

A Gentile Experience of Authentic Torah Learning

Some of the Ways that Torah’s Spirituality Can Benefit Non-Jewish People

Hi there. My name is Fran and I’m a 45-year-old woman living in Sydney, Australia. I have been learning in the Jewish system since 19-99, first at the Adelaide Hebrew Congregation, and then predominantly at Central Synagogue, Sydney. Until my 35th birthday, I had never contemplated Jewish teachings.

How I Became Involved with Torah Learning - The Background

Oddly enough, I never came to Jewish spirituality seeking religion, faith or G-d. I came with a desire for information, guidance and logic; a point of reference that would help me better comprehend how life worked in my world. I’m energetically sensitive, you see. Since childhood, I have always picked up on the thoughts, moods and emotions of those around me, without even trying; it is the silent, feeling sense which is strongest in me. I don’t write this to distract your focus away from the topic. I write it because I believe that it makes what I am saying below even more relevant for those who seek a system that explains spirituality and energetic phenomena, from physical through to esoteric levels, in a way that enhances their ability to function in the “normal” world.

For my first 30 years, I had no idea that I was energetically sensitive, and it was not until a series of incidents in the corporate world that I started to require information and help. Since childhood, the minute I am asked to help a person, something just takes over in a way that often blinds me to the realities of human nature. It keeps me focused on the target of genuine helping, which is great, but my earlier years found me continually landing into trouble with people who didn’t really want that sort of help, for themselves or others. I could sense the things a person was holding back and/or projecting, even when they were being denied. I came unstuck, big-time. So, at 30, my spiritual development began. I had to make sense of life as it was for me, in a way that helped me keep grounded and centred in the physical world. I had this extra layer of activity, a skill quite possibly, that I didn’t understand but needed to make sense of.

My learning commenced with creative visualisation classes which helped me become more aware, look at the models of life that I had embraced, and better understand my internal and external worlds. I then moved on to a spiritual development program, where I learned how to use my intuitive skills to live more honestly and succeed at problem solving – what to reference to energetically. After a few years however, I needed to go further; where to, I didn’t know.

Whilst my early training helped me greatly on the practical level, I had yet to find the explanation for how and why things happened in my world. Not that information was lacking, but what I sought was a system that drove from Divine will, true balance and integrity (not that I was at that place myself). The use of energy does not have to come from a place where ME is king, and nothing else matters. Energy work, no matter how strong, can actually be very limited when it does work.

My search for the right group took me to non-Jewish groups and Jewish lay-groups. I didn’t think to call a synagogue (a shul) at first, somehow thinking that I had to find my education in the Gentile world. No matter where I turned however, I had yet to find the right forum.

Finally! Going to the Weekly Torah Class

In 19-99, I finally realised that I may have more success at a synagogue. I rang the Adelaide Hebrew Congregation and was advised that there was a class which I was welcome to try. That first class (a “*shi’ur*” in Hebrew) was incredible. Rabbi Yosef Engel, AHC’s Senior Rabbi at the time, spoke with such passion and awareness, about the literal passages as well as the more esoteric levels. By the time the class finished, I knew I had found what I was looking for.

A weekly class that discusses Torah insights is really exciting to attend. Perhaps, for a non-Jew, it is even more amazing, simply because not all systems of theology or spirituality discuss esoteric levels well, if at all. Without a discussion of that which lies behind the text, faith and religion can seem lifeless, even dull. When Rabbi Wolff (Central Synagogue) talks, the room changes; all is silence even though there is still talking; the energy shifts and the atoms start to dance in ways they weren’t before – something more is with us, reverberating through the room and magnifying the teachings. In my words (i.e., not necessarily technically correct) the soul level takes over. The study of Torah offers a wealth of explanation, structure, guidance and support - all the things that are necessary for positive living, grounded spirituality and the ability to function well in this material world.

Rabbinically-led classes (“*shi’urim*”) are also mind-blowing in that they introduce you to a much deeper definition of G-d. (In common Jewish speech, G-d is referred to in Hebrew as “HaShem,” which literally means “The Name.”) For me, this led to a significant overhaul. Where non-Jewish systems can portray G-d as being strict, stern and distant – just the “*Gevurah*” attribute in Kabbalistic terms – authentic Torah presents Him as pure benevolence and multi-faceted, even in the harsher moments. Through exposure to the Torah’s spirituality, I have come to understand that G-d is real, that He is right here, and that He will help in all things – even if I have yet to be as good as I can be. This has resulted in fundamental changes in my spiritual practice and my understanding of Torah and Judaism.

Another aspect of Torah so often experienced in the *shi’ur* is the emphasis upon family, benevolence and kindness, not only in theory but also in very real, practical terms. This, from my non-Jewish perspective, is very interesting given that other doctrines often paint traditional Judaism as stern, cold or cruel, when in fact it is nothing of the sort. Indeed, Judaism is the spiritual parent I believe that most of us long for, from whom the non-Jewish world could benefit enormously. Where other spiritual groups and teachers seem to reserve their kindness for particular people, times or moments, Torah-true spirituality gives it as a genuine and continual offering, not only on the verbal level but also in deed and thought.

One last attraction of the weekly *shi’ur* is that the Rabbis really explain things – the reasons why, against and for. In other systems, at some levels of dialogue (e.g., esoteric), there can be a tendency to just call something “bad” or “evil,” rather than to explain why that is so. This does nothing for an educated or inquiring mind, which nowadays is quite common. Torah never backs away from a question asked with good intention; there is always a reason that can be given, and your inquiry is never rubbished or put down by a good teacher.

Synagogue Services

Having attended the weekly *shi’ur* for about 18 months, I reached a point where I wanted to attend a service, to acknowledge and give thanks to HaShem, G-d, for all that He is and does. For anyone who loves G-d, the

service in itself is awe-inspiring: a moment when you can offer praise, devotion and thanks to the Creator using Psalms and prayers that are beautifully rhythmic and heart-stirring. From a spiritual or energetic perspective, this is the time when the congregation asks HaShem to remember and unite with them once more, on their Shabbat (the day of sanctified rest that G-d commanded exclusively to the Jewish people). It is the beginning of 24 hours of spiritual focus, practice and development, remembering What is most important and Who to focus on. You can feel the energy shift as He responds to the call. Central Synagogue has a *chazan* (a prayer leader) and choir who lead the congregation through the service in song. For anyone who enjoys singing, even opera, attending a service at Central Synagogue is an incredible experience, not that this is the only reason to go.

When I first started attending, the next few days would be framed in peace and a sense of connection with something greater than self – a very loud quietness. It was a noticeable energetic shift that I had not experienced before. I am not suggesting that this is the only reason why one would attend the service, but it is an interesting aside for those who are energetically sensitive. Although one may enter into Torah spirituality for more self-focused reasons, the more s/he moves into its practices and teachings, the more this presence can be felt.

Inner Teachings

When I was going to the synagogue in Adelaide, I was so very fortunate to hear Rabbi Engel teach about the world of energy, the layers of creation, the structure of souls and how things work. Rabbi Engel is an amazing teacher, and listening to him teach is awesome.

Often in *shi'ur*, I will be informed of a pattern or energetic phenomenon that I am currently learning or experiencing in the real world – for example, the existence of the *kelipot nogah* (the Hebrew term for the potential for true goodness that is invested within the physical creation) and its role in spiritual development, the world of energy and the system of souls. As one who comes from a system where the invisible world tends to be treated only as a product of one's imagination, gullibility or state of health, to have access to these teachings and the privilege of learning it from such a great teacher is a blessing that I could not even start to place a value upon. Torah classes that are conducted under the guidance of a reliable and learned Orthodox Jew offer the Gentile a forum of learning that is multi-layered and, with good intention, always very tangible. For anyone who enjoys poetry, dance, symbolism – energy flow on any level, from physical to spiritual – a *shi'ur* weaves its way through the teachings of the Torah in a way that is esoteric and spiritual, helping you understand so much more.

The Written Torah

In Jewish learning, the “Written Torah” (the Hebrew Bible) is the first document one is supposed to study. I initially baulked at reading this because of the dryness I had experienced when reading the so-called “Old Testament.” As such, Torah study came later on. Authentic Jewish teachings continually refer to the 24 Books of the Hebrew Bible, which makes its study essential for one's understanding.

What I love about Torah study is the fact that, by having a baseline understanding of the more esoteric teachings, I am able to see beyond the literal meaning of the document. The Torah comes alive when you have even the most basic comprehension of (or access to) Jewish esoterics as I do. You start to appreciate the energetics, the spiritual meaning and the wonderful imagery. What I thought was going to be hard work and

drudgery, with lots of unintentional naps and losses of concentration, has turned out to be the most interesting and exciting part of my study. Not only am I re-reading “Bible stories” from my childhood for the first time as an adult, but I am understanding them to be so much richer and beneficial to my way of being now (let alone to the future). The writings are not just “stories” any more.

My Overall Experience as a Gentile Learning Torah

It is more than possible that, at this stage, I sound like a stuck record – can every single aspect of Torah be *that* good, *that* amazing? The reader is strongly encouraged to explore its spiritual teachings for him/herself – its texts, the Rabbis and their teachings offer a wealth and depth of spirituality that other systems just don't offer.

What blows my socks off every day is the fact that, through my involvement with Torah, my energetic and spiritual connection grows stronger and more aligned to HaShem, G-d. There is increasingly an energy, a presence, that is just with me as I travel along the way – when I need help, it is there. Whilst I am not confident to claim that I know much of anything at all, such are Torah's layers and depths, what I have retained are the practical lessons – what is kindness, how to be grateful, and whether I am driving from ego, selfishness or not. Study within the Torah system has helped me come to a place, a level of spiritual practice, where I can be more genuine; where I do not need to know or control; where I am well and truly co-creator of my reality, yet subordinate to a Power that knows infinitely more than we humans.

Spiritual Growth through Torah – without Conversion

It would seem to me that the above constitute some very good reasons why I should convert and become Jewish. For now, however, I remain a Gentile who wishes, please G-d, to continue her spiritual development within the Torah for a number of reasons listed below.

Judaism is a life of commitment to HaShem in ways that often ask you to do something “just” because G-d asks a Jew to do so. The depth of commitment to G-d in authentic (Orthodox) Judaism and its impact upon one's lifestyle, in my opinion, is far greater than that experienced by many Gentiles in their systems of observance. Put simply, I am not confident yet that I could deliver to that level and I would rather stay Gentile than make a promise that I did not uphold.

My energetic sensitivity is another factor, as it is very easy for me to label the feelings of others as my own. I have needed to progress slowly to check the feelings I have for Judaism, my relationship to it and G-d. To convert because of my affiliation to (or appreciation towards) a person and/or because it makes me feel good is not, in my opinion, a good enough reason and certainly not the same thing as being ready to commit in a Jewish way to serving G-d. Until I am sure that I would convert for the right reasons, I remain a Gentile.

There is also a strong case for Gentiles staying Gentiles. On the occasion when I “Asked A Rabbi”¹ about conversion, it was put to me that I may be better to stay in the system I was born in to and to serve the world in that capacity through observance of the Noahide Commandments. From this I gather that, as a Gentile exponent of all that Torah has to offer the world, I will also be of great value.

¹ “Ask A Rabbi” is an inquiry service at www.chabad.org, where you can ask questions of about Jewish life and spiritual practice. Having sent your question through, it is directed to a Rabbi or Rebbitzin who is qualified to respond.

Lastly, whilst Judaism does accept converts, the process is not as easy as the prospective convert just declaring his/her desire. There is study to do, things to learn before one is eligible. As a student who knows a few things but still not a whole lot, I have more study to do before I can even assess conversion as an option.

Noahidism – Torah-true Monotheism for Gentiles

As a Gentile raised in a non-Jewish tradition, my studies and experiences of Judaism have shown me one thing – that the non-Jewish world, no matter the denomination, could learn much from Torah. At a time where so many seem to be seeking a system of spirituality that makes sense to them, Torah teachings are (in the least) a very great guide. For a non-Jew, this can be done by focussing on the Seven Noahide Laws (i.e., the commandments that G-d gave for the non-Jewish world).

The Seven Noahide Laws are:

1. The command to not worship idols, implicit in which is belief in G-d
2. The command to not blaspheme His Name, implicit in which is to respect G-d and praise Him
3. The command to not commit murder, implicit in which is to respect human life
4. The command to not commit forbidden sexual acts, implicit in which is to respect the family
5. The command to not steal, implicit in which is to respect others' rights and property
6. The command to create a judicial system to uphold these laws, and the pursuit of justice
7. The command to not eat meat that was severed from a mammal or bird before it died, implicit in which is to respect all of G-d's creatures, and to not be cruel to animals.

There are plenty of non-Jews who have fully adopted monotheism (i.e., who believe that there is one G-d and one G-d only) as taught by the Torah and all the commandments that are relevant to them (many of the ordinances in the Torah apply only to the Jewish people). Torah calls these people righteous Gentiles or Noahides.

Noahidism at its most basic level is simply the activity or state of being in which a Gentile observes these seven commandments as passed down by the Torah, most of which may seem to have parallels in many systems of spiritual practice. It offers the monotheistic Gentile a spiritual home where s/he is allowed to remain Gentile, yet be nurtured by and learn G-d's Torah in a way that isn't foreign at all. In this way, all non-Jews can really benefit from Torah without becoming Jewish converts. Noahides are not expected to become or act Jewish, but they have the option to find support, guidance, education and encouragement within the Orthodox Jewish system in a way that genuinely supports them.

Still to really take off in Australia, Noahidism offers a great spiritual development and learning solution that has yet to be fully explored. There was a group in Melbourne led by Rabbi Yehoishophot Oliver, but this finished in 20-08 when he relocated to the United States. Sydney has yet to launch a Noahide group, although many Rabbis, synagogues and Jewish groups welcome non-Jews into their spiritual development and study forums. Rabbi Eli Cohen at "Jews for Judaism" in Sydney is also available to answer inquiries and offer guidance; he runs a weekly class for Jewish and non-Jewish people alike and speaks to Noahide groups on request (enquiries can be directed to his email address, which can be obtained via www.AskNoah.org/ContactUs.html).

The Noahide outreach website www.AskNoah.org, based in the U.S., has articles, education forums and contact networks. This is a site to inform, guide and educate, and can offer everyone tremendous insight into Torah, faith, Judaism, spirituality and more.

Non-Jews can also contact the Orthodox synagogue(s) in their area. Please be aware that, as a Gentile, there is a limit to which you can take part in Jewish services and some learning forums. Even within these limits though, my experience is that one is made to feel welcome by the Rabbi and others in attendance, and guided in how s/he can take part.

For many reasons, Torah offers the non-Jewish world so much more than many Gentiles seem to be aware of. If you are interested in spiritual development, finding a monotheistic forum as a Gentile or just coming to a life of better balance, Torah-based spirituality is a fascinating and very rich area to explore.

If you have questions regarding the above or wish to discuss it further, please contact me (Fran) by email, via the Director of www.AskNoah.org.