

# Sparks

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## **Funny. You Don't Look Religious** **Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat**

I once was hired to organize educational programs for a large Jewish youth group in the United States. To overcome any possible stigmas associated with the word "rabbi" and to encourage the kids to relate to me without preconceived notions, I asked the executives to introduce me as just David Aaron, not as *Rabbi* David Aaron. They respected my request, but I was dismayed to read in their newsletter the following announcement: "We want to welcome a new member to our staff: David Aaron, our Judaism specialist."

This sounded even worse! It made Judaism sound like a rare disease. Don't we go to specialists when we have a problem our general practitioner cannot treat? What do you do with a Judaism specialist? Do you come to him and say, "I've got this problem with Jewish guilt. Do you have a cure, Judaism specialist?" I was in trouble before I even started. I didn't want my name to have Jewish/Judaism/Rabbi/Hebrew or anything else like it attached to it. I just wanted to be another person on the staff. I knew that if I were identified with Judaism then I would be identified with a lot of the kids' baggage about being Jewish.

Needless to say, I had a rough time but it was the beginning of essential lessons I needed to learn.

Twenty-two years in the field of education has taught me how to help people unpack their baggage. The first step is to unlock the suitcase and look at what's inside. This process involves examining what you think you already know about Judaism and your issues with it. If you want to take a spiritual journey then you'll have to unpack the bags you've been carrying from a long guilt trip.

It's hard for people to imagine just how much baggage about Judaism they really have. Various past experiences, images, and definitions are actually stifling their ability to really understand a path to holiness. To unpack this baggage is to grow.

For example, most people are unaware of the images that naturally surface in their mind when they hear the word "G-d," and they often do not realize just how oppressive those images are. The same goes for the word *Shabbes* (Sabbath), *mitzvos* (religious duties) or other words related to Judaism. They are unaware of the biased images that are stored in their heads, and when these images surface, they assume that what comes to mind is reality.

Such personal biases are the first stumbling blocks to growth. If you really want to grow, then you must get in touch with what you think you already know and be willing to ask whether your perceptions reflect reality.

## HOW REAL ARE OUR PERCEPTIONS?

Although we consider our perceptions to be absolute reality, they are often based on a narrow range of encounters and experiences. Once we have an experience, we define it, and categorize it. And once we've categorized an experience, our definition of it becomes an absolute that we must work hard to get beyond.

This is true for many Jewish adults when it comes to G-d, Judaism, Israel, and Torah. They have already formulated their definitions and stored them, alongside other negative images in their heads, without realizing how deeply engraved these images are, and how they are stifling their ability to be happy and proud about being Jewish.

To illustrate this point, I've often asked people to describe their image of a Torah sage or a *Tzaddik* (holy person). Most people imagine a frail old man, pale, stooped over and often wearing thick glasses. Why can't the person also be a woman or a young dynamic robust fellow? But most people, when they imagine "Torah sage," or *Tzaddik* think of a frail old man.

When I was growing up, I had a very clear image of a *Tzaddik* sage — it came from a picture in my living room of three rabbis learning Torah. They were very old, with long white beards and glasses. They were sitting, bent over, around a table piled with books engaged in a deep Talmudic discussion. One looked like an umpire yelling, "You're out!" The other one looked like he was shouting, "No!" And the third one seemed to be mouthing, "Oy Vey!"

To me, that picture was Judaism. I did not want to see myself in that picture. That picture alone stifled my openness for getting more involved as a Jew because I did not like and could not relate to it. Simply, I did not want to be weak and old. I did not want to be in that unattractive dark gloomy room, sitting over a pile of books, involved with some seemingly irrelevant Talmudic discussion of minute details. Somebody's unattractive picture was my baggage.

Later in my life I realized that this picture, which my parents had bought in Israel, had actually determined what a Torah Jew looked like to me. For a long time that picture was my only image of Judaism because it was engraved in my mind — a graven image, so to speak. And I had to work to get past it, if I really wanted to know about God, Torah, commandments, Sabbath, and other Jewish topics.

A number of years ago, I had a very personal question that I wanted to discuss with a Kabbalistic master. The question was so personal that I was trembling at the thought of even talking to someone about it. So, I asked around for advice about whom I should consult. That is how I found out about a great Kabbalistic master, a Hassidic Rebbe called the Z'viler Rebbe. Hmm, interesting, I thought. I had never heard of him and did not know where to find him. But I figured that he must be in Meah Shearim, the famous Hassidic neighborhood in Jerusalem. Where else could he be?

I went to Meah Shearim and started asking around for the Rebbe from Z'vil. The first person said, "Oh, wow, the Rabbi from Z'vil! You want to see the Z'viler Rabbi? Well, you have to go *yamina* (right), *smola* (left), *smola*, *yamina*" — perfect directions. I went left, right, right, left, and, of course, I got lost.

I then met someone else on the street and said, "Excuse me, have you heard of the Z'viler Rebbe?" "Have I heard of the Z'viler Rebbe? Oy Gevalt, he's such a holy man — an unbelievable deep soul, wow, wow."

This man tells me to go left, left, right, right, right, and I follow his directions. I arrive to find a group of young kids playing on the street, and I tell them that I'm looking for the Z'viler Rebbe. The kids say, "Oy, the Z'viler Rebbi! Oy the Z'viler Rebbi, oy, oy!"

Finally, I'm standing in front of the Rebbe's apartment building. I see a young fellow walking up the stairs and I say, "Excuse me, I am looking for the Z'viler Rebbe." He says, "I can take you there."

"Great."

As we're walking up the stairs I say to this young guy, "Have you ever met this Rebbe?"

He says, "You might say so, yes." He gets to the door and says, "This is where the Z'viler Rebbe lives."

He takes the keys out of his pocket, and I say, "You work for the Z'viler Rebbe? Oh, wow." He says, "Ahh."

He opens the door and directs me to a room in the back of the house. As I'm sitting in the room, all of my images and fantasies are flying because a Hassidic master is about to walk in, full of fire, and it's going to be like lightening!

After a while, this same young fellow walks into the room, sits across the desk and says, "Hi, how can I help you?" I say again, "I'm looking for the Z'viler Rebbe."

"I'm the Z'viler Rebbe."

You can imagine my utter shock.

I was stuck in what I thought a great Kabbalistic master must look like. Surely, he had to be old. He had to be intimidating. I had trembled at the thought of even asking my question, and had the issue not been so pressing I might have never searched for him — I would have been too afraid. I was trapped by my very narrow experiences, which got in the way of my ability to see reality as it is.

The Jewish mystical tradition teaches that the archetypical biblical personality who epitomizes the *Tzaddik* is Joseph. And yet when we picture Joseph we rarely think of him as an old man. He was a young dreamer. He was dynamic, colorfully dressed, charismatic, and quite handsome. He was a sage and yet also a statesman. And yet, even though he became the powerful viceroy of Egypt, he always humbly had the name of G-d on his lips.

Funny. He didn't look religious. But he was.

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