

TRANSCRIPT

Spirituality & Health Podcast

James Jeffrey

Rabbi Rami: From *Spirituality and Health* magazine, I'm Rabbi Rami and this is *Essential Conversations*. Our guest today, James Jeffrey, spent nine years in the British Army serving in Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan, before attending journalism school in Austin, Texas. Since 2012, he has freelanced in America and the Horn of Africa. His work has appeared in *Irish Times*, *The New Humanitarian*, *BBC news*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *Al Jazeera*, *Foreign Affairs*, *CNN*, and the list goes on. His essay, *How To Bring The Spiritual Camino Vibe Into Your Life*, appears in the July-August issue of *Spirituality and Health* magazine and that's what we're going to be talking about. At the moment, James is in a hostel in Portugal but bear with the sound because what he has to say is really important. James Jeffrey, welcome to *Essential Conversations*.

James: Thank you very much, Rabbi.

Rabbi Rami: Our pleasure. Love the essay. I'm sure that lots of people who are listening to us are aware of the Camino, but they may not really understand what it is, so give us some background and tell us what the Camino de Santiago actually is.

James: Okay, so, basically, the Camino is an ancient Christian pilgrimage. It's about 800 kilometers long and there are various routes, which reflect the different origins where pilgrims came from, but the most famous route is called the Camino Frances. That starts at the Spanish-French border, just on the French side in a beautiful little village called St-Jean-Pied-de-Port. Then from there, the Camino route goes westward through northern Spain, passing astonishing Spanish cities, some of your audience may be familiar with places like Pamplona, which is famous for the running of the bulls and that was where the American writer Ernest Hemingway spent a lot of time and he wrote his novel, *The Sun Also Rises about it*.

Then you go westward through all sorts of different landscapes: vineyards, open fields, there's even a deserty area. Then eventually, you reach the city of Santiago de Compostela, in the region of the Galicia which is in the most western side of Spain. That is where legend has it that the remains of the Apostle St. James were buried after his martyrdom in Jerusalem. That, in essence, is what the Camino is. There was a famous film made about it starring Martin Sheen, which I think some people might be familiar with where in the film he plays a character who walks the whole Camino to deal with some personal grief in his life.

The Camino has been around since I think about the 10th century, and so at that time, you had people coming from all over Europe, from different places, starting in France, starting in Italy, starting in Spain. As a result of all those different routes, you actually have -- there's a whole number of Caminos stretching through Portugal, through Spain, and into France. A lot of those Caminos exists still, but the most

famous one is the Camino Frances, which starts at the border and then it goes along as I described it.

Rabbi Rami: As you're walking this, you're a journalist and you're a writer, do people talk to one another? Do you find out why they're walking or is it much more solitary and you don't do that?

James: Well basically, it's up to you, but it tends to be the former, and so as you say, for a writer and a journalist, it's a real treat, although I should emphasize that was never the motivation for doing it. My reasons were like most other people, personal and intertwined with questions about religion and spirituality, also. But yes, that's one of the great things about the Camino and virtually everyone who does it seems to say the same thing is that, it's a life-enhancing experience and everyone is equally shocked in a good way about just how open everyone else is.

I think it's because you have this shared aim and you're part of this shared endeavor, so that everyone refers to themselves as a pilgrim, whether they're religious or atheist. There's this really unifying bond. As a result of that, people just really open up. Also, I think there's a human psychological aspect to it because these people are strangers, and they're not actually part of your normal life. I think it's weirdly easier to open up to them, say, than your own family. I remember sharing some things with people that I would never normally share with other people, even good friends, and vice versa. It does seem to engender this real openness, which is I think very healthy and very rewarding and it really stands out as part of the experience.

Rabbi Rami: Is there a general sense that what happens on the Camino stays on the Camino?

James: [chuckles] That's a very good question. Yes, I think that feeds into it. Why people are so open to sharing very intimate, deep things. I think yes, and part of the whole point, I think, why a lot of people do it is because they're really yearning for that, especially in the modern world where we're increasingly isolated, alienated [unintelligible 00:05:39], atomized, all those sorts of things. I think and I speak from personal experience, people really want to be able to talk openly like this and I think a lot of people who've had to come into it wanting an experience, there is more solitude, perhaps they think that's what they need. They then realize actually they need to talk and they want to open up.

Rabbi Rami: In the article that's in the current issue of spirituality health, the article is called, *How To Bring The Spiritual Camino Vibe Into Your Life*, you write that in the Middle Ages, pilgrims walked in search of answers. Now I'm reading from your text so it's, "Answers, or at least some better understanding and appreciation about what their lives represented and meant." I'm curious, you've done it and now you're on the second one, is that why you walk, and if it is, what have you come to understand and appreciate?

James: Oh, goodness that's a [chuckles] tough question. The reason I did it this most recent time was slightly forced circumstances because of the lockdowns, but certainly, the first time I did it in 2017 I did feel that I got in a bit of a ruts. My journalism meant I was actually stuck at my laptop a lot of the time and things didn't feel as very rewarding, my back actually gave out at one point. There was almost the

physical warning flag that the lifestyle wasn't as healthy as it should be. Those were the more practical elements that I think drove me to it.

There was also another layer to it. I was working in Ethiopia at the time, and so I was surrounded by very religious Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. Ethiopia is an amazingly religious country. Actually, that also includes a lot of Muslims. Ethiopia is a real success story overall for Christians and Muslims living side by side. I've been raised as a Catholic, and by the time I was in Ethiopia, I was in my 30s. Like many people, I had stuck with my faith, but it has certainly gone to the sidelines. Being surrounded by all of these very religious Ethiopians of different faiths did get me reflecting on what was going on in my life. I did that deeper level of searching for meaning.

Rabbi Rami: It's interesting, your reference to Ethiopia and to the devout Christians and Muslims there and there are Jews in Ethiopia also, though, many have made Aliyah to Israel. At the heart of the Abrahamic traditions, so Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Baha'i. At the heart of these traditions that trace their lineage back to Abraham, is the call to Abraham in the book of Genesis where we first meet Abraham and his wife, Sarah, and then later Hagar comes into it. We first meet Abraham when Abraham was called by God in the story, I'm not suggesting any of this is literally true.

In the story, Abraham was called by God to leave home and to walk, the Hebrew that's in the text is [Hebrew language]. In the story, he's walking away from his parents house, his nation, his culture, as it says in the Bible, to a place that God will show him but doesn't give him a map. It's just you'll know it when you're there, I guess. While the story makes it an actual geographic journey, the Hebrew itself suggests something deeper, [Hebrew language] does mean to walk, but [Hebrew language] can mean toward yourself.

That while you're walking outwardly, it's also this inner journey. I'm curious if you think that walking as a spiritual practice, whether it's the Camino, or the three pilgrimage festivals in the Bible, or The Hajj in Islam, whether there's something about walking that is or at least can be intrinsically and spiritually transformative.

James: No that's, beautifully put. I felt that was really fascinating. That all makes sense. What were you saying about the tradition going back to Abraham? Don't get me started, I'm a walking Zealots now after the Camino. The short answer is, yes to all your points about the power of walking, I think it's critical, and as you say, it's this outward motion, but definitely, it links into something deep inside of us. I guess to go back to the Ethiopia reference, ever since I discovered Ethiopia, I've been very conscious that their belief is that the first modern humans when they left Africa, it was from the Rift Valley around Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa.

The argument is that the human journey really did begin in Ethiopia, and it's always been a walking journey. When I did my first Camino, I came across this beautiful quotes by, I think she's an American writer and I think her name is Linda Hogan. The way she put it, she said, "Walking, I'm listening to a deeper way. Suddenly, all my ancestors are behind me. You are the results of the love of thousands." It's a wonderful quote and I think that gets out a lot of the truth of it. Sorry, there's also another great quote, which I came across recently.

Again, it's another female American writer. It's Rebecca Solnit, who's, I think, an academic and an activist, and I hope I've said her name right. She wrote, I think, quite a well-known history of walking and she said, "The walker toiling along a road towards some distant place is one of the most compelling and universal images of what it means to be human, depicting the individual as small and solitary in a large world, reliance on the strength of body and will." Regarding that quote, there's also some text saying that walking -- it's almost now its revolutionary act against a lot of forces of the modern world that assail us, which seems to push us down into our desk-bound lives.

I think that's partly why it's well-documented. I think a lot of the problems people are having: isolation, depression, ill-health, it links to this very desk-bound life. Sorry, I'm going a bit off to the tangent towards the physical health side of walking, but body and mind are totally intertwined. I'm no psychiatrist, but I think you only have to do the Camino, and that's clearly obvious. Also, as I discussed in the article, I know when I'm working at the laptop, my brain starts to fog over, it just takes walking outside and a quick walk around the block. You won't necessarily get a huge shift in your well-being, but it's distinctly there. Your spirits lift a little bit, the brain clears a little bit, and dare I say, your soul is a bit lighter. That's just on a very short walk.

On the Camino, you can be walking every day for five weeks, by the third week, you really do enter this incredible stage where I think this repetitive pilgrimage act of walking, going all the way back to Abraham, it takes your mind and heart to another place. I'm just not qualified to explain it well enough. That hit me in 2017 and exactly the same thing happens this time round. When I got to about three weeks, obviously things just slow down naturally and life's a lot simpler naturally as a result of what you're doing. That helps create the calm and the space where I think you can just connect more deeply with these, I don't know, more spiritual, metaphysical matters.

Rabbi Rami: Yes, I think you explained that really well, and I agree with what you're saying. I think that lots of people, and I may be overstating this, but maybe not. I think that lots of people when they think about spiritual practice think about sitting cross-legged on a cushion. That's what has captured the American imagination, anyway. Though, I think historically if you look at Chinese Buddhism and in the early years Daoism, they were walkers. I read somewhere and I can't quote you where it was, but I read somewhere that sitting becomes the dominant practice in Buddhism when Buddhism comes to a place where there isn't a lot of room to walk around.

I don't know if that's true or not, but originally walking was the spiritual practice, perhaps, but people have shifted to sitting, which is the dominant practice in the culture in general. When you talk about this kind of thing, do people push back against the idea of walking? Do people recognize, even if they haven't done something like the Camino, and I haven't, but do they intrinsically get the fact that even a short walk can cause a mental/physical/spiritual shift?

James: Well, I've got to be totally honest with you, Rabbi. I haven't really tested that out too much in terms of discussing it with that many people. I've obviously spoken about the Camino to quite a lot of people, but often, it's rare that actually I really perhaps get into as much detail as I am here and to really open up about the walking. Certainly in the UK, there is a strong walking culture and it's called rambling in terms of just going for a good hike across the Yorkshire Dales, for example. I think

perhaps it's not as strong as it used to be, it's perhaps stronger amongst slightly older generations, dare I say. [chuckles] That's just the gut instinct. I think people still get it.

I haven't really had much pushback, but as I said in the article, I do think it's not so much a case of pushback that's the problem. I think people just tend to be so busy, they just lose sight of this very obvious fact, which they may intrinsically know themselves because everyone leaves the house or probably recognize that little packing up. I just think perhaps people are so assailed by all these different distractions, they don't necessarily put two and two together and really necessarily remember and focus on why they're feeling better, and so they miss this obvious fact. That walking is just the most available and cheapest means available to anyone who's fortunate enough to be able to walk to raise their spirits and improve their body and mind's function.

Rabbi Rami: I think, in general, people are built to walk. Just while you're saying it, what's flashing in my head is Chinese landscape painting. Oftentimes, you see a painting, a monk crossing bridge or something like that, and it's a huge landscape of the forest and the mountains and all of this nature, and there's this thin little bridge connecting two peaks. Then there's a tiny dot that is supposed to be the person crossing the bridge. They paint these things and place the human in the landscape as part of the ecological event that is woods, peaks, mountains, everything together.

Whereas in the United States or in Western art, if you are painting a picture of a person crossing bridge, the person would be the center. It's all about that person and you don't get a sense of the larger landscape or environment in which the person is operating. In my limited experience with walking, and I walk several miles a day, sometimes in my little town and sometimes I walk out into the woods along a river. When I'm walking, especially out along the river, I get that Chinese sense that I shrink and I'm part of the larger environment.

While fresh thoughts come into my head and sometimes I have to stop and record them, I'm not mulling over my issues after a while I'm walking the path.

I just become part of the larger landscape and I have no more concerns than I imagine the deer have as I'm walking by them, or maybe they do have some concerns that I'm going to attack them, but the trees have when I'm walking past them. I'm wondering, when you're doing a pilgrimage like this, which is so long and you've addressed this, I think. At some point, maybe it's the third week, do you disappear and there's no more James Jeffrey is walking, there's just walking?

James: Yes, [chuckles] that's a really interesting one. As soon as you said that point about the Chinese landscape and the priests, it made me think of the monk. I think that's Rebecca Solnit's point about the solitary walker against this huge backdrop, against this huge world. It just sums up the human condition. For me, I got to be honest, I think I'm still working at that; working to achieve being able to get beyond myself and I think that's really the challenge. I think you sound much more disciplined than me. I know that even after the third week, I'm still prone to rumination as I'm walking along and I'm thinking about the past, the future, and I know that's what the walking is meant to try and break the the habit of, but it's very hard.

Rabbi Rami: While you're talking about the Camino, in the back of my mind, I'm like, "Oh, I'd love to do that. How would I do that? It's so many weeks and it's so far." I was hoping maybe there was a moving sidewalk, you can just stand on it and it would just take you and be much easier. I'm assuming that other people are thinking about, how could I ever do this? You also talk about mini pilgrimages.

James: Right. We've already alluded to the easiest option, which is just to walk around the block or locally. I know that might just sound ridiculous in terms of framing it as a mini-pilgrimage. I think it depends how you do it. If you're really focused on what you're doing and in terms of really pay attention and try and notice some new things about your neighborhoods, I can almost guarantee, if you do it properly, you will discover new things that you never noticed before because I think we're all terrible at it and I've done it.

We can walk alongside somewhere and we're literally so caught up in our thoughts, we literally do not-- you could not describe what you just walked past if someone asked you 10 meters later what you just went past.

There's that walking which I'm sure it probably sounds really uninspiring and boring to your listeners but it does. If you can work it into your daily schedule, I think it really helps and it pays dividends. The other one that I talk about in the article and this was actually recommended by a pilgrim I met -- there was a Swiss couple. Again, it might sound obvious, but not that many people will do this, it's all too easy to miss it. He said, even if you're living in a busy city, virtually every city is going to have a park somewhere. If you just focus and dedicate on a particular day to perhaps or even after work, this would work obviously a bit better in the summer.

But after work, just puts **[unintelligible 00:22:01]** a little picnics, some food, some drink, and go to the park and just walk around it, lose yourself in it. Then ideally, perhaps even get a sunset, which is a really big thing on the Camino because obviously, at the end of each day's hike, you typically get these wonderful sunsets. I think it's in our DNA we respond to the beauty of the sunset. I read in one of the Camino guide books, it says, the most important thing is just do it. Don't put it off because you can always find a reason to put it off. If you think you want to do it, find a cheap air ticket and go and do it.

Rabbi Rami: Well, that is a perfect place to end. If you're interested in the bigger pilgrimage on the Camino, you can start your planning now. Your advice just to get out and to walk even if it's just around your neighborhood is also good advice. Our guest today, James Jeffrey, is a freelance writer and journalist. His essay, *How to Bring the Spiritual Camino Vibe Into your Life* appears in the July-August issue of *Spirituality and Health* magazine. You can learn more about James's work on his website, jamesjeffrejournalism.com. James, thank you so much for talking with us on *Essential Conversations*.

James: Thank you very much, Rabbi. It's a joy to be able to talk about something so, so positive and rewarding. Thank you.

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