

SPIRITUALITY AND WELLBEING

TITLE SLIDE: Hi everybody, and thanks for coming. I was invited to speak about how spirituality and religion can enhance our wellbeing and that's what I'm going to talk about.

SLIDE: But with your permission, I want to make a few comments about faith in terrible times. This is one such terrible time, for many reasons, but most specifically for me and perhaps for others here, because of the war in Israel and Gaza. I am not here to offer opinions about what is happening, but I do want to say that at least for some of us, our values and our identity are both in part derived from our religion. Most of the time, thankfully, these are in harmony and support each other; but sometimes there is tension, occasionally unbearable tension, between the two, between one's sense of morality and one's commitment to tribe. In these extraordinarily painful situations, the goal is not to choose one or the other, but to seek solutions that respect both. I know I am engaged with this effort on a daily basis.

SLIDE: Also, in terrible times, many of us have a very understandable impulse to turn away from our faith. How can God let these terrible things happen? It can easily be a moment of spiritual crisis, which for me I recognize when I've essentially forgotten about God; when I've lost the balance between my daily life and my spiritual life; and when I give way to despair. I try to make spiritual distress an opportunity to turn more deeply TOWARD, rather than AWAY FROM, God. By the way, turning toward God does not preclude being angry, sometimes very angry, at God. In such moments of anger, I'm still engaged with my religion.

SLIDE: In difficult times, difficult events and inputs naturally take precedence; they can completely overwhelm us .

Even when our problems and the world's problems seem to require all our attention, all our energy, we need to occasionally be able to take a "pause."

This doesn't mean we "forget about" the pressures, difficulties, problems, anger, grief we're experiencing.

But sometimes we need to momentarily "put down our bundles," our burdens; then, after reorienting ourselves, we can pick them up again

Sometimes, when we return to these burdens, they've become just a little lighter, so that we see solutions and answers more clearly

Faith in a higher power can help us put down our bundles by reminding us of three questions:

SLIDE: What inspires us and makes us feel grateful?

SLIDE: What gives us a sense of awe?

SLIDE: What brings us joy?

Judaism helps me find answers to all these questions.

SLIDE: I mentioned values at the start. An important value Judaism teaches is tikkun olam, repair of the world. This means a commitment to healing what is broken wherever and whenever we can. But there is also a Talmudic teaching that says "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it." This means that each one of us is only a tiny piece of the puzzle. We can only play our small role in attending to the vastness of the problems surrounding us.

SLIDE: I also believe in prayer, especially when I cannot see human solutions. Prayer does not mean that we stop seeking answers, but only that God can help us find them. A humorous essayist and author, Anne Lamott, who is NOT Jewish, describes 3 sorts of prayer: Help! Thanks! And Wow! Help is prayer for when we need to be inspired, to find hope. Thanks is how we express gratitude when we see a little light in the darkness. And wow is a reminder of the miracles large and small that we can still find on Mother Earth.

SLIDE: A final aspect of Judaism I wanted to mention that literally helps me pause is Shabbat, the sabbath. Many of you who follow a specific religious tradition have your own sabbaths. For me, the sabbath is a reminder to take a breath and turn toward God. One special injunction on Shabbat is that it should be 24 hours of joy. Sometimes that is easy, but sometimes it seems indescribably hard, almost cruel. How can we be joyful when there is so much that is horrible and wrong in the world? Yet I think there is a deep wisdom contained in this apparent paradox. The history of the Jewish people is rife with events of persecution, expulsion, discrimination, efforts at systematic extermination. Over the centuries, Jews have realized that it is precisely because of so much suffering that we must never lose hope. When we

are enjoined to be joyful, we remember not to give in to despair. This is putting down the bundle – and after 24 hours, when we pick it up again, indeed sometimes it seems just a little less overwhelming, we feel renewed and ready to re-engage in the ongoing project of repairing a broken world.