

SYNAGOGUES & CONGREGATIONS

Is Spiritual Direction Jewish?

By Rabbi Dr. Barbara Thiede

I sat with a bat mitzvah student a little over a year ago to study the Mourner's Kaddish. I spoke to her about the history of the prayer. I asked her if she could explain why a prayer said in memory of a loved one didn't mention death.

"I guess so that we remember to love God even when our heart hurts," she said.

We talked more about grief and sadness, about the way having a community around you to help you with something as elemental as saying a prayer can help provide comfort. Then I asked her to read Mourner's Kaddish.

By *b'al'ma di v'ra khir'utei*, her voice had lost its steadiness. By *ba'agala uviz'man kariv* I saw the first tears fall.

We stopped the prayer reading. I asked her to tell me what her

tears were about. She did not have the opportunity to say goodbye, she told me. She was crying because she hadn't been able to say goodbye.

My student had lost her grandmother the previous summer.

Her mother knew that the child's grandmother was past talking in those last days, and told her so.

"But I could have talked to her," she said.

"Do you think you still can talk to her?" I asked. "Would she hear you if you tried?"

I was really asking her about the Holy One and what the girl believed about life after death. How would it feel, I asked, if she wrote out all the things she would have liked to tell her grandmother before she died?

She liked the idea.



I asked her if she knew her grandmother's favorite color. Could she buy a pretty box of that color to store letters and pictures in, could she write to her grandmother for years to come?

Spiritual direction is trying to discern God's presence in the real and actual life of the individual. The director's *kavannah* (intention), is to guide the seeker in exploring his or her relationship with God, with what is sacred, with the state of their own soul. Wisdom, intuition, and staying open to God's presence helps both the director and the seeker to be aware of God's nearness – or distance. Prayer, meditation, journaling, ritual – all these can be part of spiritual direction.

Spiritual directors must meet people where they are. Do they find God to be present in the dilemmas they face and the fears they experience? If not, do they yearn for that Presence? Do they rage or hope?

Spiritual direction is to listen, above all, to the heart. Though many Jews might not think of spiritual direction as a Jewish discipline, it is fair to say that rabbinic traditions – particularly Chassidic ones – provide plenty of historical precedent for the way spiritual direction is practiced in our time. Rebbe Nachmann, who advised meditation and talking directly to God was most surely engaging in a form of spiritual direction.

While I studied for the rabbinate, I learned that being able to offer spiritual direction was as critical as knowing how to lead an engaging Torah study group, or a rewarding and enriching service. My congregants had questions – about how to expand their Jewish practice, about how to connect to the Holy One beyond the boundaries of the siddur, about how to cope with loss and grief.

This January, I will be ordained as a spiritual director, after a three-year training program with ALEPH, the Alliance for Jewish Renewal. I will be grateful for that training, for it has served to help me serve.

We all can acknowledge each other's hearts – that takes nothing more than quieting ourselves and listening for the presence of God. As we meet whatever life brings us, may we know that these things are elementally Jewish practices, ones we can all embrace. ✧

Rabbi Dr. Barbara Thiede is a spiritual director on staff at the Davidson Centre for the Professions and the spiritual leader of Temple Or Olam, serving Cabarrus County and its environs.



Let our family care for yours.

When you need assistance with a senior family member, adult or child, we are committed to providing compassionate home care through an experienced, caring staff.

Affordable Care Solutions

- Transportation
- Nurse Supervised
- Specialized Dementia Care
- Flexible 3 to 24 hour Care
- Perfect Caregiver Matching

Homewatch CareGivers®

Charlotte: 704-503-4660 Cornelius: 704-987-1802

www.homewatchcaregivers.com/charlotte

Do you ever stop thinking about what the future holds for your child?



Neither do we.

At the American Hebrew Academy, a one-of-a-kind boarding high school experience awaits your child. An academically rigorous environment where Jewish identity is nurtured, the Academy opens the doors to your child's future. It's everything a high school should be, and some things you never dreamed it could be. What doors can we open for your teenager? Learn more at www.highschoolmeansmore.org or call (336) 217-7070.

Now accepting applications for 2012-2013.

AMERICAN HEBREW ACADEMY

Because high school can mean so much more.