Although Etty Hillesum’s writings are favorably received by those whose faith is aligned with a particular religious tradition, their “spiritual but not religious”\(^1\) outlook also makes them quite appealing to “spiritual wanderers” who may feel excluded by mainstream religious institutions. Hillesum had two great teachers: Rainer Maria Rilke\(^2\) and Julius Spier. The emphasis in this paper shall be on the latter. My conviction is that Julius Spier—whom Hillesum identified as the mediator between her and God—was the main source of what I choose to call Hillesum’s “spierituality.”\(^3\) This is the hypothesis that I intend to corroborate in this paper. In order to do so, I shall tackle Hillesum’s writings chronologically in order to display how Spier introduced her to different sources of spiritual influence. I shall conclude by questioning Hillesum’s Jewish identity as well as her openness toward a large diversity of standpoints and the relevance of her writings for the contemporary spiritual quest.

In 1941, Hillesum met a Jewish “psychochirologist,” a fifty-four-year-old man, Julius Spier.\(^4\) After twenty-five successful years in business, Spier had decided to dedicate his life to “psychochirology,” which consists in studying the personality of people by examining their hands. Spier had been trained by the psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung in Zurich, and it was under his recommendation that Spier opened

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2. Frits Grimmelikhuizen—one of the founders of the Etty Hillesum Centre in Deventer—is presently working on a study about Rainer Maria Rilke and Etty Hillesum.
3. At the Congress in Ghent, I referred to Hillesum’s “spieritism.” A woman (whose name I unfortunately do not remember) came to me afterwards and suggested the word “spierituality,” which I found to be much better. I thank her for it.
4. Hillesum usually referred to Julius Spier as “S.” in her writings.
a practice and gave lessons in Berlin. His work was an immediate success. Spier was married and had two children. After his divorce, he became engaged to one of his students, Hertha Levi, who had to take refuge in London in 1937 or 1938 because of the Nazi threat to the German Jews. A year or so later, Spier left Nazi Germany and moved to Amsterdam. He rented a two-room apartment where he lived, pursued his practice, and gave chirology lessons. His students would invite "models" to offer their hands for a practical example. Hillesum was invited by a friend of hers, Bernard Meylink, to offer her hands on Monday, 3 February 1941. Hillesum was very impressed by Spier and his "magic" personality. At the beginning of their relationship, Hillesum felt threatened by the way Spier could easily analyze her. He could see in her hands the reflection of things that she had probably never explicitly stated. His ability to do so made her very tense and suspicious. In spite of this, she decided to undertake therapy with him while at the same time working as his secretary. In March 1941—perhaps on Spier’s advice—Hillesum started a diary. Tormented by existential questions, she was looking for meaning in her life. With Spier’s help, she learned the importance of self-discipline in all areas of her life.

Although their relationship was ambiguous, Spier helped her to probe the depths of herself, wherein she encountered what she chose to call God. She discovered a plurality of standpoints not only in others but within herself as well. Spier—her “Bible-reading friend,” as she called him (28.06.42)—introduced her to a number of spiritual writings, many of which were by Jung or Christian authors. These documents are being kept in the Etty Hillesum archive.