

The Seekers Forum Transcript

# Light From a Thousand Stars: An Interview with Rabbi David Ingber

December 2020



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**Mark:** Welcome, David. It's so good to see you again.

**Rabbi David Ingber:** It's good to see you, Mark.

**Mark:** Thanks. I wanted to talk to you about the importance of wonder and awe in spiritual life, particularly at a moment when a lot of people are feeling deflated and scared and anything but wonderstruck or awe-filled. I'd just like to ask you, what is the purpose of wonder in spiritual life, do you think?

**Rabbi:** Such a wonderful question, no pun intended. Wonder, as the great Abraham Joshua Heschel reminded us, "Wonder precedes faith," he wrote. Awe and wonder, the miracle of being, like the very basic bare-bones generosity that is, I think, born of a heart that reflects on just the miracle of finding ourselves here. It serves as a profound, I would call, maybe even a lubricant, as it were, against the irritation of life itself. The ability to ask ourselves this could be otherwise – and it isn't, is the source of wonder.

It's a constant reminder of the inability of the mind to fully own and completely appropriate every moment and say, "Oh, I know this. I know this." It turns anxiety potentially, the grasping for certainty, into itself a religious journey or a spiritual journey where the unknown, it ceases to some degree to be like that which is something to be feared and maybe something to be explored.

Now, of course, in general, in a moment of pandemic, it would sure feel great to have a little bit more certainty. Wouldn't it? It would feel great. At the same moment though, there's something remarkable about being able to come back to the sense of childlike exploration of multiple options, of multiple opportunities of how this could be done differently or imagined differently. I think wonder is at the bedrock of our spiritual journey. It ties in very beautifully with imagination, to the extent that wonder can birth in us a sense of what else, how else?

I think it's at the heart of all blessing is this question that is at the heart of wonder itself, like what is this? What is this apple? What is this drink? It brings us into a profound and simple door into blessing and appreciation.

**Mark:** Beautiful. How does that sense of wonder and awe change how we respond to challenge, would you say?

**Rabbi:** I think, first of all, it invites us into the posture – I think wonder and awe invite us into a posture of the student. Challenges that seemed to cut at our sense of potency, our sense of competency, our sense of I can do this, I can figure this out, can be reframed for us as opportunities for us to learn something new. Wonder and awe really are the posture, as it were, of the disciple, of the one excitedly entering into a position of, "Oh, I wonder how I'm going to handle this," or, "How might I appreciate the experience of challenge?" It also grounds us, to some extent. It grounds us in not having to be perfect.

The perfect mind can't appreciate wonder. The perfect mind is bothered by things they don't understand. "I should know this." But wonder throws me back into a place of imperfection, of vulnerability, of creatureliness, of needing support and needing help. The mind that is, I think, attuned to wonder and awe is more pliant and therefore able to deal with challenges a little more creatively with a little bit less of the ego up against it and saying, "Oh, I have to

know everything.” It’s more likely then to be able to reach out and say, “Hey, can you help me in this challenge?”

**Mark:** Wonder decreases isolation and also a sense of needing to control?

**Rabbi:** Right, and it gives us nutrients. Wonder also opens us up to the cornucopia of experience that can give us a sense of being okay. We need that. Wonder can lift the corners of our mouth. Wonder can turn against something that seems to be closed into something that’s open. When we have more and more wonder and when we make time for wonder and we ask ourselves, how might this be a moment of wonder or awe, it gives us necessary nutrients that can give us the ego strength and the spiritual strength to stabilize us against a lot of very, very uncertain moments and challenging times.

**Mark:** When someone comes to you, Rabbi, and says that they have no sense of God or they’re not feeling the divine in their lives, what would you respond?

**Rabbi:** First of all, I think that we have to know, Mark, that there are a lot of reasons for people who’ve come to me or come to you or someone else and say, we don’t feel God’s presence, or they don’t believe in God or whatever it might be. The first thing I want to know is, what is the God that you don’t believe in? The truth is probably we don’t believe in the same God. The God you don’t believe in probably doesn’t exist, and the God that I don’t believe in probably doesn’t exist.

I probably want to first explore with them what they mean with that sentence. More often than not, I would say 99% of the time someone will have a place where transcendence peaks through, where the Holy and some would call the mystery or the *mysterium tremendum* Rudolf Otto said, the sense of, again, wonder and awe, whether it’s with a child or it’s in a creative pursuit, or if it’s in family. We really want to just locate the Holy. Once we’ve defined what the Holy is and we locate it, then we say to them, “Oh, your light is full of cathedrals.” You have many synagogues that you attend, many mosques that you pray in. Your life is full of these sacred moments.

Maybe you don’t call it the thing that I call it, but maybe let’s get on the same page about what we on the inside are both saying when I say that and when you say that. Then usually we find a place and we say to someone, you are a deeply religious person in the sense of what religion means because the word religion has a really bad rap because religion, as you know, from the word *legare*, which means to ligament, to re-ligament. Where are the places in your life where you re-attach yourself to the bigger picture?

**Mark:** Beautiful. That can be a walk on the beach.

**Rabbi:** For sure. If for sure can be a walk on the beach. It can be holding hands with your beloved. It can be in a quiet moment. It can be with tears streaming down your face as you think about the epic tragedy that is going on. That can be also an opening into profound holding by love, by universe, by ancestors. They’re so many places, as Rumi said, to kneel and to kiss the ground. You just have to find where those holy places are for people.

**Mark:** What can Judaism, in particular, teach us about resilience?

**Rabbi:** We know a thing or two. We’ve been in exile for many, many, many years. The vicissitudes and the historical conditions that Jews through generations were able to

withstand I think can teach us a lot. In fact, there was a whole group of people, as you know, that went to meet with the Dalai Lama at one point to let the Dalai Lama know about some of the secrets of Jewish longevity and resilience. One of the first things I think that Judaism offers the world is the power of memory. The power of memory in the Jewish tradition to remember is to revisit, but it's also the power that we have to reframe a memory.

Another very important piece is that when we tell our stories and we tell the history as it were, we also recognize that we are part of this story and that we can change the story. We can reframe the story, and that helps bring resilience because the story – even those stories that we tell often repeat themselves. We are not passive recipients of these stories. We can change the course of our history collectively and individually. That's another piece.

I'd say the third piece that Judaism gives in terms of resilience is an abiding sense that throughout the day blessings are possible. I like to say that in Judaism, we say nevertheless bless. Nevertheless bless is a Jewish idea that the Rabbi said we are to bless a hundred times a day. A hundred times a day we are to find an opportunity to stop and say, nonetheless nevertheless bless. That blessing practice is a kind of ancient technology that puts a little blessing on a hundred discrete moments in a day, and guess what happens? You know this Mark. The more you bless, the more you find things to bless. That's another very deep piece.

There are so many pieces here, but the last one is that hope is such a profoundly important part of the Jewish psyche. The sense that, as Martin Luther King said that "The arc of history is long, but it bends." It inclines. We believe and we have always believed that things will improve, that there will be a moment where the sun will rise again. We have been through some of the worst moments: the Holocaust, the inquisitions. But we maintained an abiding faith that the sun would rise again and that we would see a new day. I think that's a very important part of resilience is that hope.

**Mark:** What about humor? When I think of Judaism, I think naturally of humor and the salvific powers of humor.

**Rabbi:** Oh man, I am telling you. I tell you, one of the most important moments of my life was I think as for my eighteenth birthday, I went to see Jackie Mason on Broadway. I never laughed that hard in my life. I think that you hit it on the head. I think that above all the heavy things that I said earlier, the most important one is that humor is a gift and the ability to see incongruous things in the world. Humor always comes from seeing this huge gap between things, and Jewish humor is key. I think a lot of Jews would say that their Judaism comes from that sense of humor and the ability to laugh.

In fact, there's even a verse in Psalms that says that "At the end of the days we will laugh. We'll have the last laugh." [Jewish language] We'll have the last laugh. Being able to find time during the day to laugh is key. I have three little kids. One of my favorite people in the world is a woman named Dr. Laura Markham. She does amazing work with kids and parenting, and she wrote it at some point, every day during the pandemic, find a way to giggle with your kids, and it's really true.

**Mark:** Beautiful. It's reminding me of Ramana Maharshi. He said, "The day of laughter is now." That the laughter is now. The moment of liberation is upon us.

**Rabbi:** That can come from a very deep – everything we said until now is that those moments where you see clearly how things are, it's a miracle just to be alive. When we have

some of those moments, they can release us. They make us laugh, and that's deeply, deeply nourishing to the soul.

**Mark:** It is. It absolutely is. Tell me, Rabbi, what is the purpose of anger on the spiritual path?

**Rabbi:** Again, anger. One way to approach anger is to see it as an emotion that's quite dangerous. One who is angry can act from a place of anger, and it relies a certain spiritual immaturity. What is it to be angry at if everything is God's will and every moment is an expression of the infinite? What could you possibly be angry at? It just isn't the way you want it. It can just be a place where your ego is hanging out, and you got to tuck in your ego. Anger is just you fighting with what is, would be one way of saying it.

I think that spiritually, though, anger can tell us something very, very important. First of all, anger can remind us of – in the right valence, anger can be a really important way to see things that haven't yet finished in our lives. Anger can be a really important place for us to see what a deep need that isn't yet expressed, frustration. Anger and frustration. Anger at injustice can be a very wholesome and important emotion to work with because it can lead us energetically to make changes.

Anger that is used to make a change can be considered a very vital function. Anger that destroys, anger that comes from a place of, let's say, psychological hurt can then bring hurt onto others. So anger that motivates us to make a change, just like the healthy piece of anger in our psychology is to let us know that there's a danger, anger that wants to motivate us to make a change can be powerfully harnessed. Anger that has allowed free reign can see the world as an enemy, can see everything as fight or flight. That's the real tricky thing with anger is that it cuts to the heart of a human being's desire for survival, and that's wonderful.

We need to survive, and anger can be used to protect us, but also, anger can be used to identify enemies where they aren't. In that sense, the spiritual traditions have always been wary of it because it can be used as a way to make the world into a dangerous place in a way that it isn't. That's the healthy balance here. Anger that motivates us to do appropriate protection, to fight for justice, those are all healthy uses of anger.

**Mark:** What makes you angry?

**Rabbi:** What makes me angry? Sometimes I find myself angry at ignorance. Sometimes I find myself angry at cruelty. Sometimes often I find myself angry at the speed of awakening and how long it takes for us to see the right thing. I sometimes get extremely – I think anger when those who are more vulnerable are more treated badly. It makes me angry. When I look at these big pieces, I can get angry, and I also can get angry and frustrated in my own life sometimes when things aren't going the way I want them to. That's where my own spiritual work is, where I see something and I get frustrated, and what I'm being asked to do spiritually is to take a deep breath and make room.

Often, anger is just a cover for sadness. In my own spiritual work, I sometimes will just ask myself, am I mad or sad? Am I really angry at something right now? Or am I just feeling vulnerable and hurt? Then I covered that with some projected anger. Mark, I say it to my little kids because all parents are their kid's emotional coaches. I say to my kids sometimes, are you angry right now, or are you sad? More often than not, if we can get underneath the

anger, we can find something that's a little bit more ready to be healed or to be met, in a way that meeting the anger might not be accurate.

**Mark:** You're teaching your kids social intelligence. What a radical idea.

**Rabbi:** What a radical idea.

**Mark:** Can you imagine what the world would be if kids had emotional intelligence with their reading and arithmetic?

**Rabbi:** Can you imagine that? It's almost like we think the world – we don't have to teach those things. It's just a remarkable thing to know that there's another way to express your frustration. There's another way to express your hurt. There's another way, and that as we build those muscles, we're able to communicate more clearly. Often we can be received more clearly. When someone's screaming at you and what they really want to say is you really hurt me, it's a very different valence.

**Mark:** You mentioned hope earlier. I'm curious. What specifically gives you hope today?

**Rabbi:** So many things. In the immediate moment, I feel a lot of hope at this moment as our country, to some extent, found a voice that many were afraid it couldn't find. I'm buoyed by how many people participated in the democratic function of this country. That really gave me hope. I'm hopeful by the extreme urgency with which people feel now to solve this problem, this pandemic, and I'm also hopeful that we can turn that kind of urgency and that kind of radical possibility into solutions for other solvable problems. I'm feeling hopeful about a burgeoning recognition amongst in communities that I visit that we must act on for the sake of the globe, for the sake of our mother, the earth and make changes. I'm buoyed by the intensity with which young people feel at this moment, the next generation feel called to make some important changes to make the world a better place. I'm hopeful about a lot of other things and bigger things socially. I'm hopeful that as we emerge from this pandemic, in much the same way that we have emerged from other paradigm shifts in our culture, that we will take with us some profound lessons about how to make the world a better place.

We've seen, in a way, some of the glaring disconnects and glaring inequities that need to be shored up, so I'm hopeful for that. I'm hopeful in my personal life with the ways that things are in my family might be healed in the aftermath of everything that's been going on. I have hope. I wake up in the day, and I feel hopeful.

**Mark:** That's that, and that's a blessed place to be. One last question, Rabbi. You've talked about blessing as a practice. Is there another practice that you can suggest for opening the heart and healing loss? So many people are feeling the grief of losing the familiar. Is there a practice that you could suggest for softening around that?

**Rabbi:** I love your language, Mark. I love the way you said that. Is there a practice for softening around grief? By that, I hear you saying that – the first thing I hear is that grief is real. We're all carrying, to some extent, unmetabolized grief. That was true before the pandemic, and it's certainly true in the current state that we're in. There is a sense of grief for what was familiar, what has been lost, those who have been lost, the current state of affairs. So much grief but then, as we said earlier, it can become rage and anger. It's so vital to be able to go to that place of, how do we grieve?

The second thing that you said is after acknowledging that there is grief, how do we soften? How do we allow the grief in and allow ourselves to shake, to cry, to feel? Because fight, flight, or freeze, we have to come out of all three of those ways of dealing with things that have hurt, and we need to feel. One of the things that I do frequently is I place my right hand on my heart, and I close my eyes. I very gently breathe into my chest cavity and specifically bring the breath into my heart space. With the exhale I say, “Ah.” After a couple of those breaths, I then also say, “Ow.”

I just invite my body and my voice to articulate a very simple ow. Sometimes what I’ll hear in response is I hurt, or I’m sad, or I miss you; I miss this. I keep it super simple because all of the other places that the mind goes in trying to articulate the perfect sentence, it’s one or two levels above the pure feeling space of, “Ow, it hurts. I hurt. I miss you. I miss.”

I give myself a really specific amount of time like five, ten minutes, whatever it is, and I hold. It’s a process. I allow myself to cry. I say, “It’s okay to cry.” I need to hear myself saying, “It’s okay to cry,” because everything in me, especially as man, and you know this one well, Mark, you can say to yourself, “Oh, I got it. I’m okay. I’m okay.”

We just allow ourselves to hear that interject, that inner voice saying, “It’s okay to cry. I’m sad. It’s okay to cry. I’m sad. It’s okay.” It’s super, super important just to allow ourselves to grieve in that way, and the body will release. The breathing will attune to those words if we feel safe. What I find almost always is that there is a great ease that comes if I allow myself the tears and fears, the tears that can come and allow me to feel the grief, the sadness, and I wind up stronger, of course, as you know.

**Mark:** Beautiful. David, it’s so good to see you. Thank you for sharing your wisdom with The Seekers Forum.

**Rabbi:** It’s my pleasure. It’s really an honor to speak about these things. They’re so vital. I thank you, Mark, and all of those who are involved in bringing this wisdom and these teachings because we need them.

**Mark:** Thank you, sir. I’ll see you again.

**Rabbi:** Okay, Mark.

**Mark:** Bye.

**Rabbi:** Bye-bye.