my family rabbi. Because Rabbi Timoner is the rabbi to my brother, Jake, and my mother, Carol, in Los Angeles. And it is a pleasure to say that all the hype was true. ***audience laughter*** This is a rare moment. You are a rare rabbi, and unfortunately, I have to say, unfortunately, I have a rare book to give you. I say unfortunately, because this book should not be out of print. Sadly it is. The works of Leo Baeck cannot be found as easily as that of Martin Buber or Abraham Joshua Heschel or Franz Rosenzweig, the other great Germans before and after the war. But, was able to track one down. And so I hope you'll be able to take this book by Leo Baeck back to Leo Baeck, and I hope that it continues to inspire your work in writing for a long time to come. It's his masterwork, *This People Israel. Chazak v'amatz*, may you be strong and resolute in all that you do. *Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazeik*, Rabbi Timoner. May you will always go from strength to strength. ***audience applause***

Rachel Timoner:

Thank you, Rabbi Wirtschafter. That is the most perfect gift. This is not easy to find, and I have been looking to collect the works of Rabbi Leo Baeck. And I commend them to you. Thank you so much. And thank you so much to the Jay Phillips Center, and St. John's and Saint Benedict. I'm really grateful to be here. I would love to entertain any questions you have, or comments, anything.

John Merkle:

Also, people can come up to here. So if any of you want to just get behind one of these mics, or up in front of one of these mics, you can come and do that as well.

Audience Member:

My question would be, do you think you have found your meaning, or your mission in life?

Rachel Timoner:

I really do. As I said, I spent a lot of my 20s trying to figure that out. And I worked for social justice—well, as a college student I was very, very active. And then for 14 years, before I went to rabbinical school, my work was in social justice, nonprofit organizations, and all of that work was so important and meaningful to me, but I was always searching, because the spiritual piece. I would go to work, and I would do my social justice work, and then I had my spiritual life, which was separate, and I needed to integrate them. And from the moment I applied to rabbinical school, I could just feel that I was on my course. I could just feel that it was right. And all the way through school in Jerusalem, and Los Angeles, and then in ordination, and becoming a rabbi, and then serving a congregation, just every step of the way, I've been so—I felt it, you can just feel it, I feel the rightness of it. And I'm very grateful for that. And that search, that—this is probably a big part of this moment of your lives, and the next however many years. It's so important to listen within. There's a lot of things pulling on us from outside. I mean, what I mean by that is, I'm using the word “pulling.” I shouldn't use that word because I was using it for something else before! But there are a lot of attractive pursuits in the world, and sometimes they're distracting from the inner voice that guides us into what we're here for, uniquely. It's gotta get quiet to listen for that. More questions?

Vincent Smiles:

Rabbi, thank you very much for a wonderful talk. This is kind of a big, slightly complex question, but even if just a few beginning thoughts on the question of, what do you think, are there things in modern society which blind us to the presence of the Spirit, and kind of deafen us to the Spirit's call to us to heal the world?

Rachel Timoner:

Such a good question. And, probably a lot of people could think of answers. There's so many things that distract us. We are in such a distracting time, right? I mean, I have up here my smartphone, which I was using just as a timer for your one-minute conversations, right? But I mean, how many things just on this could keep me occupied all the time with minutiae, right? Or with unimportant matters. Just this. And that's not to speak of all the other screens in my life, that I could be looking at. All the other draws for my attention, you know. In the Torah, there's a lot of language about idolatry, and we could think to

ourselves, well, we're not building idols and praying to them. But my understanding of idolatry in our time is, it's all around us. It's going to be the pursuit of wealth. It could be the pursuit of celebrity. I live in a city that's all about that. Really, you know? And kids grew up thinking the most important thing is to be famous. And we have, you know, with YouTube and everything else, everybody, you know, everybody has a chance to be a little bit famous. And what does that get you? Really, what is that about? There are so many distractions from the life of the Spirit, and it's so noisy out there right now. Think about how much information comes toward us in a day, compared to somebody in the 19th century. You know, when today, how many newspapers are there to read, just with a click of a thumb? Right? And that's just the news, never mind entertainment, and all the other forms of information that come toward us. Twitter and...it's very overwhelming, and it's harder than ever to get quiet.

And I find for myself, I don't know what your experience is, but I can't just flip the switch and go from the buzzing world that we live into a deeper sense of truth. I can't just say, okay I'm going to meditate now, or I want to pray now. Which, I do both things, but it takes transition time just to quiet ourselves a little bit and slow ourselves down, and actually ask what is of the essence. And so, it takes a practice. It doesn't just happen. It takes discipline. It takes a practice. I've learned over time that I need to wake up every morning, and I do the morning prayers every morning, and I have to do that first thing, because as soon as I let my mind go, it's just going to go. And I can't get back. And so, for me, that's one of my disciplines, is just to do that. I wake up and just do it so that that's the first thing that I experience in my day, is remembering, ultimately, what's important. It's my relationship with God. But we could probably, together, come up with a list of a hundred things that distract us all from the life of the Spirit. It's an overwhelming time we live in. We have, in Judaism, we have Shabbat. Which is twenty-five hours in the week, in which we are to disconnect from all of those kinds of, the commercial world, and the world of electronics, and all of that. And in my family, we are Reform Jews, which means that we don't— Reform Jews don't necessarily, unlike the Orthodox Jews, don't necessarily follow all of the rules with in what's called Halakha, the Jewish Law. There's a matter of choice, and a matter of conscience in interacting with those laws. But the idea is to choose these laws, to choose these practices, having considered them deeply. And in my family, we, on Shabbat, we actually do not engage with any electronics. All electronics are turned off. And it is, I can't tell you how restorative that is, to have twenty-five hours without anything beeping or flashing or tweeting or anything, just quiet. And my kids, I have two kids eight and eleven, and we find ourselves playing a board game, or going outside and jumping on the trampoline, or you know, whatever it is, just being together and having a moment to just appreciate being alive in a fresh way. So, you might not have that same kind of Shabbat, but I urge you to find some space and time when you turn off all those things that are dragging on your attention, so you can listen inside. It's essential.

Any other questions?

Audience Member:

I was just kind of wondering. You were talking about having, like, a purpose, a calling, something that each individual has to give. And I'm just curious what you think about how life circumstances that are maybe out of control of us, or like, injustice, unjust systems, those kinds of things. How do those affect our capability to really fulfill our purpose?

Rachel Timoner:

Thank you. Such a good question. So, we have two sides of this. One side is the last thing I was talking about, which is, no matter where we stand, no matter where we find ourselves, with whatever oppression, or whatever injustice that shaped our lives, or sometimes things that we might not think of as oppression or injustice. But just, it could be tragedy, it could be... In each life, there's...it has its own story. But things that were not in our control that might seem like they've setup limitations or barriers or obstacles for us. So one message was the message I ended with, was the Esther story. Wherever you find yourself, wherever you find yourself there is some act of courage, some act of justice that's waiting for you there. We have, in Judaism, the tradition that it's not only the wealthy who give Tzedakah. *Tzedakah* is translated as charity. It means giving money to people who need it. And actually, the translation of Tzedakah is righteousness or justice. It's not understood to be an act of kindness, it's understood to be an act of obligation, necessity, for a just world. But the point that I was going to get to is that everyone is supposed to give Tzedakah, even the poorest people. Because, no matter where you stand there is something you can give. There's something you can do.

So that's one piece. But the other piece, I think, that you're asking is, how do we understand those forces in the life of the Spirit? How do we understand the force of oppression or injustice? And what I'd say is that I think, well, there's just a few angles on this. One is the idea that, in Judaism, we have—so, one is that there are people behind injustice, there are people behind oppression. There are people behind even genocide, right? There are people who do evil things. And in Judaism, the thought is that every person is born with a pure soul. It's a different idea, I think, than... I'd like, actually, to learn more about the idea of the Christian soul, the Christian idea of the soul. But in Judaism, everyone is born with a pure soul. And then, we have in us two inclinations: we have the yetzer tov and the yetzer ra. And the yetzer tov is the inclination toward goodness, and the yetzer ra is understood as the inclination toward bad, though it really means “toward chaos.” And the rabbis teach that if there was not that yetzer ra, the world could not stand. Because all of the things that are the impulse that we think of as bad, we actually need in the world. We need a little bit of lust in order for procreation. We need a little bit of greed in order to ever build a house or build a business, right? We need a little bit of those things. The issue is excess. The issue is going beyond moderation, right? An excess. And so, in the spiritual life, it's about balancing, always. Listening and balancing for, where am I in that spectrum? Am I in balance, or am I out of balance? Do I know myself well enough, am I watching my behavior closely enough, am I in touch enough with who I am and where my middle point is, so that I'm not too greedy, I'm not too lustful etc. Too jealous, lots of other kinds of things that we might think of as raw or bad. So that's another side of that question. Did I get at what you were asking? Thanks.

Audience Member:

So, you talked about how, like, there are so many distractions in the world that, kind of, pull you away from, maybe the spirit, or getting in touch with yourself. And then in your book, you also have a part where you talk about being in the wilderness, and that being the part where you knew that the Spirit was there. Do you think that it was vital that you were in the wilderness, or would you have still come to the same conclusions had you not had that moment?

Rachel Timoner:

Thank you. That's a great question. I actually had that awareness in a few different times in my life. And I didn't grow up in a very spiritual home. And there wasn't a lot of conversation about God in my home. And so, I actually kind of had to be hit over the head a bunch of times to kind of, wake up, spiritually. I had an experience in the wilderness, I had an experience when I was young, and my father had a stroke. And it's a long story, and if you read the book you know it, but I won't necessarily go into it right now. But I had a number of experiences in my life that only, kind of, when they added up, and I looked back, did I realize, this is something that I have felt and known. And my rational mind wants to argue its way around it, but I know it's there. But the question about the wilderness. I do think that many people feel a transcendent experience in nature. And that that is a common place for people to be able to tap into a sense of belonging to a greater whole. Sense of being part of something larger than ourselves. Whether that's the night sky, or whether that's on a mountaintop, or wherever it is. I think that's a common experience. And I definitely did have an experience like that. Any other questions?

Audience Member:

I read your book I really liked it.

Rachel Timoner:

Thanks.

Audience Member:

And I wonder if you could recommend a beginner's guide to Kabbalah?

Rachel Timoner:

Ah. Beginner's guide to Kabbalah. There's one by Lawrence Kushner that I really like last name is K-U-S-H-N-E-R, Lawrence Kushner. I would check that out. Yeah.

John Merkle:

Well, I am very grateful that a year or so ago, while browsing, I saw this book, *Breath of Life* by Rabbi Rachel Timoner. And that after reading it, I thought, well I direct the center that has a rabbi in residence program, and I want the author here. And I'm just very grateful for that opportunity. I'm delighted that you accepted the invitation. And on behalf of our college community, I want to thank you and say that I hope you'll be back! ***audience applause***

Rachel Timoner:

Thank you so much. Thank you all so much. ***continued applause***

[Transcriber's Note: Correction—Rabbi Rachel Timoner's book is titled *Breath of Life: God as Spirit in Judaism*.]