

# GOD IN THE WILDERNESS

Rediscovering the Spirituality  
of the Great Outdoors with the Adventure Rabbi

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WILDERNESS  
Rediscovering the Spirituality  
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RABBI JAMIE KORNGOLD

"A book that is easily digestible but at the same time worth savoring."  
– *Publisher's Weekly*

"A tremendous read for anyone who wants to get closer to the earth."  
– *Adam Werbach, former President of Sierra Club*

"Lovely.... a privilege to read."  
– *Laurie David, producer of movie, Inconvenient Truth*

## Discussion Guide: God in the Wilderness

### Chapter Outline:

**Introduction: Genesis of the Adventure Rabbi - Genesis 1:1**

**Chapter 1: Cultivate the Patience to See Burning Bushes -  
Exodus 3:3-4**

**Chapter 2: Take the First Step, the Sea May Part - Exodus 14:8-9**

**Chapter 3: Rediscover Awe - Exodus 19:18**

**Chapter 4: Remember Sabbath Rest: Fourth on God's Top Ten List  
Exodus 20:8-9**

**Chapter 5: Stop Trying So Hard! Even God Isn't Perfect -  
Deut. 34:4**

**Chapter 6: Hear the Still Small Voice Within - I Kings 19:11-12**

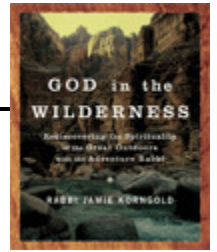
**Chapter 7: Restore Your Soul Beside Still Waters - Psalms 23:1-2**

**Afterward: Guardians of the Earth: To Till and to Tend -  
Psalms 104:24**

**Resources for Continuing the Adventure**



*Adventure Rabbi*  
Let the Wilderness Awaken Your Judaism



*The following questions may be used as a discussion guide for a book club or class, or for ideas to respond to in your journal.*

## **Chapter One: Cultivate the Patience to See Burning Bushes**

### **Part I: Reviewing the Chapter**

1. How does the opening quotation from Exodus 3:3-4 summarize the chapter?
2. How does this relate to our lives?
3. How do you react to hearing the Moses story updated?
4. Where/when in your life are you most able to slow down?

### **Part 2: Freeing Ourselves From Enslavement. An Exercise in Becoming Fully Present**

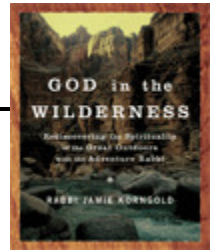
One of the first steps on a spiritual path is to become fully present. Be here now! When we are fully present, we discover a heightened attentiveness to the details of the world around us and become aware of spiritual portals.

What impedes our ability to be fully present? Often we simply have too many distracting thoughts racing through our minds. The burden of our “to do” lists creates stiff competition for our attention, no matter how lovely a situation we may be in.

In order to “cast off this enslavement,” write down a list of everything that you have to do. The goal is that if you write it down, you can then “put it down” because you are assured you will not forget about it and will get to it later.

#### ***Things I have to do:***

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.



Some people find it helpful to keep this list in their pocket and add to it as distracting thoughts float into their minds. Others prefer to choose a spot to leave it before continuing with the exercise. For example, you might choose to tape it to your computer monitor so you are assured you will get back to the items on your list. In this way you symbolically leave behind what you hope to actually leave behind.

### **Part 3: Cultivating Awareness**

Choose a quiet place to sit, preferably outdoors or within sight of something natural. This can also be done while walking. Choose one of these senses to focus on: sight, sound, smell, touch. Commit to stay focused on the sense for a certain length of time. (One minute is a great place to start with ten minutes as a goal.)

### **Part 4: Reflection**

Take 10 minutes to answer the following questions in your journal.

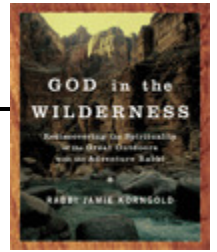
- What did you notice that you might have missed otherwise?
- How did it feel to be silent and simply observe?
- Did time go fast or slow?
- Was the experience different than you thought it would be?
- How did the experience change as the minutes went by?

### **Part 5: Conclusion:**

What changes can you make in your life to integrate this learning?

### **Possible Answers for Reviewing the Chapter:**

1. What was amazing about Moses was that he takes the time to notice the burning bush.
2. We too have to take time to notice the miracles that surround us. It's easy to be so busy and preoccupied that we walk right past them.
3. Makes it more accessible.



## Chapter Two: Take the First Step, The Sea May Part

**Part 1: What do you think is the take home point of this chapter?**

**Part 2: Journal Questions:**

**Places in my life where I am like an Israelite, waiting for someone else to fix things:**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

**Places in my life where I am like Nachshon, initiating change:**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

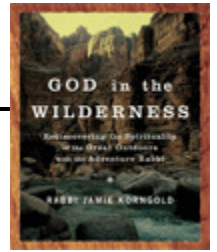
**Pick one instance from the Israelite list that you would like to turn it into a Nachshon:**

**Brainstorm ways to become like Nachshon and initiate change:**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

**What small “m” miracles do you have in your life that can help you along the way?**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.



**Possible Answers:**

Take home points:

- I can't wait for God or anyone else to make things happen. I have to do it myself! (As soccer coaches love to say, "The ball will not come to you, you have to go to the ball.")
- Our lives are filled with "small m" miracles.
- Ben Bag Bag had a fun name.

**Chapter 3: Rediscovering Awe**

**Part 1: What are some of the take home points of this chapter?**

**Exercise 1 (Outdoor):**

At the end of this sentence, stop reading, put *God in the Wilderness* in your pocket or backpack for possible consultation and go outside to find some awe. (Hey, you're not supposed to be reading any more! Go, get out of here!)

**Exercise 2 (Journal):**

Find a comfortable place to sit quietly. After you have read this paragraph, close your eyes and relax. Try to remember a place or time that you experienced awe. Breathe deeply and try to remember as much as you can about that place/ moment. What do you think made it awesome? How did you feel when you were there? Draw a picture of it if you care to. How can you replicate that in your life?

**Exercise 3 (Outdoors + Journal):**

Take a walk around your block. Be on the look out for "beauty alerts," things that call out for you that you might have not noticed otherwise. Take the same walk once a week for four weeks and see how things change, both on the walk and inside of you.

**Each week answer these questions:**

- What did you notice?
- What changes did you see?
- How do you feel about where you live?

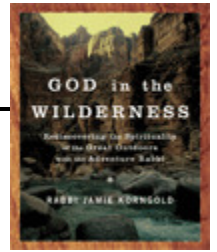
**At the end of four weeks answer these questions:**

- How did things change week to week?
- Did you notice more details as the weeks went by?
- Did your attitude about where you live change at all?

**Exercise 4 (Discussion):**

Rabbi Abraham Heschel says there are three pathways to God. List them here:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.



Which one do you find the most magnetic and why?

In what ways do you integrate that pathway into your life?

**Possible Answers:**

Take home points:

- a. Awe is one path way to God
- b. Sometimes we are so “over awed” that nothing seems awesome any more. When we train ourselves to notice the small awesome things in life, we are more able to sense the awe that surrounds us.
- c. Rabbi Abraham Heschel says there are three pathways to God:  
*“There are three starting points of contemplation about God; three trails that lead to Him. The first is the way of sensing the presence of God in the world, in things; the second is the way of sensing His presence in the Bible; the third is the way of sensing his presence in sacred deeds (mitzvot).”<sup>1</sup>*

**Chapter Four: Sabbath Rest**

What are some of the take home points of this chapter?

**Exercise 1 (Journal):**

**Okay let’s get this out of the way first:** Things I have to do/ obligations which make it impractical for me to participate in Shabbat:

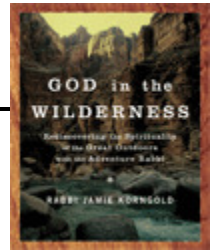
- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

**I wish I had more time to:**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, The Noonday Press , New York 1955 p. 31 God in Search of Man



**My Priorities in life are:**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

**What takes up most of my time:**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

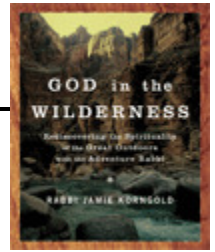
**The goal on Sabbath is to make the day different than the rest of the week and in that, make it holy or “set apart.”**

**Here are some ideas that my students try. See what appeals to you, brainstorm some others, and then try them out. Journal what worked for you and what didn't:**

1. Hike the same trail you always hike but in a different direction
2. Eat ice cream for breakfast
3. Don't complain all day
4. Don't drive the car
5. Don't turn on the computer
6. Don't answer the phone
7. Give someone a massage
8. Attend a religious service
9. Put a tablecloth on the table
10. Light and bless Sabbath candles
11. Bake challah
12. Read a book
13. Create a book club that meets on Sabbath
14. Write in your journal
15. Call your mother

**Things to think about:**

1. Why has Sabbath gone so out of style in our culture?
2. How does it enrich our lives to be able to shop 7 days a week? How does it hinder our lives?
3. If you were in charge of the universe, what would you allow to be open on Sabbath and what would you not? (i.e. restaurants, gyms, offices, doctors offices, clothing stores, buses, libraries etc.)
4. What would be your ideal rest day?



5. Do we take a day off so we can live harder the other 6 days or do we work 6 days so we can have the Sabbath? Meaning, which is the pinnacle, the Sabbath or the rest of the week?

**Plan a Sabbath activity for your family/ class/ group of friends.** Have everyone agree on rules for the day that make it different than the rest of the week. Here are some ideas:

- Eat dessert at every meal
- Leisurely meals
- No talk about work
- Read a book in advance to discuss
- Rise and go to sleep with the sun
- Say a prayer of thanks before and after meals

### **Possible Answers:**

Shabbat is great! It's tough to take a day off once a week but we really need it. I can decide what type of Sabbath practice works best for me.

## **Chapter Five: Stop Trying So Hard! Even God Isn't Perfect!**

1. Make a list of all the perfect people you know or have read about.
2. How do you react to the proposed idea that God is not perfect?
3. How do you understand, reconcile or react when in some places of this book I, the author, talk about God as if God is a conscious interactive entity but in other places I say I do not believe in a conscious interventionist God?
4. Are we more or less likely than our grandparents to strive for perfect lives? Why?
5. How does our culture entice us to believe that perfection is possible? What is the antidote to holding onto this belief?
6. I offer Moses as an example of an imperfect role-model. What other imperfect people, in the Bible or not, can you think of that we learn from because of their imperfection? What do we learn?

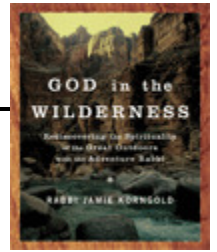
### **Journal:**

Write down every way in which you or your life are/is not perfect. When you are done tear the paper into tiny pieces and throw it in the fire. (Alternatively, flush it down the toilet or place dramatically in recycling bin.)

### **Exercise:**

On your next hike or walk, notice a tree that does not match the "perfect" tree a ten year old might draw. (This should be easy; there are very few perfect ones out there!) How do you react to this tree? Get to know this imperfect tree. Notice shapes, textures, smells, shade, lack of shade, shape etc. Climb it, sit under it, draw it, or eat of its fruits. Does anything change in how you experience the tree?





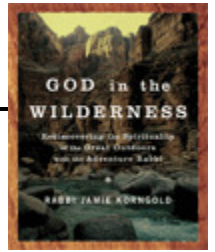
What can you learn from the tree? (I'll admit it's a bit crunchy granola of an exercise but worth a try!)

## Chapter Six: Hear the Still, Small Voice Within

1. How do you feel hearing these stories?
2. Do the Kayaker and/or Doctor remind you of someone in your life? In what ways?
3. In what ways do they remind you, or not remind you, of yourself?
4. Do you agree that we as a culture have become too extreme? In what way? What effects do you see?
5. How does the culture of channel surfing, plugged-in, under achieving, coach potatoes fit into this model of a culture of over achievers?
6. How do you react to the idea that traditionally, religion has been about limits? Do you agree that is why many people pull away from religion? What is the good side of limits?
7. Have you experienced something akin to the "still, small, voice?"
8. Can you hear the still, small, voice if you don't believe in God or don't believe in God that speaks to people? If so, what are you hearing?
9. Where, when are you most able to experience that voice?
10. How could you create more experiences in your life so you can hear it?

## Chapter Seven: Restore Your Soul Beside Still Water

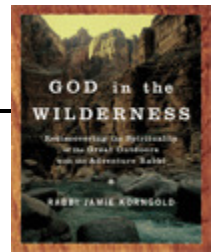
1. Why do you think many of us feel such a spiritual connection around water?
2. What type of water do you find most restorative? (i.e. river, bath tub, quiet lake etc.)
3. What do you feel like when you are near or in water?
4. If you have ever experienced a mikvah or baptism as an adult, what was this experience like?
5. Much of our water today is polluted or highly treated. Can it still be spiritually cleansing?
6. There is an intense contrast between the water of chapter 6 and the water of chapter 7. Water is both restorative and destructive. Where else in life do you



- experience this duality?
7. Do you find it soothing or anxiety producing that you are but dust and ashes? Why?
  8. Do you think all things happen for a reason? Or do they just happen?
  9. What is the place you find most restorative? Why?
  10. What opportunities does religion offer is for consolation? (i.e. also counseling, sense of community, support, prayer etc.)
  11. What opportunities does nature offer is for consolation? (i.e. cycle of life, connection to something larger, inspiration etc.)

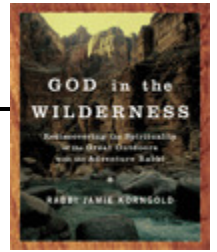
### **Exercise:**

First read Psalm 23 sitting indoors. Next read it sitting outdoors, preferably by a body of water. Does it feel different? In what way?



## Psalms Chapter 23

<p>א מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד: יְהוָה רֹעִי, לֹא אֶחְסָר.</p>	<p>1 A Psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.</p>
<p>ב בְּנֵאוֹת דֶּשֶׁא, יִרְבִּיצֵנִי; עַל- מֵי מְנַחֹת יִנְהַלֵּנִי.</p>	<p>2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.</p>
<p>ג נַפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבֵב; יִנְחֵנִי בַּמַּעְגָּלִי-צֶדֶק, לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ.</p>	<p>3 He restores my soul; He guides me in straight paths for His name's sake.</p>
<p>ד גַּם כִּי-אֵלֶךְ בְּגִיא צְלֻמוֹת, לֹא- אִירָא רָע-- כִּי-אַתָּה עִמָּדִי; שִׁבְטְךָ וּמַשְׁעֲנֶתְךָ, הֵמָּה יִנְחֲמֵנִי.</p>	<p>4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.</p>
<p>ה תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי, שְׁלֹחַן-- נֶגֶד צַרְרֵי; דִּשְׁנַתְּ בַשֶּׁמֶן רֹאשִׁי, כּוֹסֵי רוּיָה.</p>	<p>5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; my cup runneth over.</p>
<p>ו אַךְ, טוֹב וְחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי-- כָּל-יְמֵי חַיֵּי; וְשָׁבְתִי בְּבַיִת-יְהוָה, לֹא רֵךְ יָמִים.</p>	<p>6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.</p>



## Afterward: Guardians of the Earth: To Till and to Tend

1. What do you think about the idea that the outdoors are a source for spiritual portals?
2. Do you think religion gives us a mandate to take care of the earth?
3. Look at the 20 Commandments for Conscious Consumption. Which 10 would you pick as most important?
4. What is missing from the list?
5. What action will you commit to do?
6. Respond to the Carl Pope quotation, “Morality doesn’t help you stop hitting your own thumb with a hammer. But it does stop you from hurting people far away, or in the future.”
7. Are we the masters of the earth? Do we have dominion over the earth?
8. Respond to the Rabbi Abraham Ben Maimonides quotation, “The enjoyment of the beauties of nature, such as the contemplation of flower-clad meadows, lofty mountains and majestically flowing rivers, is essential to the spiritual development of even the holiest people.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> As paraphrased by Areyah Carmell in “Judaism and the Quality of the Environment,” p. 35. Carmell, Areyah. “Judaism and the Quality of the Environment.” In *Challenge: Torah Views on Science and Its Problems*, eds. Areyah Carmell and Cyril Domb. New York: Feldman Publishers, 1976.