

# a spiritual life

exploring the heart and jewish tradition

revised edition



merle feld

# *A Spiritual Life*

*SUNY series*  
*in Modern Jewish Literature and Culture*

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*Sarah Blacher Cohen, Editor*

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EXPLORING THE HEART AND  
JEWISH TRADITION

REVISED EDITION

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MERLE FELD

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*for Lisa and Uri—*

*Hold fast your dreams and ride them high*

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# Contents

Preface/ix

Acknowledgments/xiii

**1** ∞ Beginnings/1

**2** ∞ Beginning Again/19

**3** ∞ The Necessity of Poetry in My Life/49

**4** ∞ Report from the Trenches/55

**5** ∞ Passion/85

**6** ∞ Yizkor/109

**7** ∞ Israel/139

**8** ∞ Repairing the World: The Work of Tikkun Olam/171

**9** ∞ Daily Prayer/203

**10** ∞ We All Stood Together/241

**11** ∞ Brigadoon, a Place for Dreams to Grow/281

**12** ∞ Readers' and Writers' Guide/297

Glossary/319

Index of Poems/323

Literary Sources/325

About the Author/327

## Preface

When *A Spiritual Life* was first published in 1999, I began to travel across the country giving readings to promote the book and to develop an audience for it. From Portland, Maine to Palo Alto, California, I was moved beyond measure to see the effect on audiences and readers as I shared the stories and reflections of my life. I discovered that I loved reading aloud this poetry and prose, but I also came to feel how much I wanted to use these opportunities to help the women and men who showed up to further their own spiritual liveliness and introspection. I wanted to expand and shift the focus from me, the visiting poet, to them, the readers in the room, encouraging them to listen more carefully and caringly to themselves and to one another.

As I accepted invitations to visit communities and campuses, I began to create techniques and materials that would allow “the audience” to become truly engaged, active. Invited as writer, I showed up as educator, devising questions for discussion that would at first draw close attention to my poems and prose, but that would then move outward to suggest how audiences and readers might explore the deep meaning of their own lives, with my writing as a jumping off point rather than as an end point.

I found myself thrilled, fascinated, and humbled facilitating conversations among audiences about the themes of the book to see how I could develop materials that fostered trust and stirrings of deeper community through the humanizing, reflective sharing which the poems and prose of *A Spiritual Life*

inspired. Particularly when invited to communities as scholar-in-residence, I relished the luxury of time to develop and facilitate programs for adult learners on study retreats, congregants in synagogues, college students in academic courses and in informal Hillel groups on campus. The book gave me a place to stand as I opened my spiritual life and my heart to be a source of teaching. And then after years of doing this teaching in person, I began to see the possibilities of coming full circle and allowing the book itself to serve as a resource through the addition of a chapter that could guide readers in my stead. Thus was born the idea for an educational tool to accompany and enrich this book, one that went far beyond the usual page or so appended by publishers intended for book groups.

First and foremost then, what is new to this revised edition of *A Spiritual Life* is the Readers' and Writers' Guide featured in chapter 12. Both the techniques and the discussion questions offered there have benefited immensely from my encounters and work with readers from across the country and indeed, around the world—in fact, the Guide would not exist at all without the ongoing response from readers—and so it is no wonder as I worked on this revised edition and most especially as I created the Guide that I felt myself accompanied by countless partners in spiritual journeying. I am filled with gratitude for the open hearts that welcomed the first edition of *A Spiritual Life* and for the energy, excitement and pleasure I have been privileged to give and to receive from so many readers and audiences. A special thank you as well to Gail Reimer and Rachel Jacobsohn whose thoughtful critiques of the Guide helped me to realize my vision.

Of all the encounters with readers and audiences, perhaps none had a greater effect than the experiences I was privileged to share with so many people in the former Soviet Union. (A fuller version of this remarkable story is found in chapter 8, "Repairing the World: The Work of Tikkun Olam," also a new chapter to this book.) In brief, I traveled to Belarus in 1998 with Project Keshet, a Chicago-based nonprofit that helps to foster emerging women's leadership and Jewish life in

the FSU; during that visit I made some of my poems available to Jewish women's groups there and eventually there was a compelling demand to translate *A Spiritual Life* into Russian. With the help of dear friends Juliet Spitzer and Phil Wachs, Esther and Max Ticktin, Ruth and Rob Goldston, and many others in the Princeton community where I once made my home and still feel so at home, *A Spiritual Life* was rendered into Russian (as "*The Life of the Soul*") and subsequently in 2003 I went on a three week book tour of Ukraine.

During those extraordinary weeks, described here in chapter 8, I not only read and taught from the book, but in the late night hours when we should have been relaxing and sleeping, my companion and beloved fellow activist Nina Klotsman, and my gifted translator Lyubov Zrazhevskaya, collaborated with me to create a curriculum for Project Keshet Jewish women's groups across the FSU using "*The Life of the Soul*" as its base and inspiration. How delighted I am that that work there so enriched and informed the Readers' and Writers' Guide here in chapter 12. My experiences in the FSU were a profound teaching for me and thus reinforce once again the irony of "giving" and then discovering that your gift has been returned to you one-hundred-fold: English-speaking readers enjoying this revised edition will benefit immeasurably from Russian-speaking sisters and brothers across the sea whose insights inform much of the Readers' Guide.

Further cross-cultural influences on this revised edition are the result of a request to translate *A Spiritual Life* into Hebrew. That appeal came after the beginning of the second *intifada*, and because I felt the original book, published in 1999, would seem woefully outdated to an Israeli audience, I worked to give the Hebrew translator a more current chapter on Israel (chapter 7, revised here) and used the opportunity to further reflect on themes, experiences and issues relating to Israel. I later remarked to friends as I prepared this revised English edition that it is really "an English translation of the Hebrew"—said jokingly, but in fact, an accurate appraisal. The Hebrew version is not yet published: I feel great excitement

and curiosity to see how Israeli audiences will respond to this poetry and prose.

One last explanation of this revised edition is in order, namely, how did chapter 12 come to include not only a Readers' but also a Writers' Guide. Back in the mid 1990s, I had begun working with a variety of constituencies using writing as a means of helping them explore interior realms. By 2000, at the invitation of Rabbi Bill Lebeau, I was leading spiritual writing workshops for rabbis at the Jewish Theological Seminary's Rabbinic Training Institute; the workshops were quite effective and in the second year of my offering them, Bill asked if I would continue this work with rabbinical students at JTS. One thing led to another, dear old friends Joyce and Mike Rappoport were inspired to encourage me to expand my work to include students at Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Reform and non-denominational rabbinical schools, and with help from Joyce and Mike's Albin Family Foundation, the Rabbinic Writing Institute was born. Using techniques I've developed over time, I enable rabbinical students to connect to the core of their own spiritual lives and then to teach from that place of authenticity and wisdom, inspiring congregants, students, audiences, and readers to know their own deep core of meaning. It is to Joyce and Mike and Bill that I owe a debt for the most fulfilling and meaningful work of my life to date, and to my many beloved students who have enriched what wisdom I pass on to you in the Writers' Guide within these pages. The work I do guiding rabbinical students allows them to write about and to more deeply know and understand their own lives and stories, and it is my hope that this Writers' Guide will help you to do the same.

Thanks always to Director of SUNY Press, James Peltz, for his understanding and support of my work, and to Lisa and Eddie who never are too busy to read a draft of my writing and help to improve it with fine literary sense, keen intelligence, and love.

## Acknowledgments

There are a number of people who through their passionate appreciation of my poetry have encouraged me over the years not only to continue to write (that comes as it will, like the rain) but to save, collect, and transfer my words from scraps of paper to word processors; they have invited me to come read my work, have encouraged me to send it out for publication. Because they took my creative efforts seriously, they helped me to take those efforts seriously. My heartfelt thanks for their praise, which was offered early and often: Judith Plaskow, Ellen Umansky, Marcia Cohn Spiegel, Alicia Ostriker, Susan Reiman, Marcia Marker Feld, Roger Lewis, Ruth Schulman, Joyce Rappeport, Laura Spear, Leah Lemonick, Ruth Goldston, Amy Trachtenberg, Rev. Sue Anne Morrow, Kathy Murtaugh, Esther Ticktin, Joe Reimer, Henny Wenkart, Rabbi Deborah Brin, Rabbi Susan Schnur, Rabbi Patty Karlin-Neumann, Karen Kushner, Lorel Zarkessler, Michael Lerner, Ellen Frankel, Rabbi David Teutsch, Rabbi Reena Spicehandler, Rabbi Joe Levine, Rabbi Danny Leifer, Nancy and Louis Berlin, Alvin Mars, Janet Olshansky, Rabbi Michael Paley, Rabbi Devorah Jacobson, Rabbi Susan Harris, Rabbi Debra Orenstein, Rabbi Jane Litman, Rabbi Jim and Elana Ponet, Sharon Strassfeld, and Barbara Dobkin.

A singular acknowledgment to Jean-Claude van Itallie, my teacher in theatre: I remember an afternoon when we sat together in a rustic cottage at his retreat Shantigar and shyly, haltingly, I read him my first poems. In that hour he taught me everything I know about giving my words to an audience.

Three people especially are responsible through their stubborn devotion for not allowing me to finally be beaten down

by the long and arduous effort to find a publisher for this volume. Fred Bernstein went so far as to inaugurate a career as literary agent on my behalf; Judith Plaskow offered her keen mind, her critical eye, her loving affirmation; from the very beginning, Gail Reimer gave unselfishly of her time, her energy, her considerable gift for reading a text, helping me envision the unique structure of this book. My deepest gratitude for the many years of friendship and love I've shared with each of you.

I count my blessings that Sarah Blacher Cohen (seemingly not content simply to bestow good fortune on me by publishing a play of mine) invited me to submit this manuscript to SUNY Press; that James Peltz read it in a night and fell in love with it; that he, Diane Ganeles, and Fran Keneston have taken me through my first experience in publishing with an astonishing display of kindness, professionalism, and solicitude. Warm thanks as well to Nancy Trichter who represented me in writing "the marriage contract" and to Lisa Feld who offered her companionship and skill as tonic for the usually dull chore of proofreading.

For acts of friendship and bottomless devotion through dark nights, there can be no adequate acknowledgment on these pages—only in the daily living of my life can I return the love and care I have received from Frima Fox Hofrichter, Debora Phillips, Aaron Lemonick, and Leighton McCutchen.

Finally, Eddie. Much of the above and more have I received from you. All these years and all these roads later, your soul is still the soul of Ein Gedi.

1



*Beginnings*

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## A Spiritual Life

A few years ago a Jewish magazine decided to devote an issue to spirituality and asked me to contribute a short piece describing “a spiritual moment.” I thought, a moment is best captured in a poem, I’ll submit a poem. In fact, I submitted not one but two poems, two very different poems. The first captured a poignant memory of packing away my Passover dishes one year, an act which forced me to acknowledge that the holiday had come and now was gone, that my unspoken, unconscious longing to see my mother during a holiday so full of childhood memories, my mother who had been dead already several years, was of course a longing unrealized, unrealizable. In the poem were the tears of my feeling abandoned by her, abandoned in the Universe, alone, alone, so alone. Out of the depths I call to you . . .

The other poem, a very different moment, though actually also a moment of tears. A twenty-year-old me sitting down to Friday night dinner for the first time with my life’s partner-to-be. He began to make kiddush, the traditional blessing over the wine, and I was overwhelmed by feelings of gratitude that my journey had delivered me to love, to shared meaning, to connection. As the Psalmist sings in Hallel, “The stone that was discarded is now the cornerstone.” In the poem I felt like that once discarded stone, as I sang out with joy through those old tears.

The Jewish magazine decided they had room for only one poem. For a while I thought I’d insist “both or none” but finally I gave in and told them to use the one with my Passover dishes: it seemed an unusual moment to share with readers, at least it could make them reflect on the idea that “a spiritual moment” was not only a moment of consummation, that a spiritual moment might equally be a moment of longing, of stretching toward something precious that was out of reach.

But really, what I wanted to do in offering both those poems was to give a glimpse of the complexity of terrain which constitutes spiritual geography. In some sense, I've been waiting in these intervening years for an opportunity to share not one, not two, but many many pictures of the life of spirit. I've been waiting for an opportunity to share through stories, through poetry, the important life stuff I know something about—the struggle to become who you are, the work to achieve peace with your past, the search for meaning and the assertion of meaning. Increasingly when I'm asked to teach or speak, I am conscious of the constraints of the agreed upon topic, and I work to make room within it for what I think is really important to say, for what I think the audience, whether it knows it or not, is hungry to hear about. To break through the cerebral, the polite, the conventional, the pseudointellectual, and to speak face to face, human to human, heart to heart, soul to soul. Scary. Easier to write a well-reasoned paper with respected accepted sources and then just get up to the podium and read with expression. Much safer. But I never seem to be content with safe. I want alive. More and more I want alive.



As I write these particular words, wrestling with the creation of something new, something which has never existed before, I don't know how it's all going to fit together. It's a lot like the story of my life (it is in fact the story of my life) and women's stories are so complicated. (True of men's stories too? Probably, but for the moment I'm taking refuge in one of my particularities.) Women's stories: not a linear plot, but levels of reality simulcast on three or four different screens. How to tell one coherent story when you know you're not living one coherent story.

So, a patchwork. For a while I was a quilter and my favorite part of the whole process was gathering all the different pieces of fabric, seeing the explosion of color and pattern, and then creating a design which celebrated each individual

piece but also maintained enough of a harmony for all the pieces to live together.

What are the pieces of this quilt? I lay them out on the dining room table: stories, poems, reflections, prayers. What happened to me as a child, what I've learned day to day as a parent, my experience of Jewish time and symbol and custom and text, the political and spiritual dimensions of living in a Holy Land, the longing to be loved and to give love, the pain and terror and challenge of living in community, the continuing evolution of my relationship to my parents both dead now for many years. These are the greens and blues and purples and yellows of my life of spirit.



Beginnings. You should always begin at the beginning. But where is the beginning?

Earliest of all I remember the sunlight. I am sitting on a child's chair, next to my grandmother. She had long white hair—actually, not “white,” rather, yellowed, ivory. It was braided, then knotted in a bun. She's wearing a dark Old Country dress, it buttons down the front, covering a body which is sturdy yet soft. Black leather shoes lace up to her ankles, “old lady shoes.” We are sitting in the sunlight, perhaps it is autumn. The warm sun penetrates me, embraces me, I feel relaxed, cradled. It is a sensuous moment, a moment of safety. Peaceful.

Now I am a little older. A busy street corner, a few blocks from home. We were holding hands, suddenly we are not. Separated from my mother, I look up: the older children, the adults, tower above me, they block my light, darken my piece of sky. No one is holding my hand. I am separate. Alone.

A memory that repeats itself, every year, year in, year out. It is Yom Kippur. My brothers and I are home from school,