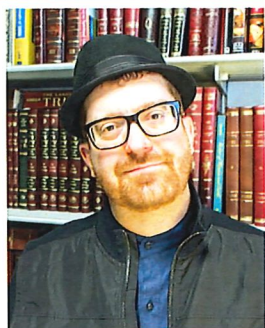


## Attention, Intention, Kindling: How God Becomes Real

Rav Aubrey Glazer



What is real and why does it matter in our quest for meaning in life? Moreover, how can we discern what is really real and of lasting value in our lives, especially when it comes to taking that leap from the mundane to the magical, from the ordinary to the extraordinary? Let me share two places I turn to for polishing that touchstone of the real. First and most recently, there is T.M.

Luhrmann's fascinating new book,

*How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (Princeton University Press, 2020), which explores how individuals make the divine and spirits feel vividly present in their lives. She argues that this process requires active effort, including storytelling, prayer, sensory experiences, and cultivating inner senses. These practices transform belief into a tangible experience, making convictions resilient and impactful. Luhrmann draws on ethnographic studies of various religious traditions, showing that these inner states are not just about belief, but about creating a world where invisible others matter. I find inspiration in her work in that it highlights the psychological and social benefits of engaging with the divine, offering insights into the enduring power of religious practices. Luhrmann's approach is respectful and nuanced, avoiding dismissive attitudes so common by the village atheists today toward religion. Her use of ethnographic evidence provides a rich, detailed understanding of how religious practices shape experiences. I am especially inspired by her innovative reframing of the cognitive and emotional dimensions of a life journeying toward the divine as follows:

**Attention:** This first stage involves focusing on the presence of the divine. Believers actively direct their thoughts and awareness toward gods or spirits, often through practices like prayer, meditation, or storytelling. This focus helps to create a mental framework where the divine becomes a meaningful part of their reality.

**Intention:** This next stage describes how believers engage with the divine through purposeful actions and rituals. These acts are not passive, but involve a deliberate effort to connect with the divine, reinforcing the sense of its presence and significance in their lives.

**Kindling:** This final stage refers to the emotional and sensory experiences that make the divine feel tangible. Through rituals,

music, or communal worship, believers kindle a sense of connection, often experiencing feelings of love, awe, or even hearing voices or seeing visions.

Surely there are critics who will argue that Luhrmann's focus on human practices may overlook theological or metaphysical aspects of divine agency. Additionally, her emphasis on Western and charismatic traditions might limit the applicability of her findings to other cultural contexts. Yet Luhrmann's work invites reflection on the interplay between belief, practice, and experience, making it a valuable contribution to the study of religion in general, and our Jewish living in particular.

Second, there is my well-worn, dog-eared copy of my spiritual mentor, the late, great, Rabbi Alan Lew's *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation* (Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company 2018) which is a profound exploration of the Jewish High Holy Days that I return to re-read every Elul, in that it continues to offer something surprising to me each reading. It outlines the spiritual journey through re/turn, transformation, and renewal. Rabbi Lew uses the metaphor of the Exodus story to illustrate life's transitions, emphasizing the importance of confronting vulnerability and embracing change. He guides readers through the stages of the High Holy Days, including Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot, highlighting themes of self-reflection, atonement, and awe. Rabbi Lew focuses here on the next step following Luhrman's kindling, which is integration of Jewish teachings and contemplative practices along with personal anecdotes that create a rich tapestry of spiritual insight. I have always remained inspired by Rabbi Lew's ability to weave together diverse traditions and personal stories that make his work accessible and relatable, especially as a Conservative Jew and rabbi. Rabbi Lew's emphasis on broken-heartedness as a path to spiritual growth resonates deeply, offering a unique perspective on the transformative power of vulnerability. No doubt there are those who will FIND Rabbi Lew's approach overly introspective, potentially neglecting communal aspects of the High Holy Days and balk at his openness and curiosity in blending of Jewish and Buddhist teachings WHICH might not appeal to readers seeking a purely traditional Jewish perspective. Yet Rabbi Lew's little book has become a cult classic in many worlds, Jewish and beyond - why? It touches the broken heart and teaches us how to elevate it by embracing the unpreparedness of life as an opportunity for profound spiritual growth. For us all, we can benefit no matter where we find ourselves on the journey Godward, to reconsider how these stages of attention, intention, kindling, and integration can attune us to what is really real in our lives.



## PrayerLab Shabbat

Are you curious about the choreography of prayer and ritual life in the synagogue services? Join us on Saturday, May 24th for the next installment of our interactive prayer lab service that will explore key sections of the Amidah prayer. Bring your questions and curiosities.

**Saturday, May 24th @ 9:30 Am**