

TRANSCRIPT

Spirituality & Health Podcast

VANESSA CHAKOUR

Rabbi Rami: From *Spirituality & Health* magazine, I'm Rabbi Rami and this is the *Spirituality & Health* podcast. Our guest today, Vanessa Chakour is a visual artist, herbalist, environmental activist, and the founder of Sacred Warrior, an organization devoted to deepening our relationships with the environment. Her new book is *Awakening Artemis, Deepening Intimacy with the Living Earth and Reclaiming our Wild Nature*. Vanessa Chakour, welcome to the *Spirituality & Health* podcast.

Vanessa Chakour: Thank you. Happy to be here.

Rabbi Rami: I'm really happy to have you here. The book was really a great read.

Vanessa: Oh, thank you.

Rabbi Rami: You explore things that I knew nothing about, so it's always a pleasure to go, oh wow, I'm getting new information.

Vanessa: Oh good.

Rabbi Rami: Since it was all new, I don't really have an opinion. You actually get to talk with me without me talking at you. We'll see how that goes.

I was intrigued just by starting with the dedication of your book. You dedicate the book to your mom, Andrea, and to Mother Earth and to your wild green friends, especially weeds. Right there I was going weeds, weeds are my friends. Yet the title of the book leads us to the Greek goddess Artemis. I thought it would be a good place to start to have you tell us a little bit about Artemis and why or how Artemis came into your life?

Vanessa: Yes, absolutely. Well, it's interesting actually. I became reacquainted with Artemis through a weed, speaking of weeds. One of the first plants I worked with when I started my herbal training is *Artemisia vulgaris*, which is mugwort, a very, very common weed that goes throughout temperate regions of the world.

At the time I was living in Brooklyn, New York, and just really starved for nature, and this plant was everywhere around me. I learned at the time-- I was delving into herbal practice and when I learned that this plant was edible and medicinal, had this rich history and folklore, and then learned the botanical name relating to Artemis, it brought so many pieces of the puzzle together for me. I always had a connection to Artemis. She is the Greek goddess of the moon, the protector of the wild, of nature, of animals, protector of women.

When I was doing research for the book, I became really, really interested in the ways that these guardians of the wild, these mythical guardians of the wild become literal guardians when we believe in them or when we honor them. As an

environmental activist, the archetype of Artemis really brought everything together for me. Then as a woman who's overcome a lot of obstacles personally and a martial artist, I also identify with Artemis.

As an activist, I feel like she's an archetype of the environmental activist, a woman warrior. It just brought all of these elements of the book together for me. The plans, my own impulse to protect and defend the earth and women and my own body, and then also this idea of a guardian of the land.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. It seems like Artemis pulled together, not only just aspects in the book but in your life.

Vanessa: Absolutely.

Rabbi Rami: It sort of resonated in a way that brought up harmony to all these different elements in your life that she could embody. One of the things that-- You've mentioned it several times already that I'm very interested in is the notion of wildness. You're growing up in Brooklyn or I guess at the time you're talking about you're in Brooklyn, like you said, Brooklyn is not a hotbed of nature though I've read that a tree grows in Brooklyn, but I don't know where wildness comes in the context of Western industrial, post-industrial civilization. We don't seem to have room for wildness. Is that right?

Vanessa: Well, I see the word wild and I have to nod to **[unintelligible 00:04:30]** She defines wild in the same way that I do, and I really was very influenced by that. Just really our original name it's not being out of control. It's being attuned to our authentic selves in a way. It's peeling back all the layers of conditioning, and that can happen anywhere. Doesn't have to be in the middle of the woods or in the jungle. You can happen in the middle of Brooklyn too. I see wildness as our natural self.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. I think that's really important. We're not talking about being out of control.

Vanessa: Exactly.

Rabbi Rami: I think a lot of people, and maybe it's just me, so let me not blame other people, when sometimes when I think of the idea of wild, the image sadly that pops into my head is the QAnon Shaman, just howling in the well of the house of representatives. He's not acting out of his true nature, but the wild you are talking about is essential to who we are as beings. I won't even say human beings, but as beings.

Yet it seems to me that the institution that we grow up in, school, work, these things are really designed to dampen the wildness to maybe even erase our essential nature. How is your worker resistance to that?

Vanessa: Well, it's interesting, long before I wrote the book, I was doing a lot of outdoor education. I started studying herbalism really seriously about 15 years ago. The reason I find that this practice is such a powerful way to help people reclaim their wildness is for me, it felt like a deep remembering that we are interconnected with the land.

For example, like I was mentioning the weeds, bringing back the weeds that you mentioned earlier, all of our ancestors worked with plant medicine. We've become blind to these plants that are around us that have uses to help us to heal. They're woven into folklore history, medicine, food. We're walking around oblivious to all of this history around us that can also connect us back to our ancestral roots, our indigenous roots. No matter where we're from, we all practice plant medicine. We all at one point we're in harmony with the land.

For example, when I was doing more retreats before COVID, I would bring people into these experiences, have them unplug, bring them through plant walks, reintroduce them to these wild plants. It's really interesting that that exposure bringing people into these experience of connection to nature teaching them how to make medicine. Like I said, it feels like a deep remembering to people and it's just like, once you lift that veil between people in the natural world, they can't unseen that. They see the land and the plants differently, and something drops away.

Well, there are a few things up away. I feel like a level of anxiety drops away, because they're like, oh, these plants around us, like nature is really, I shouldn't say here to take care of us, but in the sense of we're are not alone. There are so many resources, like literally under our feet. For me, stripping away and dropping into my body in that way, when I walk in the woods now, or when I'm alone in nature, I feel very supported and I feel such a strong sense of belonging. That has been so healing for me and I aim to bring help people remember that too, and bring them into those experiences that make them make them feel that way.

Then there's less grasping. There's less of this wanting to consume, or you're acting less from a place of scarcity and fear when you realize that you're connected, you're woven into this bubble of life. You understand that these plants around you are not just weeds. They're not dangerous, they're not poisonous, and you can learn how to work with them. You can remember that aspect of your wild nature.

Rabbi Rami: Well, let me pick up on this word that you've used a couple of times about remembering. Two things that strike me when you're saying that, one is, if it's an act of remembering, the person who's remembering doesn't lack anything. There's no new thing I have to get. This is something that I'm given probably in the womb, or at least it starts, and then I lose it and I would argue because I'm into conspiracy theories. I would argue there's a conspiracy that tries to get us to forget this true nature and is driven out and that we need to remember who we really are.

Let me just add a couple things and I'll invite you to comment. I like to write the word often, remember with a hyphen, so RE-member that we put ourselves back together because we are parts of a larger whole, and we remember the whole of which we are a part.

None of that is commodified. You can't--

Vanessa: Right.

Rabbi Rami: Okay, so we're on the same page. Speak to that if you can, that you have what you need to be whole. You've been conditioned to own wholeness so that you can be sold the product of wholeness. But through the way of the herbalist, it

sounds to me, that through the way of that herbalist, you're shattering the entire spiritual consumer industrial complex. If that's a term. Does that speak to what you're doing?

Vanessa: It does. It really does, and it's not just herbalism. In the book I draw from other practices and disciplines that have helped me, I often use the term peeling back layers of conditioning, shedding old skins. Then I really liked that, the way that you said that they remember. It's like you--

As you know, I started the book with a car accident that I had when I was 16 years old. It literally shattered me. I fractured my back and my neck. Being in stillness for that period of time, I felt dismembered, quite literally. None of my old defense mechanisms I had, everything was shattered. That's why I started the book there because I literally had to remember I'd bring the pieces of myself back together, put them back together. I always say that experience has a real blessing in disguise because I had the opportunity to examine all of these things that I'd been trying to hold on to so tightly.

All of these ideas of who I was, social conditioning, what success meant to me, really putting a lot of pressure on myself to "succeed" and then also the trauma that I was trying to avoid, but that broke everything open. I had to confront myself. I would say probably for a couple of years, I was just falling apart, but then going back to that term, like the hyphen of the re-member, I was able to put the pieces back together.

That revealed that authentic, wild, original self. I came into contact with that part of me that was always there, always at peace, waiting to be remembered, and waiting to be accessed again. I just feel like that part of us is always there; that wild nature, that original nature, that sense of wonder I had when I was a kid, when I was always out in the woods all the time when I was a kid.

I really feel like the herbal practice, the environmental activism, all the work I've done, studying ecology, is going back to something. It's not anything new. Not only isn't it anything new for me, I don't feel like it's anything new ancestrally, anything new as a human being, but I was inclined to do all of that when I was a kid. I was always making potions in the woods.

That accident and all of my healing practice led all of that other stuff fall away that was globbed on to me that wasn't mine. Yes, it's a combination of peeling back layers for me, not only herbalism. Herbalism to me is an entry point for connecting people to nature. I mentioned the weeds a lot in the book, because they're common plants that grow everywhere, that can help us to access that connection. It's accessible. They grow in urban areas, they're tenacious, they have so much vitality and life force energy.

I think they're also important to rewire our perception of weeds, because not only do we forget who they are as medicine, as access to our ancestral lineage of uses of them, because they were brought here for a reason originally, but we also try to eradicate them.

We poison ourselves and get rid of these plants like dandelion, that could be food and medicine for us. It's pretty insane if you think about it. We're killing off our food

and medicine and then poisoning our land in the process and killing the microbes in the soil.

Rabbi Rami: Yes, there's a lot more to the book than we expect you have, different weeds that are in every chapter, and that's what really captured my imagination and maybe excited about reading the book because I don't know anything about this stuff.

As I was reading it, I was thinking of all the ways, and I won't go through all the ones we could come up with, but all the ways we use the word weed as a pejorative. Like, you're lost in the weeds, and that kind of thing or like kudzu. I don't know if kudzu has any value, but something grows like kudzu and it chokes off the life of a tree or something.

The use of the word weed is so negative, and it sounds to me from what you're saying that this is part of maybe conscious, I don't know, but if not conscious, then an unconscious desire on the part because I read in your book, according to the patriarchal side of humanity patriarchal religion, patriarchy in general, even science, to the nature, the world in which we live. You're really pushing back on a very fundamental level. I don't know if this is conscious, but I just suspect it is. You're pushing back on a very fundamental level against the tide that dominates human discourse at the moment.

I'm thinking about moving to another planet and terraforming it and let the earth go to hell, and we're going to go start out over on Mars or something. I've seen the documentary with Arnold Schwarzenegger about Mars, it doesn't look that pleasant, but once they get the oxygen going, maybe it'll be better for them. It really is an anti-nature and, I think this is safe to say, therefore anti-women worldview, that is just killing us the way it's like you said the way, the way it's killing the weeds.

You write in the book-- well, actually, you quote James Baldwin, in the book, I love James Baldwin, and I'll just read the sentence to, then I want you to comment on. This is James Baldwin, he writes, "The victim who was able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim: he or she becomes a threat." Now you can unpack the first part, but I'm most interested in becoming a threat, a threat to whom, and if you see yourself, and I'll tell you upfront I do, if you see yourself in your work as a threat.

Vanessa: To the status quo, to go back to what you were touching on before, this idea of eco-feminism. How the abuse of nature and the abuse of women is very much intertwined. I actually touched on that in that chapter, particularly the Wild rose chapter, because I wrote about my sexual assault. The chapter is found-- it's really about not asking permission, and we do that to the land, just the way that a lot of women are assaulted in that way.

The land and women's bodies often suffer this non-consensual penetration and extraction. Even if they haven't been violated, there's this commodification of women's bodies in our culture. The Earth is constantly abused in that way, but on the flip side, going back to the weeds, if you leave somebody, give some of the time and space to heal, just as like if you give the lands the time and space to heal.

Sometimes we need to-- we're at a point now where we do have to intervene in many cases because the land has just become so unbelievably depleted, but if that's not the case, the earth can regenerate. These weeds are healing forces, in some ways. Obviously, there are some better invasive species that are, like you said, overwhelming an ecosystem but that's usually disturbed ecosystems where humans have come in and created an imbalance.

Going back to the James Baldwin quote, I do see that. I see it from a grassroots perspective and I like the analogy of the weed. It's this forest that arises from underground like a seed. It's this tiny thing but then eventually just spreads and takes over. There's this incredible weed landlessness and tenacity, and just life force energy in these weeds that can also be an ally for those of us who are working on earth **[unintelligible 00:19:56]** we're talking about to just dismantle these really damaging patriarchal and capitalist ways of extracting from the earth and from our bodies too.

Going back to the wild, I see rewilding the self as coming back to our original nature and rewilding the land, like I read about a lot in the book, is letting the land heal. Bringing back the relationships needed for the land to thrive. We don't have to control the land. Whether it's a manicured lawn, or these very controlled gardens, or monoculture, there's this idea of just taming the land, taming our bodies, and controlling the land.

When we cease to do that-- and there's a lot of movements now with regenerative agriculture, rewilding projects, and permaculture where that's what people are realizing is like when you work with the land, you don't have to work as hard. When you allow things to be wild, it's so much easier. Within our bodies and on the land too, we have so much more time and energy to just enjoy nature and enjoy life.

Rabbi Rami: When you talk to a rabbi which you are, you have to be ready for a Bible quote or two. Let me just make two biblical references. One is this year in the Jewish calendar, so it's going to go into 2022, but this year in the Jewish calendar is a sabbatical year where if people did it, you let the land lie fallow, and you can eat whatever the earth naturally produces. You're supposed to allow anyone who's hungry to come and eat off your land. You don't put barriers up and you do that every seven years. We're in the midst of one of these seven-year periods.

Vanessa: Interesting.

Rabbi Rami: While people are trying to figure out how best to do it, especially in a place like the state of Israel where that would mean shutting down the agricultural economy, most of the effort is how to get around doing it as opposed to actually doing it. I imagine in the biblical context people, they didn't have these industrial farms and all the rest of that. You could actually do that. How you, like you said, rewild the land is of extra import this year.

Then the other thing I was thinking of when we're talking about threat to the patriarchy, in the gospel of Matthew in the 13th Chapter, now I can even give you the verse, Verse 31. Jesus presents a parable where he says the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. A mustard seed. That a person took and sowed in a field. A mustard seed, it's a weed, the mustard plant. The kingdom of God is like someone who

deliberately, because it says this person sowed the mustard seed, the kingdom of God is like people deliberately sowing weeds and wildness back into the culture. It sounds you hadn't heard that one in a while.

Vanessa: No.

Rabbi Rami: How does that speak to you?

Vanessa: It does the power of those small things. To me, that speaks the grassroots efforts or these ideas that are potentially invisible but that can just spread like mustard, like weeds. I love that idea. I think of another quote that's in the book in the chapter about poison ivy, I have a quote by George Washington cover that says there is no need for America to go hungry, as long as nature provides wild weeds and vegetables. I believe I'm quoting that correctly. That's the other thing too is just if we take advantage of these resources that are here for free.

There's so much like-- I really became interested in herbalism not just from that perspective. It was more about activism for me than making medicine and teaching people how to make medicine quite honestly. It was like, oh my goodness, this is such a great gateway for people to reclaim these practices, to reconnect with the land, to ideally help honor these plants so we can eradicate these insane practices of killing off free food and medicine that are poisoning us. It was really from that lens that I started to get so involved with it.

Then of course my health has just improved exponentially from this practice. In my own life too, I have let go of so much grasping and feel so much more at ease. Not only has my health improved because of taking medicine but just because I feel like this stronger sense of belonging connection to these practices and my ancestral roots. It's funny to go back to that other quote. The threat is really about just feeling more at home here, but then you're not a really good consumer, are you, when you're content, so that's threatening.

Rabbi Rami: I want to ask you a strange thing that I hadn't thought of when I read the book but I heard just in the way you talked about weeds, I don't know if you did this more than once but at least once I heard you speak of them as who they are as opposed to what they are. We had a woman on the show who works with beans. She was a Mexican chef but a healer and she works with beans. The beans were alive to her in a way where she couldn't speak of them as its. Was it the same with you?

Vanessa: Not at all. I don't know if you've noticed but I made a concerted effort not to refer to any plant as it in the book, because it others us. To me, they are sentient beings in their own right. I feel like when we just refer to them as it, it's easier just to take without permission or to take without thinking or just to-- They have a role to play in the ecosystem we can't exist without. They were here before we were.

Rabbi Rami: In some languages, there's like in Hebrew there's no word for it.

Vanessa: Oh really? That's so--

Rabbi Rami: You'd only speak of the weeds, like you did, who or he or she or something like that, because there is no it.

I'm very cognizant of the time. I want to have you talk about one more thing and you end the book with a chapter called Mindful Wildcrafting. I'm always looking for a way to end these podcasts if it's possible with something that you can leave the listener with something that she could do to get involved in this work of reclaiming her wildness or his wildness. Can you talk a little bit about mindful wildcrafting and help people who want to get started in this practice get started?

Vanessa: Absolutely. Well, mindful wildcrafting like you touched on, it's really about awareness of your environment. Obviously, you need to make sure that you are harvesting a plant in an area that's safe to do so. You don't want to harvest, you want to-- I like to build relationships with plants on city streets on how to identify them but I would never harvest from there. That's not a healthy place to harvest.

First, surveying your environment, you know where in your environment if it's safe for you to harvest and if you're planning to ingest the plant. Really, really making sure that you know how to identify the plant clearly, also being clear about your intention why are you harvesting the plant. Then if you have a clear intention for example to make a tincture how much do you need. Don't take more than you need. Even if for example I set out to harvest a particular plant, but I get to the location and there isn't enough, if I know that whether it's the pollinators or the other animals or just the land itself needs that plant more than I do, I won't take it.

It's harvesting with reverence for the environment that you're in. It builds relationship with the environment that you're in because you're really paying attention, you're paying close attention.

Then I really like the permission is respect. You're respecting the land, you're not just taking. Going back to what we were talking about before about consent, I said you're building a different kind of relationship, you're asking, you're acknowledging, and you're realizing that you're taking the life of another sentient being. That's powerful to just and it doesn't take very long to go through all of that in your mind.

Then just the all of my teachers from-- and if you go back to various indigenous traditions, there is this exchange. I was taught to do that too. Just to leave a token of gratitude whether it's a genuine thank you, like the act of plucking your hair from your head is very similar to plucking a plant from the land, so that's what I sometimes do. It is a very momentary ritual, but it's really beautiful and deep act of reverence and a deep act of thanks. I feel so grateful. Then it's just become woven into the way that I do it now.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. Very powerful. The whole notion of rewilding, reclaiming your wild nature, being a threat to the powers that are really trying to tame us in. I'm saying this, I'm not putting words in your mouth, but tame as in service to our corporate overlords' thing.

Vanessa: Exactly.

Rabbi Rami: This is just fabulous stuff. I thank you very much for writing the book as well as being on the podcast. Our guest today, Vanessa Chakour is the author of *Awakening Artemis, Deepening Intimacy with the Living Earth and Reclaiming our Wild Nature*. You can learn more about her work @vanessachakour.com and you can look in *Spirituality & Health* magazine, she will be featured in an upcoming issue.

Vanessa, thank you so much for talking with us on this *Spirituality & Health* Podcast.

Vanessa: Thank you, I really enjoyed it.

Rabbi Rami: So did I, thanks.

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I'm Rabbi Rami. Thanks for listening. [music]

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