

A SPIRITUALITY & HEALTH E-BOOK

Best of Rabbi Rami

Roadside Assistance for the Spiritual Traveler

OUR ROADSIDE
ORACLE ANSWERS
**LIFE'S 5 BIG
QUESTIONS, PLUS
20 MORE**

Spirituality
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THE SOUL | BODY CONNECTION



A bit more than 10 years ago an Oracle showed up out of the ether via email. What we knew about the Oracle wasn't much: a rabbi with no congregation, a long list of books we had never heard of, and a vague affiliation with an academic institution in Tennessee, where he never seemed to be. But our book editors at the time, Fred and Maryanne Brussat, who have read every significant religious/spiritual book ever written, wrote this: "Ask Rami anything!"

So we did.

(Over time, we learned to pronounce his name. Ra rhymes with Ah! or Awe, depending on the circumstance. Ra me.)

People ask questions, Rami answers, and we don't edit them (except occasionally

for space) because the answers speak for themselves. Our Oracle lives in the real world (which is billions of years old), yet he is not of it (any more than anything else is, according to physics). And (so far as we can know) his answers are honest, true, helpful, and entertaining. We have readers who gleefully try to trip or trick the Oracle, and we wish them luck.

The rabbi's dream is to have a bus and travel the country or even the world offering Roadside Assistance to the Spiritual Traveler, and we're trying to make that happen. If more people listened, we would be happier and healthier and live better. In the meantime, here are some of the Oracle's foundational answers. Please spread them around—and keep the questions coming!

—THE EDITORS



BIGGEST QUESTION 1

What am I?

You are a tube.

Let's start concretely: You are a body. And what is this body? It is basically a tube, not so different from the body of a worm. Food goes in at one end, waste comes out at the other, and in between all kinds of cool things happen.

Anyway, that is about all I know regarding the body: It's a tube that does cool things and then dies, often in horrible ways. The amount of time allotted for doing cool things is sometimes quite short and sometimes quite long. If we take care of this tube—eat right and exercise, that kind of thing—we might extend the time the body has to do cool things, but I've known too many people who ate well and exercised regularly, and who yet

died young, to think that we have all that much control over the fate of this tube.

So eat well and exercise regularly not because it will keep you alive longer, but because for most of us it will make the life you have better for as long as you have it—which, even when it is long, isn't really all that long.

Think about that for a moment. Humans have been around for hundreds of thousands of years, but chances are you and your kids won't make it past 120. Given the grand scheme of things, your life is little more than a blip on the cosmic screen, and yet it is such a precious blip.



BIGGEST QUESTION 2

Where did I come from?

You came from the world.

While it is true that we are tubes, it is also true that we are more than tubes.

Take your lungs, for example. While they do exist inside your tube, and while they are absolutely essential to your survival, they rely on processes that have nothing to do with what goes on inside your body.

Lungs need oxygen, but they don't make oxygen. While your body is good at making methane, and seems to get better at this with age, nothing in your body makes oxygen. Oxygen is made through the process of photosynthesis, a process that requires trees, plants, and sunlight. If your body needs lungs, and your lungs need oxygen, and oxygen needs trees and sunlight, then trees and sunlight are as essential to your body as your lungs. In fact, trees, plants, and sunlight are as much a part of your body as lungs.

Nor does the body end there. Trees need earth and water to survive, and sunlight needs the sun, so the planet earth and the sun are part of your body as well. For the earth and sun to be in just the right relationship for photosynthesis to happen and oxygen to be made, they need all the other planets and moons in our solar system to be just where they are so that gravity will hold the earth at just the right distance from the sun so that your tube doesn't freeze up or melt down. So the whole solar system is your body no less than your lungs. And the solar system needs the Milky Way galaxy and the galaxy needs the universe, so if the story of the body is well told, you discover that you are the universe. How's that for precious?

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BIGGEST QUESTION 3

Where am I going?

There is nowhere to go.

If you are with me so far, try this:

Take a length of rope, tie a knot in it, and think about the relationship between the knot and the rope. Is the knot other than the rope? Could the knot exist without rope? Now name the knot after someone close to you who died. (When I do this exercise with kids I name my knot Fanny after my mom's mom.) Having named the first knot, tie a second knot on the rope. Give this knot your own name. Compare the two knots. They are not the same. One is a bit older than the other; one may be a bit tighter or looser than the other; one is in one place on the rope, the other in another place. And yet they are both the same rope and nothing other than the rope. Now imagine that the rope is all there is, and everything is a knot of the rope.

This is a story about death, so it is time to mark the passing of our first knot, Fanny in my case. Untie the original knot; Fanny has died. But where did she go? Sure, her shape is gone, but is the rope any more or

less? Is the rope that was Fanny missing? Is the Rami knot any less connected to Fanny now that the knot we called Fanny is gone? To the extent we love and cherish the knot—Fanny—we miss her. We miss her shape, her smell, her stories, and her love. Everything that we remember about her is gone, but the rope that she was still is. And because it still is, the connection with Fanny isn't broken. Now tie a third knot in the rope. This isn't Fanny; there is no way to replicate the Fanny knot perfectly. It is simply another knot, for the rope keeps knotting the way an ocean keeps waving.

The reason I love this exercise is that it leads me to an understanding of myself and others that honors our differences without imagining them to be permanent. It allows me to be the precious tube I am, while showing me that I am so much more: I am both knot and rope, wave and ocean, part and whole. I am God—just not all of God. And so is everything else.

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BIGGEST QUESTION 4

What am I here to do?

To open your heart, stretch out your hand,
broaden your mind.

Stories that answer the question *What Am I Here to Do?* are called heart stories because they either open or close your heart. When your heart opens, compassion arises. When compassion arises, you naturally reach out to be of service to others. And when you are of service to others, you get to know them and expand your mind.

Another way to say this is that there are only two kinds of heart stories: those that engender love and those that engender fear. The love I'm talking about makes you curious about life and courageous when living it, while the fear I'm talking about constricts the heart and alienates you from life.

When I talk about stories that perpetuate fear, this is the kind of story I have in mind: We all carry these "othering" stories. They may be about Jews, African Americans, Mexican Americans, Muslims, Christians, homosexuals, women, or any number of people we might fear. We tell othering stories to keep the other at bay.

Are you the Chosen, while everyone else comes up with the Silver Medal at best? Are you saved while billions of others are going to burn for all eternity in Hell? Are you a true believer sworn to defend the faith by slaughtering the infidel? Are you of a higher caste, while others are lower or perhaps so low as to be beneath caste and hence untouchable? Do you fear black people, white people, Puerto Ricans? These are all constricting fear-based stories we were told and may well tell our children even without realizing it. Stories told long enough cease to be stories and become facts.

Were you born with an innate dislike for fat people? Or did you learn this growing up? And if you are fat, do you hate yourself for being fat? I spent much of my youth in fat camps, and all of my life fighting my weight. I can tell you the only thing fat kids hated more than even fatter kids was themselves. You aren't born hating yourself—you learn that. Perhaps you need to open your heart to yourself?

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BIGGEST QUESTION 5

Why?

Because.

I want to teach you a Hebrew phrase that I have found extraordinarily helpful in my quest to understand the purpose and meaning of life: *Lama? Kakha*. *Lama* is the Hebrew equivalent of the English word “why.” *Kakha* is Hebrew for “it just is.” *Lama? Kakha* means that things simply are the way they are, and asking *Why?* is often irrelevant.

Lama? Kakha. Why? Because. Because reality is reality and we can’t always understand why, and so we have to be humble and learn to live without final answers.

Another way of asking *Why?* is to ask *What is the purpose of life?* I say this: “Life *has* no purpose; life *is* purpose.” When you have something, the something you have is other than you. I have a computer, but the computer isn’t me. I have an idea, but the idea isn’t me. What I have is other than who I am. But I don’t have life, because there is no me without life. I am life; life is me.

You are not here to win something, or to earn something, or to escape to some other dimension. You don’t have to find something extra from life, you only have to live life rightly—with curiosity, courage, and compassion. When you do, your heart will open and you will be filled with an ever-increasing capacity to love and be loved. You are here to live and live well.

There is no *why*, there is only the fact that you are here. “Why do I suffer?” There is no *why*, there is only the fact of suffering. Don’t ask *why*, ask, What shall I do with the situation in which I find myself? And here the answer is simple: You are an experiment; you are a way life explores living. Live your life as an experiment, and see what you can learn about living well, taking care of self and others. And then share what you learn with others. This is why you are here.



+ 20 MORE . . .

1 What religion is God?

What flavor is ice cream? Ice cream comes in dozens of flavors—chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, coffee, etc.—but ice cream has no flavor of its own. God comes in lots of flavors—Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, African, Native American, Pagan, etc.—but God has no flavor of its own. Find the flavor you like the best; just don't imagine that your favorite flavor is the right flavor, or that any flavor is God.

2 Do I need a religion to awaken to God?

You awaken to God the same way you get to Carnegie Hall: practice. Here are some of the practices I do daily: walking, lovingkindness meditation, studying sacred texts, mantra repetition, and self-inquiry. You can find variations of these practices in every religion, or you can create your own practice without joining any religion. The key isn't belonging to a religion but committing to a practice.

3 My girlfriends and I have resolved to live more spiritually. How should we start?

Start by practicing what we Jews call *shmirat ha-lashon*: guarding your tongue. Ask yourselves three questions before speaking: Is what I am about to say true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? If what you are about to say isn't true, don't say it. If it's true and kind and, as far as you can foresee, has no negative consequences, say it. If it is true and unkind, however, ask the third question. Say only what is true and necessary. And if what must be said is harsh, try not to say it harshly. This will keep you from gossiping and elevate the quality of all your conversations. Do that for a year and you and everyone with whom you talk will benefit.

*Ask yourselves three questions before speaking:
Is what I am about to say true?
Is it kind? Is it necessary?*

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*Self-forgiveness may be overrated.
Use your guilt over the past to make
yourself more kind in the present.*



4 My husband and I are finally divorcing, and I'm the cause. While my husband has forgiven me, I'm unable to forgive myself or make peace with him. Please help me with this.

Self-forgiveness may be overrated. Use your guilt over the past to make yourself more kind in the present. Use your memory of mistakes to avoid making the same mistakes. We are all defined by the baggage we carry. Learn to drop baggage that no longer serves you in your quest to be your best self. When your arms are no longer holding what you don't need, you may find them ready to embrace what you do need, and, perhaps, your ex as well.

5 I do mindfulness meditation twice daily, consider myself deeply spiritual, and participate in many spiritual communities. I am also pro-life. I find that my conservatism is derided in spiritual circles. Are spiritual people always liberals?

Like you, the more I practice meditation, the more pro-life I become. But my pro-life stance is universal: I am pro-life for the unborn and the already born, pro-life for humans and animals and nature as a whole. The more I practice, the more sensitive my moral antennae become, and the more compassionate I am toward people called to make difficult moral choices. The more spiritual I become, the more I want for others what I want for myself: the freedom to make the most compassionate and just choice I can make without others limiting my options to the choices that they would make. Is this liberalism?

6 My "spiritual" friends are so self-righteous about their so-called holy diets that I sometimes eat junk food just to spite them. Does eating really matter spiritually?

I think all consumption—food, clothing, electronics, cars, etc.—matters and has an impact on us physically, emotionally, morally, environmentally, and spiritually, and we would be wise to consume in ways that are beneficial in all five dimensions. Without telling you what to eat, I suggest that you ask yourself whether what you consume is of benefit to you in each of these five ways. If it is, consume it. If it isn't, don't.

7 My meditations convince me that I'm a spiritual being having a physical experience. Does the physical plane have any significance at all?

Thinking in terms of spiritual beings having a physical experience or physical beings having a spiritual experience perpetuates the illusion of dualism. Physical goes with spiritual the way front goes with back and up goes with down. If your meditation leads you to denigrate the physical, take up an earth-honoring practice like gardening, and a body-honoring practice like yoga. When you know the physical and the spiritual as aspects of a greater whole, you will know the significance of each.

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8 **So many spiritual teachers say we choose our own reality. I have Parkinson's. Did I choose this?**

Imagining that you choose your own reality is the height of narcissism. A nearly infinite number of factors have to be controlled for you to choose to have Parkinson's disease, and you simply lack the power to do so. The only choice you have is how you deal with the situation you are in. And even then, your choices are limited. Dealing with Parkinson's is going to be difficult enough without adding to your suffering with fantasies of self-blame. Any so-called spiritual teacher who tells you this is your fault is a fool, a charlatan, or both.

9 **I have been humbled and stepped on so often that what I need is to stand up for myself and be strong. Why doesn't spirituality make us stronger rather than weaker?**

When I speak of humility I don't mean to imply weakness. I'm speaking of the capacity to rest your small self, your ego, in your larger Self, the Self that knows itself as an expression of God. When the small self rests in the larger Self there is no sense of weakness at all. On the contrary, you awaken to and live from your innate divine dignity and neither accept nor offer anything less than dignity in your relationships with other people. Done rightly and well, spiritual practice lifts you up without putting others down.

You'll know you've really found God in the woods when you stop judging the people in the box.

10 **I find God while hiking alone in the woods, rather than attending a worship service in a brick box. Why do people prefer to gather in a box?**

Central air or heat, for one; community, for another. But it isn't a matter of either/or. Different people awaken to God in different ways. You'll know you've really found God in the woods when you stop judging the people in the box.

11 **For years I have felt perfectly comfortable with my faith, but in the past few months I am nagged by terrible doubt. How can I regain my certainty?**

Belief, not doubt, is the enemy of faith. Don't erase doubt; embrace it. Doubt, if it is allowed to ripen, strips you of certainty and awakens you to a compassionate curiosity rooted in a humble not-knowing that is the hallmark of mature faith.

12 **Is there one thing all religions agree on?**

Yes, it's called the "Golden Rule." Here are some examples: Christianity: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Judaism: "That which is hateful to you do not do to others." Islam: "None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself." Buddhism: "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." And Native American tradition: "All things are our relatives; what we do to everything, we do to ourselves. All is really One." Different religions hold different beliefs, but they all agree that treating one another honorably is central to living the good life. Believe what you will; do what is right.

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You can have all the hope for the future you want, but if you do not act now, nothing will come of it.

13 **How can someone who has lost hope for the future be helped?**

Losing hope for the future isn't a problem. Choosing not to act in the present is a problem. The future is overrated—it rarely turns out the way we imagine. The future is really only the present when the current present is past. There is no future—there is only now. So you can have all the hope for the future you want, but if you do not act now, nothing will come of it. Forget the future. What would bring you pleasure right now? If it is legal and loving, do that, and let the future take care of itself.

14 **I'm trying to integrate the Sabbath into my life, but I'm confused by the rules. Is there one principle that might help me?**

The Sabbath liberates the human from the economic: “Six days you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of complete rest” (Exodus 31:15). Complete rest means resting not only your body but your heart and mind—no worry, fear, angst, or craving. Why? Because the economic system depends on these: Without them you cannot be convinced to buy more than you need, and go into debt to pay for it. The antidote to craving and the key to liberation is joy, and joy is produced through play. So look for a community that offers an ecstatic celebration of the Sabbath. Or find friends with whom to meditate, pray, sing, chant, drum, eat, walk, and engage in conversation that stretches the mind beyond the conventional. Make play your gateway to holiness on the Sabbath.

15 **My girlfriend insists she's “spiritual but not religious” but can't explain what this means. Can you?**

I can tell you what it means to me: People who are SBNR are seekers open to any teacher, teaching, or technique that cultivates compassion and justice in themselves and the world. They aren't concerned with religious claims to exclusivity, or theological arguments about the afterlife, and who is saved and who is damned. They find wisdom in both Christ and Krishna and refuse to be limited to or by either. Don't ask your girlfriend to explain SBNR—ask her to share her deepest values. It is there that you may find common ground.

16 **My neighbor insists that miracles prove his religion is true. I don't believe in miracles. Do you?**

I do. Miracles, for me, are ordinary events to which we assign extraordinary significance. This is why living a deeply spiritual life—a life lived with awe and reverence—is a life filled with miracles. It isn't that something out of the ordinary happens but that we come to see the ordinary itself as miraculous. Religions are filled with stories of great souls doing extraordinary things that violate the laws of nature. We call them miracles, but they are better called parables—teaching tales that are spiritually true without having to be literally true. When we insist that parables be taken literally, we aren't believing in miracles but in magic.

Make play your gateway to holiness on the Sabbath.

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17 I've read that spirituality makes us humble, but as a woman I'm openly gay and openly Christian. I don't believe I had a choice in either matter: Everything is God's will. Yet what the Bible has to say about homosexuals hurts and confuses me. Why would God make me only to hate me?

I believe all humans come from God, the source and substance of all life, and that all scriptures come from humans. Scriptures reflect the best and worst within us. When scriptures teach love, compassion, and justice, learn from them what you should do. When they teach fear, hate, and cruelty, learn from them what you shouldn't do. As a Christian, you know that God is love, and that God loves you as God made you, but don't expect scriptures or those who preach them to live by the same standard.

18 I work for a very progressive company that offers yoga and mindfulness classes to make us happier and more productive. Do you think this works?

Yes, it does, and that worries me. The purpose of yoga is to awaken you to the Absolute in, with, and as all reality. The purpose of mindfulness is to reveal the impermanence of life and to cultivate compassion toward all the living. I worry that by using these practices to support a consumerist machine that is destabilizing the entire world, we are furthering the exploitation of person and planet rather than stopping it. This is not what Patanjali or Gautama Buddha had in mind.

The purpose of mindfulness is to reveal the impermanence of life and to cultivate compassion toward all the living.

19 I would like to practice meditation, but it's too time-consuming. Is there an alternative?

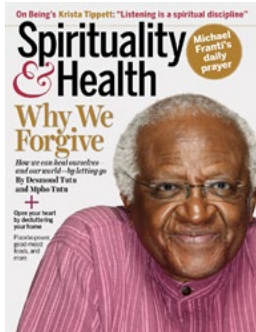
Yes, there is: Wake up! Wake up to the fact that you are not your body, your thoughts, or your feelings. Wake up to the fact that you are a wave of God's ocean. And then wake up from that awakening and realize that ocean and wave are both water and you are that as well! If you know this—not intellectually, but the way you know your thumb when you hit it with a hammer—then meditation is unnecessary. If you don't know this, meditation is indispensable.

20 As I write this, powerful winds are shredding property and lives from Texas to Florida; terrible fires are devastating the northwestern United States; and Kim Jong Un is making the earth quake with his hydrogen-fueled insanity. All I can think of is the prophet Elijah looking for God in wind, fire, and earthquakes and hearing the "still, small voice." Where is the voice of God in all this?

The voice Elijah heard carried a question: "Why are you here?" (I Kings 19:13). This question is ours, as well: Why are *we* here? I believe we are here to promote the flourishing of life (Genesis 2:5) and "to be a blessing to all the families of the earth" (Genesis 12:3). Our task at this moment is to allow the winds, fires, and quaking to silence our ideological squabbles, our inane arguments, and our bellowing of "alternative facts" so that we might hear God's question and respond to it with acts of love, compassion, and justice for all.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro is the author of over two dozen books, including the *Rabbi Rami Guide to God*, *Guide to Forgiveness*, and *Guide to Parenting*. This article was adapted from the *Rabbi Rami Guide to Parenting*.





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