

period, Tom's growing ability to see the world through Ezra's eyes enables father and son to communicate and form a strong bond. Sometimes Ezra lets Tom teach him things, like basic social skills, but much remains hidden about Ezra that tends to catch his parents by surprise, often in good ways.

While Ezra has been able to recognize letters and spell words from an early age, no one knows if he is reading with comprehension. Tom gets his answer when Ezra sets off the fire alarm at their synagogue when Yom Kippur services have concluded and people are filing into the reception hall to break the fast.

Amid the confusion of people rushing outside with their bagels and juice, Tom asks why Ezra has touched the red alarm box. "It said, 'Pull Down,'" Ezra innocently responds. Tom admits to "feeling at once exasperated and tickled: My son can read."

Like the noted animal scientist and autism advocate Temple Grandin, Ezra is fascinated by animals and loves to visit the zoo; it is the one place where all his anxious mannerisms disappear. On one

such trip with his grandfather, he suddenly volunteers an astounding array of facts about each species that he has memorized from his wildlife encyclopedia. His extraordinary memory soon becomes evident in the addresses and dates he recalls, as well as facts he has memorized on topics that interest him, from breeds of dogs,

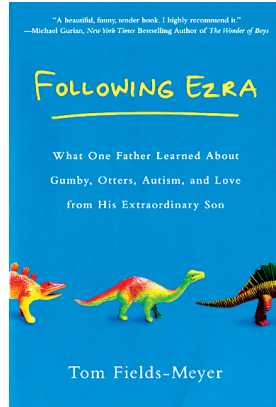
to cartoon characters, to the release dates for every animated Disney film ever made. "I come to relish my periodic, precious glimpses into the extraordinary ways Ezra's mind makes sense of the world—particularly when he shows flashes of his powerful and unusual memory," his father writes.

Ezra is fortunate to have parents who are open to nurturing all his interests as possible venues for more

social interaction. He has benefitted from his experiences in the Jewish community—a Jewish summer camp for special-needs children, afternoon Hebrew school classes, and regular attendance at Sabbath services with his parents and brothers.

When Ezra decides he wants a bar mitzvah, his mother helps him learn to chant his Torah portion and his father helps him draft his speech, but Ezra selects the topic: "I want to talk about being autistic... How it's not bad, it's good," he tells his parents. At Ezra's bar mitzvah, his parents, family, and the entire congregation marvel at the *dvar Torah*, the speech of the young man on the *bimah*, and his father watches in awe as the boy who once seemed so alone greets every guest and thanks them "for being here to celebrate my future." (Postscript: Ezra, now a 15-year-old high school student, has published an illustrated children's book, *E-mergency*, with coauthor Tom Lichtenheld, to rave reviews.)

Bonny V. Fetterman is literary editor of Reform Judaism magazine.



Here I Am: Using Jewish Spiritual Wisdom to Become More Present, Centered, and Available for Life

by Leonard Felder

(Trumpeter, 179 pp., paperback \$15.95)

I always feel warmly about self-help books that suggest things I'm tempted to try. Leonard Felder's simple, engaging book on using Jewish spiritual techniques for stress relief falls into that category for me.

"Mindfulness meditation" has been popular since the physician Jon Kabat-Zinn brought it into mainstream medicine in the early 1980s; its practices relied on mainly Zen Buddhist teachings adapted for secular Westerners. Felder, a practicing psychologist in Los Angeles, proposes a meditation practice that utilizes Jewish teachings for stress reduction: his remedy for the stress overload of daily life is to take a few breaths (of course) and focus on a phrase—a prayer, blessing, or concept from the Jewish tradition—that we can use to calm and center ourselves over the course of a busy day.

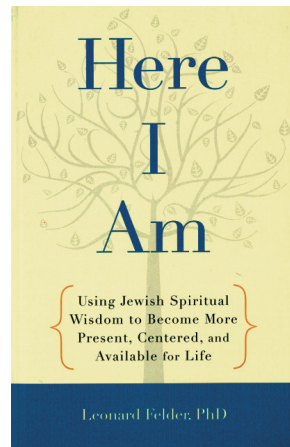
The phrases he proposes do not function like mantras, to block distracting thoughts; rather, they serve to focus our attention on concepts that counteract common emotional snares. For example, the biblical phrase *hineni*, "Here I am," brings to mind the unspoken question, "Where are you?" and becomes a way of slowing down. Felder makes use of spiritual ideas with therapeutic value such as

tzimtzum, the kabbalistic idea that God, the Eternal Source of Energy, "contracted" in order to leave room for a created universe; likewise, he suggests, we have to recognize when we are being too intense or overbearing and use a phrase to help us do a kind of *tzimtzum*: "Relax, pull back, open up some space."

The following blessing, traditionally said after using the bathroom,

can be said anytime to remind us of our commitment to our own health: "Blessed are You, Eternal Source of Creation..."

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