First Aid for Spiritual Seekers
by On Being

What follows is the syndicated transcript of an interview between On Being’s Krista Tippett and Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie

Krista Tippett, host: Forms of religious devotion are shifting, just like every institution right now, but there’s a new world of creativity towards crafting spiritual life while appreciatively exploring the depths of tradition. Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie is a fun and forceful embodiment of this evolution. Born into an eminent and ancient rabbinical lineage, as a young adult he moved away from religion towards storytelling, theater, and drag. These days, he leads a pop-up synagogue in New York City with a global profile that takes as its tagline: “everybody-friendly, artist-driven, God-optional.” This is not merely about spiritual growth and community, but about reinventing the very meaning of “we.”

[music: “Seven League Boots” by Zoë Keating]

Amichai Lau-Lavie: We are catering to generations of all ages who are seeking spiritual meaning and who are a little burnt out and tired by cliché and by some of the religious offerings and traditional trappings. And without being too rude and too funny, the language that I’ve been trying to wrestle with dances that very thin line, that very tight rope between — we’re loyal to the past, and we’re loyal to our audience, and we’re finding the in-between. And it’s how to be cheeky without being cheesy, and how to be profound, how to bring the sacred. I think we’re starving for the sacred.

Ms. Tippett: I’m Krista Tippett, and this is On Being.

I spoke with Amichai Lau-Lavie in 2016, the year he was ordained as a rabbi in the conservative tradition of Judaism. He lives in New York City, where he is founding spiritual leader of Lab/Shul and the Storahtelling Project. He was born in Israel.

Ms. Tippett: So I ask this question of everybody, in some version, but I am really looking forward to your answer — how you would start to describe the religious background of your childhood?

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: So my task on Fridays, growing up, in preparation for the Sabbath, was to help my mother set the table. And she would bring out the best silver and china, and I would help set it. And that means I would go around in the neighborhood and pick flowers from either neighbors’ front yards or from some general public areas. And I remember that as a task that I loved. I would get lost, and I would make little arrangements, and I would put them in the middle of the table, and that was my thing. And this both spoke to my spiritual aesthetics, to very much being in my mother’s house, and — I don’t know where to put the queer, exactly, in there, but it certainly catered to that type of artistic
sensibility. And people ask me today what I would do if I wouldn’t be doing clergy work, and I say I would probably open a very boutique-y type of florist shop that would only function on Fridays.

Ms. Tippett: [laughs] I love that. Now was it also later, as you grew older, that you understood that you came from this 39 generations of rabbis from kind of an illustrious rabbinic dynasty? Was that history something that only made itself felt to you as you got older?

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: On our living room wall — still is; it’s a different wall, but still the living room — there was a photo of my grandfather, my father’s late father, who was a rabbi and who perished in the Holocaust. And his very distinct features and looking straight into the camera was really the icon in my childhood home, both because of the martyrdom and because of the rabbinic legacy and because of the huge light that his story and tragic end cast over us. And I think I can almost place the moment when I sort of realized that this is the dynasty. And it coincided with my uncle who, when I was in my early teens, was elected as Israel’s chief rabbi and whom I knew very well, and I grew up with him, and I think, at around that same time in my early teens, this notion of the legacy and its responsibility. But at some point, I realized that this is who we come from. There is a debate whether it’s 37, 38, or 39 generations. But it’s something in the 37-esque.

Ms. Tippett: And you were also that generation born in the aftermath of that, the 20th century’s terrible convergence of Jewish history and the darkest forces of human capacity and human history. Your father and his younger brother were liberated from Buchenwald in 1945 — is that right — by American soldiers?

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: Yeah. He was liberated at the age of 18 and, within a few months, went into sort of autopilot of religious observance as a choice. And only in his late years, in his 80s, he had the ability to ask some of the faith questions, and I walked him through it and interviewed him. And he chose to remain Orthodox, to remain pious.

You asked about my childhood memories of religion. And other than flowers for Sabbath and other beautiful gestures, my father would pray at home. In the mornings, he would put on his tefillin, his leather phylacteries, and his prayer shawl, and he would drink a glass of tomato juice simultaneously and glimpse at the morning paper. He was a journalist. And my memory was my father having this religious ritual at home at the dining room table while multitasking with tomato juice and a newspaper that later on became CNN.

And I mocked him for many years. I remember as a teen I said, like, “Really? You’re not praying. This is like — what is this? It’s a checklist.” And only later, and certainly after his death, when I inherited his prayer shawl that I now put on every morning, I realized that this was his way of sticking to discipline and committing to a path of persistence, even if the big answers and the big questions are not quite clear.

Ms. Tippett: Somewhere, you have spoken — and whether you had said these words or not, this is one thing that comes through in your life and your work, your calling, is this calling to serve those who are “fringe and other.” And as you’re speaking about the history that your family knew personally, it’s clear that that flowed into this, and so did your sexual identity and the fact that — I mean this is such a striking story, that when it came time for your bar mitzvah, the Torah portion included the teaching about homosexuality as an abomination. And I wonder if, even at that time, if you were at all conscious at that time of this planting a calling in you.
Rabbi Lau-Lavie: It’s so hard to retrieve one’s mindset during those angstful teen years. I have this memory of sitting at the blue desk that I had during those years between 12 and 16 and writing a short story about the scapegoat. And what happens if the Leviticus story, which is part of my bar mitzvah portion, the middle chapters of Leviticus, what if the guy whose job it is to take the scapegoat on the day of atonement and toss the scapegoat off into the wilderness — what if the guy decides not to do it, and he’s just attached to the goat, and he doesn’t want to send the goat off? And I think that that was my way of asking the questions that I dared not ask about the fact that by the age of 13 I knew who I was attracted to. I knew that it was an abomination, and it was a taboo that was not even to be spoken.

I was in New York City at the time, in Manhattan, and so I was exposed to a great deal of opportunities — and this is early ‘80s — and writing about the scapegoat and about transgression, and what if you don’t deal with the “sacred trash” as we are supposed to, but let it go, was my sort of crafty way of asking myself — what if? What if it’s not what I grew up on? What if it’s not the either/or of good, bad, kosher, treyf, abomination, sanctity? What if there’s something else here?

I don’t recall, and I doubt I had, any role models to think about this out loud with, not until my later teens and my 20s. But I think those years planted the seeds for my — somehow, with grace and despair, I guess, ask questions that were hard enough to push me over the edge in some way and to leave, to understand that my option is either to stay within the familiar structure that I grew up with, with very clear religious and sort of societal boundaries, or dare risk the fact that there is another paradigm here, that there’s another option where I’m not an abomination.

What I’m feeling doesn’t feel unholy, it doesn’t feel messy, and so maybe the Torah is not right. And I remember feeling, at some point, like there was this thing — thinking, “OK, one day I’m going to die and I’m going to stand before the Throne of Glory, and there’s this one option where God’s going to look at me and say, ‘Why didn’t you follow all the rules that all the rabbis told you? Eh. You go to hell.’ Or the other option was that God’s going to look at me and burst out laughing and say, ‘Wow, why didn’t you follow your heart?’” And I thought that that latter option is much worse.

[music: “hey june” by melodium]

Ms. Tippett: I’m Krista Tippett, and this is On Being, today with performer and rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie.

Ms. Tippett: So it seems to me that the arts — and you are — another identity, I mean we all — what is it — we contain multitudes — you are an artist, an artistic person, that this became your way of staying with these questions. And also, you just said you left, you walked out of that Judaism in which you had been raised, but it seems to me that the arts also allowed you to continue to be Jewish. You were still actually loving Judaism, even if you were doing something completely different with it and its fundamentals.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: Yeah, I would say what initially kept me tethered in a holy way was storytelling and the understanding that while I might not sign up for the religious practice and for the faith in a God and in a legal religious system as is, I was attached and mesmerized by the body of storytelling and by the tradition of storytelling, whether it’s the Talmud or the midrash, the Jewish legends, or the Kabbalistic tales. And being in a situation where I’d sit around a table with a bunch of people, and we’d open one of the
books, and we’d talk about any of the stories — Jacob wrestling, or you have it — and then the permission to use the storytelling as a pretext and as a context for our own text, for our own lives, was mesmerizing.

I realized that at some point in my late teens, and that the knowledge that I’m part of this relay race, of this lineage of people who for thousands of years are contemplating and interpreting the text, and that I, too, am invited and permitted to continue the interpretation on the margins that then become the text, that was what first kept me interested, in my early 20s — the notion of just opening the pages of Talmud, whether I have a beanie on my head and I’m keeping the Sabbath, or not. And that eventually led into the interest in a more personalized spiritual vocabulary.

Ms. Tippett: When did you — how old were you when you founded Storahtelling?

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: Storahtelling, I was about 28, 29.

Ms. Tippett: OK, so this kind of led to that, eventually.


Ms. Tippett: You wanted to renew the drama of the stories, it seems to me, the dynamism of the stories. And even here again is where the artist of you came in. As you said, what if this is actually theater, and actually you’re working with bestselling literature, and there’s already an audience there, but it’s a bad performance? There’s something very passionate — and playful, also, as serious as it is too — in the way you picked this up and wanted to transmit it to others.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: Absolutely. I think the playful is key, because so much of the religious narrative and situation is so heavy. And at some point I was interested in storytelling, and I thought I’d be interested in theater and in drama, because I was working in a high school with kids who couldn’t care less about any of this. But they did care if you got them on their feet and you started doing some drama games. So I began understanding the role of masks, both literal and figurative, and how the “as-if” of story and the “imagine” of storytelling and myth allows our soul and our mind to interact with possibilities that just plain facts and legal thinking, as opposed to more legendary thinking, doesn’t.

But here it’s prime time: The Jews are in the pews; there’s about 500 people here on a Saturday morning for an hour — instead of being invigorated by the storytelling, they’re just being chanted to. And it’s Hebrew; they don’t understand it; and it’s long, and it’s dire. So I went researching, what is the history of this ritual, this Torah service ritual, and discover that it is indeed one of the oldest storytelling ceremonies in continuity on the planet. It is Judaism’s oldest educational device of sharing the tribal story with the community once a week, and that until a thousand years ago, every time it was done, it was done in split screen — you had the chanter in Hebrew and the translator in vernacular. And the translator was not just translator. He was an interpreter and a storyteller. And there are records of this tradition happening in the Old Testament and in the New Testament in later writings. And for a bunch of reasons, this tradition died out a thousand years ago.

And I thought, how fantastic to bring it back, to bring back the live translator, to bring back the emcee, to wrestle with the Biblical story in ways that will be meaningful in the 21st century and not to take it verbatim but figure out how the translation can become a theatrical, dramatized vehicle to engage people in the wrestling with the text.
Ms. Tippett: And how was Hadassah Gross born — who was kind of a drag character you created, Sabbath queen?

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: Wow, you’ve done your research.

Ms. Tippett: À la Zsa Zsa Gabor, who just died.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: Yes, rest in peace. Yes.

Ms. Tippett: [laughs] Yes, exactly.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: Rest in peace, Zsa Zsa. I read the obituary with extra care. Hadassah loved her.

Ms. Tippett: [laughs] Well, I thought of you — I thought of you while I was — yeah.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: [laughs] Well, thank you. That’s a great compliment. Zsa Zsa was indeed a role model. So you know, there is this holiday once a year called Purim, which is the Jewish sort of Carnival, where the scroll of Esther is recited in synagogues and people put on masks and drink. It’s very Carnival, and it has, indeed, very ancient Persian, pagan roots and sort of became Jewish-ized. I, of course, loved the Purim since I was a child. There are photos of me doing drag at the age of four.

Ms. Tippett: But it wasn’t called drag, I’m sure.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: It was called Purim costume. I became my cousin Rachel.

Ms. Tippett: [laughs] Right.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: And then I became a Russian piano teacher — there’s great photos. But yeah, you’re allowed. It’s the topsy-turvy. And the older I got, I was interested in what Purim has to offer us as grownups in this masking and unmasking. And also, politically, Purim is a very interesting and complicated conversation about racism and about the ethnic and the “other” within us.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: And one Purim in the late ’90s, I was emcee of some kind of an Esther scroll event, and I had one vodka too many, and Hadassah Gross emerged out of my head like Athena, with a full — that was her name, Hadassah Gross. I knew she was Hungarian, I knew she was a widow, and she was a Kabbalah teacher.

Ms. Tippett: Was she a rabbi’s wife, also?

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: Yes.

Ms. Tippett: OK. You said you weren’t going to be a rabbi, but you could be a rabbi’s wife.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: Exactly. She was, in fact, the widow of a rabbi. And again, this is — at the time, this was just fun drag. I was in New York. I was hanging out with the Radical Faeries and other interesting queer spiritual groups where drag was sort of OK in many ways of fluidity, in between spirituality and joking and ritual and shows. And that in-between — it’s
not serious; it’s not play; it’s not drag; it’s not not — it’s where lighting candles became a very sacred place. She served an important role in my own coming to terms with being out. She had an important role with my father’s dealing with me coming out.

Ms. Tippett: How was that?

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: Well, at some point there was an Israeli newspaper that did a big piece on Hadassah and interviewed my father, who said — they asked him, “What do you think about Hadassah?” And he said, “She has great legs.”

Ms. Tippett: [laughs] Had you ever had a conversation with your father about this?

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: A little bit, and it was something about the humor that allowed him to laugh with me at this phenomenon.

Ms. Tippett: That’s lovely.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: So there was something very healing in what she brought.

[Music: “Soul Alphabet” by Colleen]

Ms. Tippett: After a short break, more with Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie. And you can find this show again in several libraries at onbeing.org, including Judaism, Public Theology Reimagined, and Intentional Communities. We created libraries from our 15-year archive for browsing or deep diving by topic — for teaching and reflection and conversation. Find this, and an abundance of more, at onbeing.org.

Ms. Tippett: I’m Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, I’m with Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie, exploring the reinvention of religion and the reinvention of the meaning of “we.” He is an especially creative exemplar of engaging religious tradition while also applying its forms for people now. Born of an eminent orthodox rabbinical lineage, he once moved away from Judaism towards storytelling, theater, and drag. These days, he leads something called Lab/Shul, a pop-up synagogue in New York City with a global profile that takes as its tagline: “everybody-friendly, artist-driven, God-optional.”

Ms. Tippett: So when you when you were ordained, The Times of Israel wrote, “With an eye on Jewish continuity, maverick spiritual leader goes mainstream.” [laughs] It does sound like in many of those years between your bar mitzvah and the time you were actually ordained, or decided to get on the path to becoming a rabbi, you would not have imagined that that’s where you were heading, even though I also sense that you never stopped loving Judaism.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: I think wrestling — as you said, the story about Jacob is very apt. It’s not a love/hate. It’s a love and deep understanding of the deep repair and rebranding that is, in my opinion, needed. Not just rebranding in the terms of text, but in the deep tissue of what it is that thousands of years later the Jewish people carry and what gifts and treasures we still have to work through and share with the world. So I feel a deep love and a deep sense of honoring the legacy that I was born into and the richness that I’m so privileged to have inherited and been taught. And what’s needed in this new time, in these new days and this new paradigm where Judaism, I believe, must evolve, is evolving to retain its particularity while being radically universal.

Ms. Tippett: So when you use language like “rebranding,” I think it could be heard as kind
of cynical or dumbing things down, turning to consumerist impulses. And I don’t think you — and it doesn’t actually sound that way when it comes out of your mouth, but I think a cynic would hear it that way. To me, it kind of points back at the artist in you. I mean you’d said at some point that you once went around saying that artists are the new rabbis, and then you transitioned to “rabbis are the new artists.” And so if I look at the — well, maybe let’s call it the tagline of Lab/Shul — would you call Lab/Shul, would you call it a congregation, a synagogue?

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: Yes. No, it’s a congregation.

Ms. Tippett: It’s your congregation, and you are the spiritual leader, the founding spiritual leader. So it’s “everybody-friendly, artist-driven, God-optional, all ages.” And just tell me a little bit about why those four phrases?

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: And missing is “pop-up,” by the way, which is not there.

Ms. Tippett: What’s missing? What is?

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: “Pop-up.”

Ms. Tippett: Pop-up.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: Pop-up. So we’re transient, physical-wise. And the taglines really look at what does it mean for us to reimagine what is the role and the purpose of, certainly, religion and the Jewish story in the 21st century. So “everybody-friendly” means that we’re really not checking who you are based on descent or consent or blood or belief. You’re here as a seeker — welcome. Jew, Jew-ish, other, blended families, people from all paths — welcome.

“God-optional” is a tricky term that I came up with because for so many people, the word “God” is so off-putting, and the notion of prayer or a transcendent being, deity, that we grew up with in the Hebrew schools and in the synagogues of our youth, is not really speaking to who we are. So God-optional is our way of saying agnostic-friendly, atheist-friendly. It’s a metaphor. If you truly connect to prayer: yay. If not, it’s a meditation. We translate all of our liturgy in ways that are gender neutral, hierarchyless, and God-optional.

And that’s rather radical and speaks very, very powerfully to people of a lot of different backgrounds who are just invited into the contemplative, into the spiritual presence, understanding that our liturgy is, indeed, poetry, and it’s metaphor, and it’s inviting us to be present. And artists are involved with every single step of how we build ritual and how we do everything, how we structure our communal life. So “artist-driven” is very important.

“Pop-up” is primarily because we’re in New York City, and real estate is insane, and we cannot afford a building. But that’s also a philosophy. We go from wineries to museums to galleries, in Brooklyn or Harlem or downtown, and we use the internet a lot. So it’s sort of an intimate, cozy place to try things out.

Ms. Tippett: So there’s so many things we could talk about, and I have so many notes about High Holidays Boot Camp and the meaning of repentance and — maybe we’ll get to some of that. I think it would be good to dwell with this moment we inhabit. We’re speaking as the political reality around the world is in a very unsettled state. And lots of
surprises — well, I think unsettled is the way a lot of people feel all around, on every side. So maybe kind of focus on how I kind of draw you out on theology and faith and community in the context of now.

I do have to say, and I haven’t seen you quoting Heschel anywhere, although probably you have — I keep thinking of this line of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was also at Jewish Theological Seminary, where you went and were ordained in the conservative tradition, this line of Heschel: “In a free society, some are guilty, while all are responsible.” You wrote this beautiful reflection on words, moving into the High Holy Days. Is that recent?

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: What was the …

Ms. Tippett: On words — “Our private and public words matter a lot. In this world of so many words …” Was that not you?

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: It sounds familiar. It’s either very recent, something I wrote last week, or it is part of the …

Ms. Tippett: I think it’s very recent.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: Yeah, so it must be something, I think, I wrote last week as I was — it was the second anniversary of my father’s death, and I was at the cemetery, and my uncle and brother and family insisted on chanting many, many, many Psalms. And I was thinking, “Wow. We’re chanting all the Psalms so that we don’t talk,” and went, “What are the words we need, or what are the words we don’t need, and what are the rituals that are healthy and vibrant, and which ones need a bit of help? And where are we at this moment, that what we need are healthy words and healing words and space for words, and not just recycling the old words?” There’s a transition.

Ms. Tippett: But I think both, right? Aren’t you saying, I mean — both…

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: No, it’s absolutely both.

Ms. Tippett: I mean you wrote that “We chant the ancient words as did our ancestors before us, fragile, human, hopeful, honest in our return to this place, this time, this word, on our journey.”

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: Yeah, I think the words are the black box that contains so many of the ancestral aspirations and truths — and also baggage that needs to be checked. There is an evolution. Not everything that we’ve inherited is worthy of being passed on, like trauma and memories and values that have evolved. Part of the reason why I’m not an Orthodox Jew but a flexidox or polydox and otherwise-Jew, and not just “Jew,” is that I do believe in evolution, not just of our species and the world, but of concepts. And if the Bible and the Jewish values that have sustained my people for thousands of years believe that women were subservient and that sexuality was of a specific type and that types of worship included slaughtering animals, we’ve evolved. That’s not where we are.

So we need to read some of those sacred words as metaphor, as bygone models, as invitations for creativity, and for sort of the second meaning and the second naïveté here that still retrieves this text as useful and these narratives as holy, not as literal. I think that is, of course, the conversation between so many of us of different religions who are struggling with our brothers and sisters who choose to read things literally and speak for a
Biblical truth that is unalterable, where we — some of us think that there is room here for creativity, for sacred metaphor and change. And we’re not there yet. We’re not there yet for those days of dignity and equality and radical justice that Heschel and Dr. King and so many of our leaders, then and now, are hoping for. And here we are — oh, my God — again?

Ms. Tippett: Right. And we weren’t — I mean you and I could talk for an hour, but we weren’t there before, either, and weren’t quite as conscious as we should have been about how many people were left out and how many things had been happening that flew in the face of these values. There’s a real, natural human pattern at work right now, which is, change does happen at different paces for different people, and there’s kind of a classic reaction. But it’s a reaction to change that is underway. So in that sense, maybe we shouldn’t be so surprised, because the magnitude of the changes — of mentality, of behavior, of values, of imagination — they’re vast, and they’re happening on so many different levels right now.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: I want to share with you the story that really came to me right after the elections, and I’ve used it a lot since. It’s this Talmudic parable about a ship that is sailing, and there are many cabins. And one of the people in the cabins on the lower floor decides to dig a hole in the floor of his cabin, and does so, and sure enough, the ship begins to sink. And the other passengers suddenly discover what’s going on and see this guy with a hole in the floor. And they say, “What are you doing?” And he says, “Well, it’s my cabin. I paid for it.” And down goes the ship.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: And it’s a story in the Talmud that talks about human responsibility in the Jewish sense — that we’re all in the same ship together. But I’ve been wrestling with it and talking about it from the day after — from November 9, talking about what does it mean for us to be that person? And where have we been only focusing on my cabin and me-me-me-me-me-me-me-me-me-me, and where are we not part of a “we”? And how is that true of every single one of us, and how that is true in some ways of America, and how the narcissistic, me-focused, insight-driven, my own needs and aspirations in this age have taken so hold of us that the sense of public and communal and responsible-for-other, including the limping and the weak at the edges of our camp, in some way has not been looked at as religious traditions have taught us to and as the Bible again and again reminds us: Remember the Other. Remember the Other. You were the Other. And then the question is, what is the “we,” because the boundaries of what is “we” are shifting.

Ms. Tippett: Yeah, what is the “we,” and how do we — [laughs] how do we weave that together, right?

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: Right. It’s so easy to descend into animosity and either/or. And I’m in the middle of an email volley with someone in my vast family who is a lovely, lovely, lovely gentleman, who sent an email around to the family saying that he voted for Trump. And I couldn’t understand the level of rage that came out of me in wanting to communicate with him. And I thankfully have the ways of containing and curbing my enthusiasm and waiting 24 hours before I send some emails, and so I waited to send him a very short note that said, “I’m so glad we’re honoring our past ancestors together. It seems like we can’t quite agree on the present and the future.”

And I’m trying to think, how do we use love? How do we go face-to-face in difficult conversations with those who see the world so differently than some of us and whose
values are coming from the good place of “me” and “preservation,” and even have a “we” in mind, but it’s not as expansive and radical as the we that I’m thinking of and some of us are? How do we use love? I’m sure it’s keeping you up at night. I know it’s keeping me up at night.

Ms. Tippett: Yeah, and it is something we — we have to walk this, right, because there aren’t answers to that question you’re posing. I mean I was thinking, also, at the very beginning when you talked about a new sense of God being born after the Holocaust, that the kindness — kindness — I mean I think love is also — it sounds so grand, and it sounds like it’s something you have to feel. And this love we have to practice now and learn to practice is so much more practical than that.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: It’s daily. It’s daily practice. It’s ironic to me now — I’m in my late 40s, and I’m a father, and I’m a rabbi, and I’m looking at my life and how it’s evolving and who knows what else. And I sit every morning for a few moments, wrapped up in my father’s prayer shawl. I meditate and write in my journal. I rarely use any of the liturgical texts. And what it’s about is discipline. It’s just daily discipline. It’s a workout. And it’s the workout for gratitude. And it’s a workout for what Heschel called radical amazement and wonder. And it’s just an exercise in meditation in silence. Sit for a few moments and cultivate love.

And I’m so amazed that at this point, this tool that I inherited that’s in my toolbox is right there. And I don’t drink tomato juice, and I don’t read the paper, but I kind of do what my father did. I carve this little space each day for being in the “me” so I can be there more for the “we,” and I am now really conscious of how, at core, it is an exercise in love so that I can be there, more agile and helpful when more contentious moments happen the moment I turn on my phone or open my front door.

[music: “Rain” by Poppy Ackroyd]

Ms. Tippett: I’m Krista Tippett, and this is On Being, today with performer and rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie.

Ms. Tippett: I was looking at the Lab/Shul website, and it’s just — it’s really fun. And I think it follows on — it’s kind of an expression of the playful and serious forms that way of moving forward can take. Like there’s one post that’s advice from Kermit. [laughs] And I don’t know if you write these, or who writes these. “Last night, 15 Lab/Shul co-creators answered their first ever community call to action to share their energy, excitement, and exasperation in this moment when our political future feels uncertain. The resounding answer: Connect. Or our sage Kermit the Frog says, ‘Someday we’ll find it / The rainbow connection / The lovers, the dreamers, and me.’” And I’ve been humming that song ever since, because I still remember learning that when my kids were small, and it’s such a beautiful song.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: Well, I’m so happy to say that this is one of the few posts that I did not write.

Ms. Tippett: [laughs] OK.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: But I believe Rabbi Kerry, who’s part of our team now did, together with some of our team members. And my joy is that the language that I’ve tried to convey is this very delicate combination of reverence and irreverence. And it’s because we are catering to generations of all ages who are seeking spiritual meaning and who are a little
burnt out and tired by cliché and by some of the religious offerings and traditional trappings. And without being too rude and too funny, the language that I’ve been trying to wrestle with is one that dances that very thin line, that very tight rope between — we’re loyal to the past, and we’re loyal to our audience, and we’re finding the in-between. And it’s how to be cheeky without being cheesy, and how to be profound, how to bring the sacred in many ways. I think we’re starving for the sacred in so many ways.

In the Jewish world, there’s this renaissance of various attempts to both bring social justice and human dignity and spirituality and practice and wisdom to the forefront. And it does take rebranding. It takes reimagining what we have to offer and how we get to mix and match with other traditions. And that is a historical precedent that I think we are now waking up to understand how radical it is that you and I are having this conversation and that Muslim leaders and Buddhist leaders and Zen leaders and Shinto leaders and Indigenous — we’re all mixing and matching our tools. And the trick is, how do we keep and retain our indigenous wisdom while having these labs and these conversations where we get to play and share and expand the we.

Ms. Tippett: But I don’t actually think that that — like, that looks like it would be the challenge, on the surface, but I don’t think it often is, because in really profound — the paradox of authentic, profound, interreligious connection — or, I think, connection across meaningful boundaries — you don’t give up the ground you stand on, right? The world becomes larger because you have seen this other, and you may have an appreciation for them or a curiosity about what they bring into the world, but it’s also, the ground beneath your feet is somehow richer and more interesting. That’s so often the way it goes.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: If one is aware of the ground beneath one’s feet. I think where this post-ethnic opportunity and this interreligious dialogue becomes challenging is that for so many people of different faiths, the last century has not provided deep education and literacy of what it is that’s so sacred and meaningful about our ground.

Ms. Tippett: Yeah, and to me — again, on the Lab/Shul website there is a write-up about something that I heard about after the election, these meetings with Muslim and Jewish women. Did you write this one? “On Sunday, I sat, cried, and sang with 500 Muslim and Jewish women at the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom gathering.”

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: No, that’s Rabbi Kerry again.

Ms. Tippett: It’s a beautiful — and might sound really counterintuitive that this is also a product of the post-9/11 world. And it’s very much in contrast to the renewed language of “the other” that’s out there in culture, and again, interestingly, in some ways a response to it.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: The Friday after the elections, along with a few other people I ended up in the mosque on Friday afternoon, as they were at prayers. We stood outside with signs that said “Together against hate.” And I was standing there with my skullcap on my head, and I was invited into the mosque to say a few words. And I was like, here I am inside a mosque, kneeling, praying, meditating with people — this would not have happened. So what is the opportunity here to discover common ground, not in anti-, but in for and in favor of enlarging our sense of human responsibility?

And the mystical or the ethical Jewish notion of “we are each created in the divine image” is the candle that is lit on my altar, and in many ways, I believe, it is lit on many, many, many altars. But in some cases, the light just doesn’t — isn’t cast wide enough. And one
of the challenges, I will certainly say as a Jew right now, is for us to understand, in the 21st century, what is a Jew? Who is in? Who’s out? How are we expanding and redefining the boundaries? And again it goes back to the question of who is “we,” because it’s changing, and for some people it’s too fast and too radical and too scary. And for others it’s too nebulous.

Ms. Tippett: And for others, it’s too slow, right? [laughs]

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: Right. And there’s so much wisdom in slow. In 2006, the conservative movement, after almost a decade of deliberations and more, even, decided to allow LGBT students to be admitted to the rabbinical seminary. And here we are, 100 years since women were able to vote in this country, and a century is and is not a long time.

And I come from a long, long tradition of thousands of years of people trying to make sense of the world. Some of the changes are going to happen in my lifetime. Others, I now know, might not. But the question is, what seeds do we keep on planting, and what low-hanging fruit can we keep on plucking? And now, I would say, more than ever, as you said, we’re in such a moment of uncertainty. It feels like the call to invest in the local, communal, is essential — people need each other face-to-face, hand-to-hand — while at the same time not losing sight of the bigger “we,” the global “we.”

Ms. Tippett: Right, and figuring out how to do that, how to invest in both those ways of being in the world. And we need each other to figure it out, because it’s huge. It’s a lot to ask, right? It’s a lot to ask, with this history we have as a species and what feels instinctive to us, even when it flies in the face of what we deeply want.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: And in fact, you know that our DNA is able to handle 150 names or so, [Editor’s Note: Rabbi Lau-Lavie is likely referring to the Dunbar Number, which is the theory that human beings are able to maintain a meaningful relationship with up to 150 people. According to various studies, humans can remember up to thousands of names. Learn more.] and that we do have this sort of tribal sense of the local and intimate and the immediate, and yet we’ve got thousands of Facebook friends, and we are simultaneously called to have true empathy and compassion to what happened yesterday in Berlin and in Ankara and in Aleppo and in Brooklyn and in Jerusalem. And it’s all in my feed, and it’s all people I know, and my little homo sapiens brain and heart isn’t built to handle this level of traffic.

Ms. Tippett: Yeah, that’s right.

Rabbi Lau-Lavie: So I either shut down, and I only focus on my peeps, or I find some way to navigate and to negotiate what is fidelity and what is responsibility and how do I have the circles of intimacy and containers of we that sustain me and I can be helpful with. And how, in other ways, can I be an agent of growth in a larger scale, in this global economy we’re invited to be part of. So I feel that it’s about showing and not telling. And I am co-creating a Jewish and a Jew-ish and a spiritual conversation that I consider to be triage, at this point. This is first aid for spiritual seekers who are very, very thirsty.

And it’s not everybody’s cup of tea. My mother came for my ordination back in May, and we went back and forth for weeks, whether she will be with us for the Sabbath morning practice. My mother is observant and religious, and she prays in a synagogue where women and men sit separately, and there’s no music and there’s no electricity, and certainly no priests and vicars on the stage. And I said, “Well, it’s going to be that kind of Shabbat. There’s going to be a lot of music. There’s going to be a lot of faith leaders.
There’s going to be all of us sitting together — and I’d love you to be there.”

And she came, to her great credit, and said to me later, “I was very moved. This is absolutely not my cup of tea. I will not be back. But I love what you did. I’m looking around at these hundreds of people who are in tears, who are dancing, who are praying, who are delighted to be part of this tradition, otherwise they would not have had a place to tap into the sacred.” So my mom is not my audience. I’ve done enough therapy to deal with that.

Ms. Tippett:[laughs]

[music: “Mondoline” by Spring Street Quartet]

Ms. Tippett: Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie is founding spiritual leader of Lab/Shul in New York City and the founding director of Storahtelling.


Ms. Tippett: The On Being Project is located on Dakota Land. Our lovely theme music is provided and composed by Zoë Keating. And the last voice that you hear singing at the end of our show is Cameron Kinghorn.

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