

# The Arc of Becoming: Process Theology and Jewish Spiritual Direction

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*God's reality does not stand at an untouchable remove from the created world but... is in process with it.*

*....our Godly task here on earth is to be partners in the process of becoming.*<sup>1</sup>

Traditional models of Jewish spiritual guidance have functioned within religious communities that envision an authoritative God and believe that *halakhah* (Jewish Law) is the primary, if not exclusive path for walking with God. Modeled on a hierarchical template of relationship, such belief and practice remain foundational for Orthodox Jews. Post-modern, liberal Jews, however, are not comfortable in that paradigm. Many contemporary Jews continue to study, perform *mitzvot* (lit. “commandments”), observe rituals, holidays and other practices, but they do so without a sense of being commanded by an authoritative God.

As many have observed, the modernist, scientific worldview challenged not only traditional theologies, but spirituality of all kinds. This has been particularly true for post-Holocaust Jews.<sup>2</sup> Still, contemporary Jews have spiritual longings: moments when we have direct experiences of the holy; times of suffering, when we need faith to sustain us, and; faith that inspires us to pursue justice and shape ethical lives of meaning and purpose. We seek spiritual wisdom, guidance and companionship from many quarters and diverse traditions. We are increasingly aware of the complex interconnectedness of all life both in healing, life-giving ways, and through the rapid devastation of Earth's ecological systems. We recognize that the modernist vision of our planet as senseless matter to be exploited for human use is deadly, and that we must recapture a vision of the earth as sacred and alive, as indigenous people have always known it to be. We need ways of thinking about God that are consistent with how we understand and experience reality.

Over the last many decades, scholars and theorists from diverse disciplines have turned to Process Theology as they've pondered life's ultimate or divine dimensions. Their goal -- to reinvigorate religious understanding, tradition and faith for people who can no longer wholeheartedly believe in a theistic God. Feminists have been especially attracted to Process

Theology because its metaphysics shares our foundational assumptions: that God's power is persuasive rather than authoritative, exercising "power-with", rather than "power-over", and; that the nature of reality is inherently relational, indeed, ontologically interdependent. A variety of Jewish thinkers have begun to re-envision God, Torah, *Mitzvot*, Covenant and Ethics from a Process theological perspective.<sup>3</sup> The hope and purpose of this essay is to explore how the contemporary practice of Jewish spiritual direction can be enriched by an encounter with Process thought, and perhaps to contribute to the ongoing development of Jewish Process Theology.

In recent years, more and more Jews have become interested in Spiritual Direction. A contemplative practice, it has enabled them to re-sacralize their lives and live with a deepened awareness of the sacred which underlies both the extraordinary and the everyday. I have been developing the ideas discussed below while serving others as a spiritual director and while teaching at rabbinical seminaries and in training programs these last twenty years. I've been moved to discover that both seekers and practitioners have found Process Theology generative for the practice of Jewish Spiritual Direction. I offer this essay as a further contribution to this emerging field.

### **A Small Bit of History**

Process Philosophy and its attendant theology began with English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), who taught at Harvard beginning in 1924, and his American followers, most notably Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000) and John Cobb, born in 1925 and still alive today. The insights of Albert Einstein and the then-new discoveries of quantum mechanics asserted that physical matter is not an enduring, unchanging substance; matter can become energy and energy can become matter. Thus, Whitehead and his followers created new categories to think about the universe, God and the nature of divinity, categories in alignment with contemporary scientific discoveries that would shift the long-held opposition between theology and science.

I write this essay not as an expert in Process Thought, but rather as a practitioner. As I have learned, there are "first-person" and "third-person Whiteheadians." "Third-person Whiteheadians" hesitate to appropriate the metaphysical categories of Process Thought to describe everyday experience on the human level. "First-person Whiteheadians" are comfortable using such notions to illuminate subjective, conscious experience as it is lived by higher

organisms. If I may deign to place myself in either of those categories, I fall among the “first-person” group.<sup>4</sup>

### **What Could it Possibly Mean for Post-modern Jews to “Hear God’s Voice?”**

At least one pastoral theologian, Carrie Doehring, proposes that we need a ‘tri-focal lens’ to understand and minister to contemporary seekers in need of pastoral care; we must look simultaneously through a lens which encompasses pre-modern, modern and post-modern approaches to knowledge. 5

Doehring proposes that when we look through a pre-modern lens, we focus on a person’s religious and spiritual experiences of feeling connected to God. We explore how and what induces a sense of God’s presence (or absence), noticing whether direct experiences of the sacred happen, for example: during worship, ritual, individual prayer, spiritual practice, or; through human relationships, in community, through activism or in solitude; through art and aesthetic experience or in nature. Looking through a modern lens, we recognize the times when a person’s needs or suffering may be best addressed through medical or scientific means, and as pastoral caregivers we rely on and refer to physicians, psychologists or other specialists. Through a post-modern lens, we pay careful attention to a person’s unique history and social location, the complex intersections of gender, class, race, sexual orientation, and ability, and ponder the unique religious and broader life experiences that have shaped a person’s faith. We also pay attention to our own social location and how each of us makes meaning at the intersections of our complex and multiple identities.

As I’ve been practicing and teaching both Pastoral Care and Spiritual Direction, I have come to understand Spiritual Direction as both an independent contemplative practice and a dimension of Pastoral Care. It is my sense that many contemporary liberal Jews move among and between the three positions described by Doehring. That is as true for pastoral caregivers and spiritual directors as for the people we companion.

Let me propose that a Process metaphysics enables us to move through all three dimensions with intellectual integrity, including our individual experiences of the mystery we call God. At its core, Process Thought has sought to reinterpret pre-modern concepts for contemporary people through the insights of modern science.<sup>6</sup> Thus Process Theology can enable

spiritual directors to meet post-modern people “where we’re at” amid our many layered perspectives, multiple identities and diverse spiritual journeys.

At the heart of Spiritual Direction is the practice of discernment, the “holy habit” of listening into our lives with awareness, with *kavannah*, the intention to hear how the Holy is calling. To do this, we need to develop sensitivity and attentiveness, to notice the sacred invitations present in the ordinary and extraordinary moments as well as over the longer arc of our lives. Through meditation, people cultivate the practice of mindfulness, which Jon Kabat - Zinn has famously described as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment to moment.”<sup>7</sup> The awareness cultivated by mindfulness enables discernment, the practice of noticing how the Holy is calling us in and through those moments.

These calls come to us through our bodies and our inner lives, through other people, including strangers, friends and family, through work and play, through all kinds of relationships and varieties of experience. Calls can come from our tradition and our history, from our communities and current events in our nation and around the world, from the earth herself and from non-human creatures. As the heavenly retinue called one to another: ...*melo kol ha-aretz k'vodo* – the whole world is infused with the Presence (Isaiah 6:3).

These calls and invitations come to all of us. The questions for discernment include... Are we listening? Do we notice the invitations? Do we have the patience and courage to take the time to attend, to discern how we are being called and toward what? Do we hear calls to service? How responsive and responsible are we to the calls we hear? And, in what ways might we resist these calls?

Process Thought gives us language and categories to imagine what “discernment” and “hearing God’s voice” might mean to post-modern Jews, while enabling us to better communicate our experiences, evolve our consciousness and act ethically in the world. When I discovered Process Theology, I was able to ground what I had been doing intuitively as a spiritual director, in a conceptual universe that aligned with my understanding and experience of God as active in my life and the lives of those I companion.

## **Some Basic Principles of Process Theology**

Let's look at some important concepts from Process metaphysics to see how they can contribute to the practice of discernment in spiritual direction. I will give brief explanations of these concepts and offer traditional language and metaphor to illustrate how they may be articulated in a Jewish idiom. In addition, I offer you, the reader, brief practice questions and illustrations from the lives of actual people, as they have been shared with me in individual spiritual direction, supervision or spiritual direction groups of various kinds.

As you read what follows, allow both your intuitive and your conceptualizing mind to work together. While keeping intellect online, listen with a poetic sensibility that resonates in the heart.

### **All of Life is Becoming**

The foundational claim of Process Theology is that all of reality is “in process”; all reality is dynamic not static, becoming, perishing and becoming, always changing.<sup>8</sup> Or as Robert Mesle, who wrote an introduction to Whitehead's thought, says: “...the world is finally not made of ‘things’ at all, if a thing is something that exists over time without changing. The world is composed of events and processes.”<sup>9</sup>

According to Rabbi Toba Spitzer, to whom I am indebted for her eloquent distillations of many of Whitehead's complex ideas, “Whitehead uses the word ‘experience’ to indicate that at all levels of existence, the world consists not of little units of matter, but of consequential moments of becoming--moments which combine elements of “choice” (that is different possible outcomes) with the influence of the past and the surrounding environment.”<sup>10</sup>

Mordecai Kaplan, one of the most influential Jewish thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century whose teachings became the foundation of Reconstructionist Judaism, is sometimes considered a Process theologian. In an articulation of his theology in 1949, Kaplan asks:

Does the awareness of God depend upon our conceiving God as a personal being, or may God be conceived in other ways and yet be the subject of our awareness, or the object of our worship?... Nothing would be lost if we substituted [for the notion of a personal being] the one of ‘process’, which, at least with the aid of science, most of us find quite understandable. Why, then, not conceive God as process rather than as some kind of identifiable entity?<sup>11</sup>

But we do not need to look only at 20<sup>th</sup> century texts to imagine rooting Process Theology in Jewish tradition. The holiest name of God in Jewish tradition is the tetragrammaton, *YHVH* (the Eternal). This is the name that is sometimes transliterated into Jehovah or Yahweh. But this ineffable name is, in Hebrew, an impossible declension of the verb ‘to be’, collapsing past/present/future, being/becoming into one holy name. Perhaps the most well-known text in Torah, when God shares something directly with a human being about the nature of the divine essence, is the story of the Burning Bush. Moses asks for God’s name and is told *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh – I will be that which I shall be (Exodus 3:14)*. The holiest name of God in Torah refers not to an entity, even a divine entity, but rather a process of becoming.

Although much of Jewish liturgy and ritual emphasize the importance of remembering, in Torah God often calls people into the future:

**Most famously**, God says to Abraham: *Lekh L’kha. Go to the land that I will show you...I will make of you a great nation.* (Genesis 12:1-2)

**Later, God** assures the wary Patriarch: *“Fear not, I am a shield to you, your reward shall be very great.”* (Genesis 15:1)

**In the desert** God’s angel promises Hagar: *I will greatly increase your offspring; they shall be too many to count.* (Genesis 16:10)

**Amid the Burning Bush**, God points Moses toward the coming Revelation at Sinai: *When you take the people out of Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain* (Exodus 3:12) The Hebrew word for “bush”, *s’ne-h*, came to be seen, through the rabbinic imagination, as pointing Moses toward a future when the Ten Commandments would be proclaimed at *Si-n-ai*.

How can the idea of a God of process and becoming orient our holy listening as spiritual directors?

As we hear peoples’ narratives, we are listening **for the arc of their becoming**. We may notice how they were shaped by the past and we need to attend to whether and how they are present in the moment; however, we also listen for how they are being called into the future, into

becoming. This is one of the differences between Spiritual Direction and Psychotherapy. Most psychological systems, from Freud to the most recent theories influenced by contemporary neuroscience, are interested in how our “present” has been shaped by the past, often by trauma that has distorted our ability to perceive accurately what is unfolding now.

*Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* is how God “sounds” as the divine calls human beings toward becoming. Through the practice of Spiritual Direction, we want to encourage people to practice patience, to listen into their lives and into the world -- not to rush past or avoid the discomfort of unknowing. “To walk to the edge of what we know and sit awhile” listening.<sup>12</sup>

**Practice:** *Take a moment from your reading. Pause and listen into your life. Allow the words ‘the arc of your becoming’ to echo inside. Notice what arises. What are the edges of your becoming at this moment in your life? What is being born and what may be dying or coming to an end? What is emerging and what might you need to let go of? What may be pressing for expression, asking for attention, calling to you from beyond yourself? Perhaps, what risks, challenges, situations are presenting themselves that could be opportunities to grow or change in life-giving ways? How are you being called into the unknown, into service to follow what is holy?*

### **Creativity is of Ultimate Value**

Conceiving of God as Process means conceiving of creation not as an event that happened thousands or even billions of years ago, but as ongoing and ever-unfolding. In Process Theology, God is understood to be present and active through creativity, which is the basic force in the world. Creativity is understood to be flowing constantly through us and all of Creation, ever bringing forth novelty. To be created in the image of God implies that *our* creative process flows out of and into the infinite process of divine creativity that sustains the universe. Humans *may* be unique in being able to participate in creative process with self-conscious awareness.

In a commentary on Genesis 1, the Hasidic master, Rabbi Simcha Bunim of *Peshicha*<sup>i</sup> (1765-1827), offers an interpretation of Creation that is remarkably aligned with a Process metaphysic:

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<sup>i</sup> The Polish town Przysucha, vocalized in Yiddish as *peh·shis·ha*.

The Lord created the world in a state of beginning. The universe is always in an uncomplicated state, in the form of its beginning. It is not like a vessel at which the master works to finish it; it requires continuous labor and renewal by creative forces. Should these cease for only a second, the universe would return to primeval chaos.<sup>13</sup>

Two additional examples, one from the traditional morning liturgy and the other from *Zohar*, the major corpus of 13<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Kabbalah, further elucidate this point:

*Ha-mehadesh b'tuvo b'khol yom tamid ma-asei be-reishit...*renewing each day with constant goodness, Creation's work.<sup>14</sup>

*A river issues from Eden to water the garden* (Genesis 2:10)... That river flowing forth is called the world that is coming—coming constantly and never ceasing. This is delight to the righteous, to attain this world that is coming, constantly watering the garden and never ceasing.<sup>15</sup>

Melila Hellner-Eshed, a renowned Israeli scholar of *Zohar*, sees the river as a central metaphor, representing a dynamic eternal process issuing from Eden, the Creative Source that continually brings life. “The river symbolizes the divine flow of plenty within itself and from itself into different worlds.”<sup>16</sup>

The idea of creativity as the ever-unfolding, basic divine force in the world has significant implications for how we might listen for God in a person's narrative. In *Spiritual Direction*, we can listen for how the creative process that *is* this unique person is being called to express itself. Here are some ways we can orient our listening:

**Pay attention to the “invitations”** in this person's narrative, to the moments and movements that call one to greater creativity, to action and greater aliveness in relationship with oneself and with others.

**Listen for the opposite** -- what is ending or dying, what does this person need to let go of or what is letting go of them. What does s/he need to leave behind in order to “Choose life!”, to live with greater creative energy, freedom and vitality? What do they need to re-create or repair?



**Listen for the opportunities** through which one is being called into creative service, action or activism beyond their own needs, in service to local communities or larger movements for social justice?

**Listen for how the Holy** may be calling her or him through the Earth and her non-human creatures?

**Pay attention to** spontaneous experiences of the sacred, including what may emerge in prayer, dreams, spiritual practice and aesthetic experience. If you hear such moments in the narrative, take out your “cosmic highlighter pen”. Bring directees back to dwell again in “this very place”, *ha-makom ha-zeh* (Genesis 28:16) the ‘place’ where Jacob exclaims, “Surely God is present in this place, and I did not know it!” Invite the directee to listen contemplatively for the wisdom that continues to echo within them.

**Trust our own creativity.** Spiritual Direction is a highly intuitive process unfolding between people amid the ever-creative and creating process we call God. Therefore, Process Thought encourages us to pay attention to intuition, to experiences and activity that is novel, adventurous, improvisational or playful. “The Primordial Nature of God is the goad toward novelty in the universe, stimulating us to realize new possibilities after the old ones no longer are sufficient to give zest to our enjoyment of being actual.”<sup>17</sup>

*Sally (a pseudonym), a white, cisgender, woman in her 40’s is an ordained minister raised in a mainstream Protestant church. She experienced family trauma during childhood. While in her 20’s she met and married a man and had two children. Sally became a successful minister in a mainstream church, but discerned, after years of service, that her calling could not be realized in that professional context nor in that marriage. With much courage, she stepped out of the conventional structures of her early adult life. The couple divorced. Sally left her position at the church to become a weaver and chaplain. Over time, she discerned she was queer and partnered again.*

*Sally is a talented person, brimming with ideas and passion. Like other creative people, she hears many internal “voices”, different parts of her “self” vying for attention: voices from her past that can both ground and hold her back; invitations toward personal and social transformation, and; strong callings to upset oppressive elements of institutional life that restrain creativity, marginalize both people and ideas and interfere with the freedom for discernment. Sally chose me, a Jewish director, because she wanted someone not subject to*

*Christian denominational preferences and allegiances. Due in part to my social location, my listening during our sessions is not shaped by involvement or commitments to those communal or institutional worlds.*

*As Sally and I “listen into” her life for how she is being called, I support her to trust the strength of the creative flow as holy. At times she may hesitate when the river seems to be crashing against boulders of self-doubt or caught in swirls of limiting ideas from the past. As she has followed that creative flow, however, Sally has taken risks and faced many of the challenges in her life: she has changed religious communities, burst the seams of previous denominational boundaries, become more expressive in her artwork, challenged her abusers, asserted her queer identity and expressed a worldview that is uncomfortable in certain professional contexts. Her sense of freedom continues to expand. In the immediacy of the present, I often hear how past/present/future are mixed in a moment, in a drop of experience, as we discern how creativity is moving through each occasion.*

*As Sally was going through a challenging time, I invited her to pour out her heart to God. Sally emerged from silence saying she could not pray to that God anymore, but she could talk to (Mother)Mary. With my encouragement (not that she needed it!) Sally began a regular practice of talking with Mary and found her Presence in Sally’s life to be a deeply comforting companionship. In subsequent months, Sally also decided to take anti-depressant medication to relieve unnecessary emotional distress.*

As I reflect on the ‘arc of becoming’ in Sally’s life, I see the movement from her earlier years to the present towards ever greater freedom as she trusts the flow of creativity in and through her. I think we both understand that flow as the Holy in which she lives, moves and has her being.

It is possible to see how the elements of the tri-focal lens combine to form a rich context for spiritual guidance: the pre-modern experience of sensing Mary’s companioning Presence; seeking a modern scientific-based mode of healing through medical psychiatry and the prescription of an anti-depressant, and; the post-modern reality of a rich spiritual direction relationship formed through the connection of two people of different ages, faith traditions, cultural backgrounds and sexual orientations, (though of similar race and class backgrounds) each speaking in her unique voice from her own social location.

**Practice:** Take a moment to listen into your life. Where do you notice the energy of creativity, the energy of life flowing? Where do you notice it is stopped up or stuck? What are your fears, hesitations or resistances to following the call of that creativity or taking the risks needed to do so? Are there, perhaps, revelatory moments when you are waking up to new insights, perspectives, awareness, being touched by the creativity of others or by the earth herself? In what ways is your own creativity moving in alignment with larger movements for social justice that support the emerging creativity and freedom of others, especially those whose creative energy has been distorted or squashed by oppressive forces?

### **God's Power is Persuasive, not Coercive: The *Initial Aim***

Whitehead's conception of divine creativity centers around the idea that God provides each human being, indeed each created being, with an *initial aim*. God's persuasive power is felt within each created being as the *initial aim* to actualize the best possibility open to it, given its unique situation.<sup>18</sup> This may be discerned moment to moment, occasion to occasion, and over the longer arc of a lifetime as God 'lures' or urges human beings toward that aim. Although God provides the *initial aim*, God does not have control as to whether it is fulfilled. That is left to the person, through discernment, choice and chance.

Three texts below articulate this idea in Jewish metaphor and idiom:

An ancient Rabbinic midrash teaches:

**Rabbi Simon said:** You will not find a single blade of grass that does not have its *mazal* -- constellation of stars and/or angel -- in the heavens that says to it "Grow!"<sup>19</sup>

In 1949, Mordechai Kaplan wrote:

**[Belief in God]** is the faith that reality, the cosmos, or whatever constitutes for us the universe in which we move and have our being, is so constituted that it both urges us on and helps us to achieve our salvation, provided of course, we learn to know and understand enough about that reality to be able to conform to its demands.<sup>20</sup>

Rabbi Shalom Noah Berezovsky (d.2000), a contemporary Hasidic master, known as the *Slonimer Rebbe*, expounded on a related theme at length:

**In the holy book *Yesod Ha -Avodah*, (lit. "The Foundation of Sacred Service")** brought down in the name of *the Ari z'l*, "No day or hour that has ever existed from the beginning of time can be compared to any other day or hour. And in the same way, there is no comparing one human being to another since the creation of the first human onward and

no one can do the repair work (*tikkun*) of his fellow human, which is determined by the season, the hour and the unique code of that person.” These words become the important groundwork for finding our task in the world. Indeed, we need extreme clarity to discern *et asher Ha-Shem*<sup>ii</sup> *Elohekha sho-eil may-im’kha*, exactly what it is *Ha-Shem* is asking of us, and what path is ours. It is according to the unique root of our soul and our personal tendencies, combined with the specific era and situation in which we find ourselves that we will be able to draw near to *Ha-Shem*. For if we lack personal responsibility for our world or lose touch with our task and purpose in life, we are like travelers who get lost on the way, unable to find our destination and never reaching our goal.

Before anything else, a person needs to meditate well and dig deeply into the knowledge of what his/her special task is in the world...We are given signs by which to discern it, and sometimes we know it because it is the most difficult thing we could ever undertake...But when we have this clarity about *sh’lihto alay admot*, our special mission to earth through which we fulfill ourselves, we no longer get confused about the great work or equivocate about the amount of energy we must invest in it. Nor do we lose hope in life, because we know that our soul’s purpose is fulfilled by means of it and no sacrifice is too precious to carry it out...”<sup>21</sup>

A pervasive metaphor in Jewish mysticism is that each soul<sup>iii</sup> has roots in a specific dimension of God-self and has special tasks, *tikkunim* (pl., lit. “Repairs”), to accomplish during this lifetime’s journey. As directors we are, in a sense, always listening for the unique path of this soul. How does a specific opportunity or challenge express, reflect, redirect or detour the unfolding of that path? In Spiritual Direction, we encourage people to explore the possibilities inherent in all their lives’ experiences. Looking through the eyes of discernment, we then propose these questions: *Will you somehow materialize the possibility? Will you sense the wisdom for this moment?*<sup>22</sup> Can you sense God’s Presence, as support and perhaps even urging you on, “carrying you on eagle’s wings” (Exodus 19:4)?

***Practice:*** *As you reflect on your life, what are the ways your unique creativity has been expressed? How have you materialized the possibilities? How has your creativity been gift to you, to others and to the world? How can you tell? How has that creativity been expressed through your strengths and how has it come through loss, challenge, suffering, or pain? At this moment in your life, in what ways do you sense you are living in alignment with that initial aim*

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<sup>ii</sup> *Ha-Shem* (lit. “The Name”) is an appellation vocalized to indicate the ineffable *YHVH*; at times it may connote a quality of divine/human familiarity

<sup>iii</sup> “Soul” here is not referring to an entity, but to a process of divine unfolding

*and how might you be off track? How might you resonate (or not) with the Slonimer's vision?*

### **All of Life is Interdependent--All Life is Interconnected.**

Catherine Keller, well-known feminist Christian Process theologian, states that no theology has better embraced the truth of our radically relational interdependence than Process Theology, interdependence not as an ideal, but as an ontologically given reality.<sup>23</sup> Whitehead's Process Philosophy argues that "there is urgency in coming to see the world as a web of interrelated processes of which we are integral parts, *so that all of our choices and actions have consequences for the world around us.*"<sup>24</sup>

In the thirteenth century, the *Zohar* observed: *God fills all worlds... binding and uniting one kind to another, upper with lower; even the four elements cohere through the Holy Blessed One, Who is within them.*<sup>25</sup> We now live at a time when science and Spirit are aligning to teach us again that everything is connected. Nothing in the universe can exist on its own. As we live into the effects of climate change, we are increasingly aware of the inescapable web of life on this planet and the consequences of damaging and violating that web. Covenantal partnership with God can be re-envisioned as responsible, creative action in relationship with other human beings and the Earth herself; we are ineluctably interconnected. Martin Luther King famously expressed this truth as a principle of social justice in his 1963 "Letter from a Birmingham Jail": *Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.*<sup>26</sup>

Sandra Lubarsky, a contemporary Jewish Process theologian, re-envisions covenant as the *site for responsible creativity.*<sup>27</sup> Or, as C. Robert Mesle writes, "...thinking of the world as deeply interwoven—as an ever-renewing relational process—can change the way we feel and act."<sup>28</sup>

One of the ways I understand *discernment* is as a practice of **cultivating aware participation in the sacred Web of Interconnectedness.** When we meet with a person in spiritual direction, we enter their unique web of relationships and can begin to perceive the calls coming to them from within that web. For some, the strongest calls come primarily through the

most intimate connections of family or local community. For others, the calls emanate and echo most strongly down the generations. Still others, conscious of their location in history, sense a more expansive call, even a prophetic call to social transformation and justice. The nature, sense and magnitude of how one is being called not only differs among and between people, the call changes at different stages of life for the same person.

To perceive an individual's web, spiritual directors, like scientists who literally study spider webs, need to cultivate stillness and the "patience to notice": *who is the directee connected to? what are the visible and invisible lines of connection between that person and other people or beings, dead and alive? what are the ideas and influences within her/his thought field? where is s/he located within the power dynamics of the greater society? what are the implications of those dynamics that might influence and shape that call? how are they being called from within their "small corner of the web" or through their unique location in history or society? how are they being called into service? how might you, as a spiritual director, support a directee to be attentive and open to the divine creativity moving through them, the small web of their own lives and the larger "macro" web of life in which they are embedded?*

While these questions might seem overly intellectual rather than contemplative, I ask you to internalize the image of the Web of Life, the 'inescapable network of mutuality'. I invite you not only to see individual directees in front of you; but to perceive them also as interwoven within webs of relationship. Such an imaginal change in perspective can further reveal a Relational God of Process -- and help us to shift paradigms.

The following examples offer us tiny glimpses into how these questions might underly the process of discernment as a practice of "cultivating aware participation in the web of inter-relatedness", ranging from familial to generational to the societal and ecological.

*When she was a young woman, **Dianne** and her husband had difficulty conceiving. As a woman of Sephardi descent<sup>iv</sup>, for whom passing down family traditions is very important, the idea of not having children was deeply distressing. She and her husband decided to adopt Rose,*

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<sup>iv</sup> *Sephardi* Jews are those descended from the Jewish communities of the Iberian Peninsula that, following the Expulsions of 1492 and 1497 were scattered to Turkey, North Africa, the Middle East, the Netherlands and the Americas

*a white child, likely from a non-Jewish background. From infancy, Rose had great difficulty forming an attachment to Dianne; she would literally arch away rather than mold to her mother's body. Later she had many behavioral, emotional, relational and educational problems. As educated, middle-class people, Dianne and her husband offered their daughter every opportunity they could, seeking out therapeutic, medical and educational support. Despite their best efforts, things continued to be extremely difficult for Rose. She and Dianne were not able to form a warm mother-daughter attachment.*

*Dianne felt challenged to make meaning out of this aspect of her life. Always a committed Jew, she became a more active spiritual seeker in her fifties, a path that included meditation and spiritual direction. Broken-hearted after years of therapy and the failure to form the relationship with her daughter she longed for, Dianne hit an existential and spiritual wall. She needed ways to "be" with the implacability of the situation, to encompass the truth of how things are, things she could not change.*

*As she listened to Dianne's narrative over several months, the spiritual director noticed that in the larger web of relationships in which Dianne was embedded, were two young women for whom Dianne was a beloved mentor and elder: one was an emerging community leader and the other had asked Dianne to be her daughter's godmother/Jewish grandmother because her own mother and mother-in law had died. The spiritual director noticed the joy and liveliness Dianne exuded when she spoke of these relationships. Gradually, Dianne began to see those relationships as the sacred opportunities they were, not only for personal fulfillment, but also as ways she was being called from within a web wider than immediate family, to make contributions to community and future generations. As Dianne integrated this shift of perspective, her sense of distress lightened, she found some inner peace and enhanced meaning.*

*A year later, however, Dianne hit the wall again. Feeling hopeless and in terrible pain from her adult daughter's rejection and disconnection, Dianne decided to stop calling Rose or trying to reach out to her.*

*Knowing there are times when we are up against implacable realities we cannot change through our own effort or action, the spiritual director shared with Dianne that she thought this was one of those moments. "Feeling into" Dianne's experience, the spiritual director softened the edges around her separate self, opened her heart and encouraged Dianne to find a place inside herself from which she could cry out and ask God for help. Opening in vulnerability to*

*the flow of life-giving creativity in the Universe, both Dianne and the spiritual director went into silent prayer.*

*As Dianne emerged from her prayer, she had tears in her eyes and was surprised that something had shifted inside. She wanted to make a phone call.*

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***Sarah**, a spiritual director in training, presents herself to her peer group for supervision. She was approached by Rachel, who is part of a shared network of friends and colleagues, to ask if she could meet with Sarah for spiritual direction. Members of the multi-faith peer group listen carefully, knowing that boundary issues in minority communities can be more complicated than in larger faith communities, and; new directors can easily get entangled in challenging, overlapping relationships.*

*The group learns that both Sarah and Rachel are children of Ashkenazi<sup>v</sup> Holocaust survivors and the two women have previously shared much personal history and life experience growing out of that common bond. Sarah is a liberal, observant Jew, while Rachel lives in an Orthodox world in which the roles she plays make it impossible for her to share her heart and doubts with anyone in that community. Rachel sees Sarah as one of the few people she can trust with her inner life, who also understands the worlds she comes from. In turn, Sarah's sense of self and calling has been shaped by the legacy of her parents' survival and the importance of companioning Jews whose lives have been damaged by the Holocaust. For this reason, Sarah feels called to companion Rachel even as she recognizes the potential challenges.*

*As Sarah deepens her reflection, the group can sense not only how hard it might be for Rachel to find the spiritual companionship she needs elsewhere, but also that there is a bashert (lit. "destined") quality to this match. Still, Sarah knows she needs the wisdom and support of the peer group as she begins to meet with Rachel in spiritual direction. Recognizing both the risks and opportunities, Sarah and the group covenant to keep a careful eye as this relationship unfolds over time, balancing the power of the call down the generations with the necessity to maintain ethical boundaries in the present.*

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<sup>v</sup> Ashkenazi Jews are white Jews descended from Eastern, Central or Western European backgrounds



*Jacob is a child of Ashkenazi Holocaust survivors who grew up in a working-class, urban, racially diverse neighborhood with many immigrants from different countries. This context formed a rich foundation of experience and knowledge that informed Jacob's commitment to activism for most of his adult life. As a young man, Jacob was instrumental in creating an early version of a "Children of Survivors" group, as people were beginning to identify the unique strengths and challenges faced by this population.*

*In mid-life, Jacob's ability to actualize his gifts as a community leader and social justice activist had to be put on a back burner; family members with significant illnesses and disabilities urgently needed his care over prolonged periods of time. In recent years, Jacob has been freed from these responsibilities, which he had lovingly fulfilled, to engage the fulness of his skill and gifts in pursuit of social and environmental justice. He has felt particularly called to join in transformative work around Anti-Semitism and Racism in spiritually-grounded social justice organizations, whose constituents include African-American Christians, Muslims, white Jews and Jews of Color. Jacob has a clear and compelling sense that, in part, this is the soul-work, the tikkunim, tasks of repair, that he is meant to engage in this lifetime. He recognizes both the compelling need of this historic moment and the unique social location of his birth, upbringing, finely honed skills and gifts. Members of the spirituality and action group to which Jacob belongs have witnessed, supported and been inspired and transformed by Jacob's growth and spiritual development over the past decade, as he has heeded God's calls. Jacob has experienced the joy of purposefully actualizing "initial aim" of his life, while significantly elevating the ethical, empathic, and creative energies of expanding webs of diverse people and communities.*

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***Practice:** Again: take a moment. Thinking of discernment as 'cultivating aware participation in your unique corner of the web of life' ...allow yourself to see the season, your age and stage of life, notice your social location, the unique personal and social influences that have shaped your life, your unique skills, talents and gifts, reflect on the web of human relationships in which you are embedded, from family to larger networks, notice this moment in the history of your people and nation, the crucial moment in the life of our fragile planet. What are the calls, the*

*invitations, opportunities, challenges, seeming road blocks? How might these be an expression of a larger sacred process that's unfolding? How might you be called into service because of your unique gifts, location and place in history? Is this a moment when you are primarily called by family, local community, your 'own people', by larger and more expansive needs and movements?*

***Notice there may be a demand here.** Though we use the language of 'invitation and lure', we can understand ourselves, as Jews, to be commanded through the inescapable, dynamic network of mutuality in which we are located. **Go forth!** (Genesis 12:1) **Choose Life!** (Deut. 30:19) **Justice, justice you shall pursue!** (Deut. 16:20) As Jewish spiritual directors, we hear and honor these prophetic calls still emanating from Torah.*

### **God is in Process: God Changes and Evolves In, Through and With Us**

Because God is active in God's creation, in and through human beings, it is not only we who are in process; God is in process too, changing and evolving. Though communicated through narrative and metaphor rather than philosophical principle, this idea is woven throughout Torah and rabbinic literature. Indeed, it has been noted by scholars and rabbis, that the God of the Hebrew Bible is constantly learning, growing and changing through interaction with human beings, challenges by the Patriarchs, Moses, and the people Israel. Talmudic rabbis even celebrated God's capacity to change. For our purposes, a couple of examples must suffice:

**In the story** of the Golden Calf, Moses argues with God and changes God's mind. Furious with the Israelites, God is ready to destroy them for building and worshiping a molten image as the one who brought them out of Egypt. Moses implores and cajoles until God renounces God's intention to punish the people with death. (Exodus 32)

**A beloved** Talmudic tale tells of a rabbinic dispute which ends with God calling out to validate the legal opinion of Rabbi Eliezer. Hearing God's voice, Rabbi Joshua, Eliezer's disputant, proclaims, "The Torah is not in Heaven! We take no notice of heavenly voices, since you, God, have already, at Sinai, written in the Torah to 'follow the majority.'" Subsequently, a Rabbi Nathan met Elijah the Prophet and asked him about God's response upon hearing Joshua's protest. Elijah declared, "God smiled, saying, 'My children have triumphed over Me!'"<sup>29</sup>

The notion that God is not only in active relationship with human beings, but that God needs people, so God may grow and evolve, is at the very heart of Jewish textual traditions: *So, you are My witnesses, says the Lord, and I am God" (Isaiah 43.12). Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai taught, "If you are 'my witnesses,' I am God, and if you are not my witnesses, I am not, as it were, God."*<sup>30</sup>

### Continuing...

I often say (and you might too!) that I would not be who I am were it not for the web of transformative relationships, of family, friends, colleagues, spiritually creative communities, progressive Jewish institutions and multi-faith organizations in which I have been and am embedded. Each context, in its own way, provides a “site for responsible creativity,”<sup>31</sup> which inevitably involves joy and struggle, as we strive toward whatever Covenantal partnership might look like among us as people and with God at this moment. As we are called into the future, we continue to change and be changed, change one another and can imagine a dynamic, creative God changing with us.

In that spirit of Becoming, I welcome those who find the ideas above engaging, challenging or troubling to join in the conversation, with me, with others, and.....

### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Toba Spitzer, “Why We Need Process Theology”, *CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly*. Winter, 2012. P.89. and “The Blessing of Uncertainty: Kaplan, God and Process”, *The Reconstructionist*. Fall, 2005. P. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Sandra B. Lubarsky, “Covenant and Responsible Creativity”, in *Handbook of Process Theology*, Ed. Jay McDaniel & Donna Bowman. (St. Louis: Chalice Press) 2006. Pp. 274-285.

<sup>3</sup> *Jewish Process Theology and Process Thought*, Ed. Sandra B. Lubarsky and David Ray Griffin. (State University of New York Press), 1996. Brad Artson, *God of Becoming and Relationship*. (Vermont: Jewish Lights) 2013. Both of Toba Spitzer’s articles fn. 1 address these issues.

<sup>4</sup> Op. Cit. *Handbook of Process Theology*, Introduction, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press. 2006, 2015. Pp. xxv-xxvii.

<sup>7</sup> *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. “Process Philosophy”. Retrieved from [iep.utm.edu](http://iep.utm.edu)

<sup>8</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn, see for example, <http://mindfulnet.org/page2.htm>

<sup>9</sup> C. Robert Mesle, *Process-Relational Philosophy: An Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead*. Templeton Press: West Conshohocken, Pa., 2008. P. 8.

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<sup>10</sup> Op Cit. Toba Spitzer, *CCAR Journal*, 2012. P. 88.

<sup>11</sup> Mordecai Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*. (New York: The Reconstructionist Press) 1981. P. 182-3. Retrieved from Toba Spitzer, *The Reconstructionist*, 2005. P. 60.

<sup>12</sup> See Karyn D. Kedar, *The Bridge to Forgiveness*. (Woodstock, VT.: Jewish Lights) 2007. p. 90

<sup>13</sup> Simcha Bunim of Przysucha. Retrieved from Sandra Lubarsky, *Handbook of Process Theology*, 2006. P. 280.

<sup>14</sup> *Siddur Kol HaNeshamah*, p 268-9)

<sup>15</sup> Zohar 3:290b [Idra Zuta]; trans. Daniel Matt)

<sup>16</sup> Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar*. Trans. Nathan Wolski. (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press) 2009. pp. 230, 250

<sup>17</sup> Cobb, J and Griffin, D. *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976) p. 59.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* p. 53

<sup>19</sup> *Midrash Rabba Bereshit* 10:6

<sup>20</sup> Kaplan, M. *Future of the American Jew*, p. 182 (New York: The Reconstructionist Press) 1981. Retrieved from Toba Spitzer, *The Reconstructionist*. P. 64.

<sup>21</sup> Berezovsky, S N, *Netivot Shalom* (lit. "Pathways of Peace"), Introduction: Awareness, Ch. 6 "What Does YHVH your God ask of you" as translated by Rabbi Tirzah Firestone.

*Yesod Ha Avodah*, (lit. "The Foundation of Sacred Service") is a book reflecting the teachings of the First Grand Rebbe of Slonim (Belarus), Rabbi Avraham Weinberg (d.1883).

*Ari* (*The Holy Lion*) is the acronym by which Rabbi Isaac Luria, (d. 1572) the innovative master of Safed Kabbalah, is commonly known. z'l is an acronym for *Zichrono(ah) liv'rakhah*, May his (her) memory be for blessing

<sup>22</sup> Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press) 2008. P. 101

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* Catherine Keller, P. 22

<sup>24</sup> Op. Cit. C. Robert Mesle, P. 9

<sup>25</sup> *Zohar* III:225a

<sup>26</sup> Retrieved from [https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter\\_Birmingham\\_Jail.pdf](https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Op Cit, Sandra Lubarsky. *Handbook of Process Theology*, P. 278.

<sup>28</sup> Op Cit. C. Robert Mesle P. 3

<sup>29</sup> *BT Bava Metzia* 59a-b.

<sup>30</sup> *Midrash, Pesikta de Rab Kahana* 102b

<sup>31</sup> See note #29