



## Jay Henry Moses



*Rabbi Jay Henry Moses got his start in Jewish leadership through NFTY, Reform Judaism's youth movement. He graduated from the University of Michigan in 1991 with a B.A. in English literature. In 1992, Rabbi Moses enrolled at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and was awarded a Wexner Graduate Fellowship for his rabbinical studies. During his years in Cincinnati at HUC-JIR, Rabbi Moses served as a student rabbi at congregations in Grand Forks, North Dakota and Pine Bluff, Arkansas. He was ordained and came to Temple Shalom of Chicago in 1997.*

*Rabbi Moses has shown a continual commitment to two Jewish passions: educating youth and engaging in mitzvah activities. He is on the board of Kavod, a nonprofit tzedakah collective. Rabbi Moses also serves on various committees in support of Olin-Sang-Ruby Union Institute, Reform Judaism's camp serving the Great Lakes region. He is an active volunteer with the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs and the Old Town School of Folk Music. He loves to play basketball and to spend time with friends, especially his dog Motek.*

**S** *habbat Shalom:* What is the purpose of spiritual life for you? How would you see your role in this life?

**Moses:** The purpose of spiritual life is to seek truth and meaning in life. I don't believe that what we take in with our senses and process with our intellect is the whole story of being. In fact, it is only the gateway, only the tip of the iceberg, the garments concealing the real truth. The purpose of spiritual life is to see what is under the garments. My role in life is then to be seeker—for myself—as well as guide—for others, when they are interested.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Is life with God an individual choice or is God present anyway? Does it imply a particular or ideal way of life?

**Moses:** God is there no matter what; we choose whether or not to be aware of God's presence and pay

attention. Our choice is whether to believe and practice based on this awareness. I believe there are different ways of interpreting the kind of life implied by this awareness. Judaism, and Jewish law, is one series of ways to live out this awareness. It's not the only one; it's just a venerable, respectable one, and it happens to be my legacy. That's no accident either.

**Shabbat Shalom:** What are the elements of your life with God?

**Moses:** I meditate each morning, with traditional Jewish elements of prayer—head covering and prayer shawl. I lead services on the Sabbath in synagogue. I study traditional Jewish texts. I seek awesome sights in nature. I love to listen to many kinds of music and sing. I cherish love relationships and friendships. In each of these experiences, I find moments of closeness to God, moments of connection to something higher and

more powerful than what is apparent on the surface.

**Shabbat Shalom: How do you communicate with God?**

**Moses:** I communicate with God by trying to get my ego out of the way and let God in. I am almost never able to do it.

**Shabbat Shalom: How important is study in your spiritual life?**

**Moses:** Study is very important because the Jewish tradition is a textual tradition. We have expressed our relationship to God through texts for over 3000 years. I believe that the intellect and the spirit meet in the study of religious texts. I also believe studying pushes us to grow intellectually and spiritually; it challenges us, and I believe that challenge and growth are at the heart of deep spiritual truth.

**Shabbat Shalom: How do communal activities enrich your life with God? Why is worship together with other persons of value to you?**

**Moses:** Community is essential to Jewish religious practice. The experience of a group praying and singing together is one of the most powerful religious truths in our world. Judaism teaches that certain prayers require a “minyan,” a quorum of ten. Community—warts and all—is critical. We learn much alone, and there is much to be said for private, quiet, isolated spiritual experiences; but Judaism’s Talmud teaches “do not separate yourself from the community.”

**Shabbat Shalom: How are children initiated to live a life with God?**

**Moses:** This varies from community to community and family to family. Minimally, children are taught the building blocks of Judaism: Hebrew, holidays, Bible stories, life-cycle events. It is hoped that they will take these building blocks and use them as they enter their own spiritual journeys in adulthood.

**Shabbat Shalom: How important are Jewish ceremonies and festivals to your life with God?**

*I believe that the deepest Jewish ethical truth about eating—deeper by far than keeping kosher in its traditional way—is vegetarianism.*

**Moses:** Very important. The rhythm of time is something many of us take for granted, both the cycle of seasons and the cycle of life. Judaism insists that every passage—each day, week, month, sea-

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son, year, each birth, coming-of-age, marriage, death, etc.—speaks of the meaning of the whole thing. Judaism is a system for seeking meaning, and each ceremony touches on a different intuitive human curiosity, need, or yearning. We link history with our own struggle to find God in this way. While the whole package of Jewish observance can be overwhelming, each ceremony individually is beautiful and important.

**Shabbat Shalom: Is obedience to the Torah necessary (or crucial) to live your life with God?**

**Moses:** Yes, but I interpret “obedience to the Torah” liberally. I believe the Torah contains core values, and I believe in obedience to them: compassion, charity, decency, discipline, hospitality, fidelity, study, and many others. I also believe that our understanding of the Torah and its values changes over time. I don’t believe the Torah is a manual to be followed literally in all cases; it is simply the starting point, the system of “roots” to which we trace ourselves, but our actual practice is more like the “fruit” or “leaves” of the tree, bearing only scant resemblance to the roots, but inextricably connected to them and growing out from

them. I study and preach from the Torah in this interpretive way weekly.

**Shabbat Shalom: What is the major source for morality and ethics in your life?**

**Moses:** Jewish tradition is my major source. Judaism certainly does not have the corner on the market of these values, but I like to think of us as founding shareholders. I have picked up much morality from parents, teachers, friends, school, the media, society, etc; but the older I get the more I read my morals through the lens of Judaism, consciously. I believe God wants us to continually strive to improve ourselves, so the connection is clear.

**Shabbat Shalom: The Greeks regarded work as unworthy of a “good” person, and they would have rather kept busy thinking than working. How do you regard work?**

**Moses:** The Talmud teaches: im ein kemach, ein Torah. “Without sustenance (lit. flour, i.e. the work that puts bread on the table), you can’t have Torah.” I believe both are necessary for a balanced life. Work makes rest meaningful.

**Shabbat Shalom: Usually Jewish people are regarded as being very active. What does the concept of rest mean to you?**

**Moses:** I’m not sure I agree with that stereotype. In ultraorthodox communities, it is a badge of status to spend all one’s time studying Torah, and not “working” at a trade at all. Rest is a supreme value, though. The story of the creation of the world depicts God creating for six days and then resting. The natural rhythm of the world demands that we rest periodically. It is unhealthy physically and spiritually not to. If God needs rest,

then God knows we do.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Regarding performance and achievement, how do you react to the following statements: “God will provide” and “I have to work hard to get what I need”?

**Moses:** I’m more in the “God helps those who help themselves” camp. I think the drive for achievement is deeply rooted in the Jewish psyche, from the Torah on. Our view of God has always been one who challenges us to be the best we can be, in terms of education, professions, ethics, and every way imaginable. God only provides me with the gifts and strength I need to achieve in the material world. The commitment to do it is what I need to bring.

**Shabbat Shalom:** What is recreation for you? How do you relate recreation to your spiritual life?

**Moses:** Recreation, like rest, is crucial for balance. I believe the body needs work and exercise to remain healthy. I love sports, basketball, baseball, cycling. I love to spend time playing with my dog in the park. I believe entertainment—sporting events, cultural experiences, concerts, museums, etc.—all contributes to the healthy mind, body and spirit by virtue of the balance it encourages. I believe God created us with different interests, needs and temperaments, and that we should listen to our bodies and souls.

**Shabbat Shalom:** How important are aesthetic aspects of life in your life with God?

**Moses:** Very important. God touches us in many ways; we can never “understand” God, we can only catch glimpses. The “keyholes” to look through are everywhere, and these areas are important keyholes for me. There is no easy formula for finding God. God is everywhere and in everything, and each one of us will tune in on different frequencies.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Is diet an important part of your walk with God? Why?

**Moses:** Yes. I believe Judaism challenges us to uplift the mundane and make it sacred. Nothing is more mundane than eating. I have chosen to be a vegetarian as a statement of this holiness of the apparently mundane. In doing so, I connect myself to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, where they are given the plants to eat, and the animals only for company. I believe that the deepest Jewish ethical truth about eating—deeper by far than keeping kosher in its traditional way—is vegetarianism. Also, the gratitude for food is an important spiritual connection. Blessings before and after meals are the tool for uplifting the mundane.

**Shabbat Shalom:** So, physical health in an important ingredient of your religious life?

**Moses:** Yes. The body is a miracle, a gift from God. I believe Judaism challenges me to get in touch with my body, and that my body is a receptacle of God’s energy. I try to treat it as such.

**Shabbat Shalom:** In the Bible we find phrases like: “Remember . . .” and “You have seen . . .” and it seems that these imply that for a Jewish person the past is in front of them and the future is behind them. What lessons are learned from the past? How do you relate to the uncertainty of the future, in your life with God?

**Moses:** Jewish tradition teaches that there is no chronology in the Torah; it’s all an illusion. The Truth is not time-bound. Yet, it’s true that we are challenged always to remember and learn from our past. I believe that events unfold in ways which are educational and which reveal something of the deeper meaning of our existence. I think the uncertainty of the future is how it has to be for humans. Certainty shouldn’t be the goal; preparation

to accept the future and to be able to deal with it is the goal in my life with God. God teaches us how to deal with the future, but only if we are paying attention to the past and the present. Only if we truly understand the heart of the stranger, as we are commanded to do, can we be ready for the next time that “Jew” and “stranger” become synonymous.

**Shabbat Shalom:** When is life with God difficult?

**Moses:** Life with God is not difficult. Life in general is difficult. The problem is when we expect God to make it otherwise. If we expect God to prevent or solve our problems, we are inevitably disappointed. The biggest challenge is accepting that God may be distant, difficult to access in as direct a way as our spiritual hunger may cause us to want.

**Shabbat Shalom:** What would you share from your personal experience to kindle someone’s interest in a life with God?

**Moses:** I often feel compelled to acknowledge my own doubts and to legitimize doubt and uncertainty as a very valid theological exercise. I grew up with no real God-language. I’m still not totally comfortable even with some of the things I have said in this interview. And yet, I think too many people dismiss God too quickly because they expect theology to withstand the scrutiny of rational or scientific inquiry. I would share that I have discovered a world beyond the rational and scientific; respecting and including it, but not limited to it. This is the world of God-talk, and it reflects a truth even deeper than the rational mind has been able to grasp.

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\*Interview by Samuel O. Indreiu, graduate student at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.