

**A Conversation about Jewish Spirituality
with Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz
by Arthur Kurzweil**

Perhaps never before in the long history of the Jewish people has there been a generation of Jews as cut off from its spiritual roots as ours. In addition to the various elements of modern history that have drawn so many to secular life, Jews today come after two great traumas in its long history: the murder of one third of the world's Jewish population sixty years ago, and the mass migrations that have taken place throughout the world over the past century that have ripped so many Jewish families apart.

Enter Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz.

Rabbi Steinsaltz's life and work have been a catalyst for remarkable change and growth throughout the Jewish world. Born in 1937 in Jerusalem to a secular family, Rabbi Steinsaltz, as a teenager, began a personal journey and a career that have resulted in his reputation as one of the leading and most influential rabbis of our time. Described as a genius of the highest order, his biography and credits are most remarkable. He is perhaps best known for his Hebrew translation and commentary on the entire Talmud, an accomplishment that has not been achieved by one person since Rashi wrote his commentary a thousand years ago.

Through his books, public lectures, schools and many other activities, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz has had and continues to have an enormous impact on a large and growing number of individuals throughout the world. A note from Arthur Kurzweil: I have had the extraordinary privilege of knowing Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz for more than 20 years. During this time, I have served as his publisher and his driver, but most importantly as one of his countless devoted students. The following conversation took place in November 2003 in Los Angeles during a 10-city lecture tour of the United States on the occasion of the publication of his translation and commentary on the classic Chasidic text, the Tanya.

ARTHUR KURZWEIL: In my conversations with many Reform, Conservative and Orthodox rabbis over the years, it is clear that many of them have an aversion to spirituality, even sometimes claiming that Judaism is not spiritual! What in the world is going on when rabbis represent spirituality as some fringe element in Judaism? And what is Jewish spirituality?

RABBI ADIN STEINSALTZ: What is the problem? It is really a double or triple problem. One of the big problems is historical. Most of the people you have encountered are relics. ... They really live in the past when anything about spirituality was some kind of a taboo.

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In a strange way we are still living 19th century Judaism. And 19th century Judaism was in an age that was completely rationalistic. It was a whole rationalistic world in which the highest spiritual move was perhaps some kind of charitable feeling to others, and you didn't even overdo that.

So because of this historical burden, some people are, in a certain way, afraid of anything that has to do with spirituality. ...

In our times there is a growing and a widespread fake Jewish Spirituality that is perhaps as dangerous as anything that can happen. You have things that seem to be spiritual but are somewhere between confidence games and magic tricks.

All of these things are making people, and some honest people, turn away from the experience of anything to do with spirituality. That is the reason why when a seeker or searcher somehow finds his way to a Jewish prayer place, he or she usually finds it dry, boring, and unappealing, especially if the seeker has any kind of a spiritual tendency-- which in some way most people do have.

Now, the fact is that there is a very old and very rich Jewish spirituality, as ancient as anything else. I am speaking about very clear-cut and very public forms that appeared not just in the last century, but have been a part of Jewish life for as long as we know about Jewish life. It is not a matter of esoteric corners of Judaism. But, again, there is an attempt by so many people to take out the spiritual part and to leave the sometimes-practical message and sometimes no message whatsoever in order to make it fit within some preconceived notion of what Judaism is.

KURZWEIL: Can you offer some advice to the spiritual seeker who is searching for an authentic and reliable teacher? In the end, do we have anything to help us other than our intuition?

RABBI STEINSALTZ: Intuition is a great thing but intuition is also a great misleader. That is, there is always a two-sided element in any kind of intuitive thinking. It is not clearly checkable one way or the other way. Unluckily, often people who thought they had some kind of a deep attachment to something or somebody discover that it was just a matter of being attracted to a show. Intuition can be a great help, but it is not a solution.

... Whenever I see something that is very showy, very flamboyant, very colorful, and impressive, I am always trying to search out what is really lying beneath it. And in so many cases, we find out that beneath those showy garments there is nothing.

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I have had my own experience with zoology and I remember once seeing something that made a big impression on me. It was a plucked peacock. When you see a plucked peacock, which looks like an ugly, emaciated hen, you get so very disappointed because when you see the peacock in all its glory it's clearly a glorious bird. But, if you want to eat it or have more contact with it, then you find out what it is in truth. So when I see peacock feathers, which are wonderful to look at, I'm always beginning to think about that plucked hen beneath those feathers.

In the same way, when someone comes and makes a big show, a very impressive show, this is the time to make a check to wonder whether you are not taken by external effects. You know this because you are doing these things when you perform as a magician. The secret of magic tricks is that you make people look at the wrong things. So many of these people who are selling spirituality are really doing all kinds of tricks to take your mind off of what is really important. I would suggest trying to look carefully at these people who are claiming or are serving as teachers.

Many teachers are very reluctant teachers. You have to push them, and you have to pull them, and you have to force them to say something. Not everybody gets a message, "You go and spread My word." Many people, many worthy people, don't have it. Sometimes they are shy. Sometimes they are introverted people and you have to dig it out of them. When you find someone who seems to have knowledge, it is important.

Let me add another quality. ... Honesty is extremely important. ... When people are honest, it's a high quality and not so very common. You have to search for people who are honest. Honest people may be the right teachers because whatever they say in the end will be things they honestly believe. This is someone who should be a teacher.

KURZWEIL: When a spiritual seeker enters a New Age bookstore or a well-stocked general bookstore, there seem to be so many inspiring books from dozens of religious traditions. On close examination of these volumes, often consisting of translations of texts now available in English, lofty, uplifting books on the spiritual life represent most of these religious traditions. Then, when looking at Jewish texts that have been translated into English, so many seem to be occupied with rules and regulations and cases of law. Can you help me to understand this?

RABBI STEINSALTZ: [The Jewish] language has a tendency of avoiding abstractions. Most of the abstractions in Hebrew are modern abstractions, modern words. In the old literature, if you read a whole book, such as the Torah, or the whole Bible, you will find, if you really search for it, how very few abstractions there are. Everything is put in a different way, not always a practical way, but a different way.



It is an entirely different style, unlike, say, Buddhist or Hindu literature that tends to be abstract. ... The language of thought in the medieval times had a big tendency for abstraction. And that was one of the pitfalls of the science and philosophy of those days. They came to a standstill and to a point to which they can't go anymore.

... Incidentally, these abstract words and phrases, if you take them in a large amount, have some kind of intoxicating quality. You read them and basically you don't understand anything. But they are far more powerful than any smoke of grass. They make your mind somehow think that you are into something powerful, wonderful. You don't really know what you are talking about, but you can repeat it easily. You can read them page after page, and enjoy yourself immensely by being in some kind of world that is almost completely made of thin air. But, it exists. It has clearly an influence and it really is intoxicating. You read a few pages of it and if you are asked to tell anybody, say a little child, what you have read, if you cannot just repeat the words you find you do not have the faintest notion what is written there. And I'm speaking about pages and pages and pages of these things. And after you look at all of these pages, what did they really say?

Now, [Jewish] literature tried not to develop abstractions and tried to deal with abstractions in a nonabstract format. ... There are Jewish books that deal with spirituality, quite a number of them, in fact, from ancient times to modern times. Many of them are not translated and many of them, if they were translated, would be perhaps difficult for a reader because they don't have the same quality as other kinds of spirituality. And sometimes they speak, they try at least to speak, about the most high things in the most level headed and most simple words possible. So it doesn't sound the same way. As it is with anything of any importance, there is a demand on people—not an easy one—to bend down sometimes and to look at things.

I used to have lots of free time and I'm wonderfully good at loafing. So, I watched all kinds of plants. Some of these plants have tiny flowers—too tiny to be seen. Now, if you look at some of these tiny flowers that you can find in any field, they are beautiful, as beautiful as the most gorgeous orchids. But they are small and sometimes they don't have the same colors and they are in clusters so you don't see them. What you have to do is to bend to them and to watch these things that are not so big and flashy, but they are as beautiful as any others. You have to watch them.

This demand on people, to be participants, is so important for things Jewish. But in many cultures—especially in America—things are geared to make things easy. In Judaism, things are not made to be difficult on purpose, but surely not made to be easy, which means you have to participate, you have to work at it. Now who wants to work? If you can get well-digested material, why should you chew anything?

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KURZWEIL: Is part of our work to see the concrete and to try to grasp the abstraction that it represents?

RABBI STEINSALTZ: In some way it is an encounter with the abstractions. It may be an encounter with something that I'm not even sure are abstractions. You try to look at something in the real world, say a bird. I'm not speaking about beautiful birds that everyone will look at. Say a sparrow, a very humble creature. Look at a sparrow. And then look at the sparrow without trying to think about "sparrow-ism." Look at the sparrow as it is. Try looking at it not just as something that you have to poison tomorrow if you don't want your garden destroyed. But if you look at the sparrow and you just look at it, you admire it, you think about it, then I won't say that sparrow will grow to the size of an angel, but the sparrow will become something different.

That is what is called the eye of a poet. In a different way, it is the eye of the scientist and the eye of the lover. Which is an eye that is not searching for abstractions. If I look at somebody that I love, it doesn't mean that instead of seeing a nose I see something completely different. But somehow I see the nose and it appears to be a very different and very unique nose, not like anything else. So, when looking at these things there is a quality of being able to become transcendental without going to the abstract.

You go to it in a different way. It's a different path basically. It's a path that seems to be so very commonplace. There are people who will always ride on the wings of angels. But there are also those who go up to the same high mountains by just trudging, moving one foot in front of the other, and feeling sometimes sorry for themselves because it's such a hard way. And, after some time, without noticing that you are in a much higher position than you were before, you go on, and you go on and you climb on and use the same stick and go on.

... If you want to get on within the Jewish life, surely within the spiritual Jewish life, you don't have any charmed gateways. You are given some kind of a path and you have to work your way up, day after day, without any promise of any kind of harps that sing to you. And if you hear them singing, perhaps something is wrong with you.

KURZWEIL: With the Jewish way being such hard work, one can understand the temptation to seek a different and easier path.

RABBI STEINSALTZ: There are lots of easier ways. The problem is: where do they lead? This question has to be asked. Sometimes it's a tough problem, a tough question to ask: "Ms. So-and-so or Mr. So-and-so, You have been dealing with spirituality for the last 20 years. Did you become a better person after 20 years of spirituality?"

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You possibly became more mushy. You possibly became less realistic. But in many ways, you didn't become any better.

After a year of study, I tell some of my pupils, "I don't know if you really have advanced within this year, and it's hard for me to be a judge of it. You yourselves truly cannot be judges. Go home to your wives. Ask your wives if you became any better. If your wife says, 'You definitely became better' then it means you went in the right way. If she says she doesn't notice any difference, it was perhaps the wrong thing to do at the beginning, so stop it. Some of them have even taken my advice. They asked a very direct question.

So of course, people can add all kinds of wings to their personality—from eagle's wings to bats wings. And the question is not whether I soar into heaven. The question is "Where do I land at the end?"

... Does spirituality have something to do with the spirit? If it has, then the spirit has to do something. It has to grow.

*Arthur Kurzweil has been a leader in the world of Jewish books in America for 25 years. He is also the editor of two collections of essays by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *The Strife of the Spirit* and *On Being Free*. Arthur is a member of the Society of American Magicians and the International Brotherhood of Magicians. He often performs a one-person show called "Searching for God in a Magic Shop." See his website at www.arthurkurzweil.com.*

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