

2005 – Yom Kippur Kol Nidre – Science and Spirituality

A joke tells of a rabbi, a priest, and a rationalist bound for the guillotine. The rabbi was marched up onto the platform first. There, facing the guillotine, he was asked if he had any last words, and the rabbi cried out, “I believe in the one and only true God, who shall save me.” The executioner then positioned the rabbi below the blade, set the block above his neck, and pulled the cord. The heavy cleaver plunged downward but then, abruptly, it stopped with a crack just a few inches above the would-be victim's neck. To which the rabbi said, “I told you so.” “It's a miracle!” gasped the crowd. And the executioner had to agree, letting the rabbi go.

Next in line was the priest. Asked for his final words, he declared, “I believe in the Father and His Son who will rescue me in my hour of need.” The executioner then positioned the priest beneath the blade and pulled the cord. Again the blade flew downward, once more stopping just short of its mark. “Another miracle!” screamed crowd. And the executioner, for the second time, had no choice but to let the condemned go free.

Now it was the rationalist's turn. “What final words have you to say?” he was asked. But the rationalist didn't hear. Staring intently at the ominous engine of death, he seemed lost. Not until the executioner poked him in the ribs and the question was asked again did he reply. “Oh, I see the problem,” he said, pointing. “You've got a blockage in the gear assembly, right there!”

Jewish life and thought have for many centuries been torn between rationalism and mysticism. We are a practical people, focused on matters in the material world we can see, touch, and experience, as evidenced in our focus on deed over creed, on mitzvot over belief. Yet, we have also recognized the limits of rational thinking, the existence of a level of reality beyond our sensual experience, and the powerful pull of mystical and spiritual, seeking an ecstatic experience that reaches parts of our being that our intellect cannot. And in recent history, these two impulses have been understood to be at odds with each other.

This conflict can be seen in the history of the Kol Nidre prayer. While its precise history is shrouded in mystery, most scholars believe that Kol Nidre began in Spain in the seventh century, as a reaction to forced conversion. Jews forced to convert to Christianity on pain of death invoked Kol Nidre on the holiest night of the year; a plea for forgiveness from all false religious oaths. Repenting, they asked God to deem their coerced vows null and void. In the modern era, in the western world, in which we are thankfully no longer subject to forced conversion, these words held less meaning, and many Jews, not only Reform but also Orthodox and Conservative, considered that they offended reason and should be excised from the Yom Kippur liturgy. But there was and is something haunting about the melody of Kol Nidre. It evokes something powerful, not fully understood, but all the same emotionally and spiritually evocative, and people complained loudly about its deletion. While reason would suggest that Kol Nidre was irrelevant, we could not give up this plaintive spiritual melody that spoke not to our heads, but to our hearts.

Judaism, indeed religion in general, has always had rationalist streams and thinkers, but since the dawning of the modern era, an age of enlightenment and science, reason has been a driving force in religion as much as in the secular world. In some cases this has been evident more in the

rejection of reason and science than in embracing it. However, from early in its history, the Reform Movement saw reason as the primary guide for seeking religious truth.

The American Reform Movement's first statement of basic principles, The Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, stated that "We hold that the modern discoveries of scientific researches in the domain of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism," and recognized ". . . in Judaism a progressive religion, ever striving to be in accord with the postulates of reason." The Columbus Platform in 1937 made an even stronger statement in favor of the primacy of religious reason – "Judaism welcomes all truth, whether written in the pages of scripture or deciphered from the records of nature. The new discoveries of science, while replacing the older scientific views underlying our sacred literature, do not conflict with the essential spirit of religion as manifested in the consecration of man's will, heart, and mind to the service of God and of humanity."

This focus on reason resulted in a focus on the ethical and moral as the prime purpose of a G-d centered life. But it also rejected practices and beliefs considered not to be in accord with the postulates of reason on the basis that they were ". . . apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation." However by 1976 in its San Francisco Platform, the Movement had begun to doubt the primacy of reason and science, saying that "The widespread threats to freedom, the problems inherent in the explosion of new knowledge and of ever more powerful technologies, and the spiritual emptiness of much of Western culture have taught us to be less dependent on the values of our society and to reassert what remains perennially valid in Judaism's teaching." And the Movement's most recent Statement of Principles in 1999 barely mentions reason and science at all, elevating the spiritual above all else, where previous platforms elevated the rational.

This change in focus is part of a larger societal and religious movement. A decade ago Harvey Cox, a sociologist of religion, predicted the decline in traditional religious denominations, but he wrote in his later book Fire from Heaven that he had missed the parallel phenomenon of ". . . the disabusement of belief among the young concerning those beautiful promises that reason or science or politics were going to deliver us from our misery. All that stuff went oversold and went sour." For many in today's world, science and reason have left them cold. After all, they promised so much in terms of human progress and improvement. But the history of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st has shown that science and reason are devoid of morality, tools that can be used for great good or terrible evil. Moreover, while science and the dictates of reason have improved our lives in many material ways, many feel that their lives are nevertheless empty and void of meaning.

In Douglas Adams's book The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, a computer is asked to answer the ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything. After seven and a half million years the computer built for this purpose divulges the answer: forty-two. "Forty-two!" the characters yell. "Is that all you've got to show for seven and a half million years' work?" "I checked it very thoroughly," said the computer, "and that quite definitely is the answer. I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is."

For many, the problem with putting reason at the center of religious experience was that we were asking the wrong question. Getting an answer to the question of the meaning of life, the universe, and everything, according to reason and science, according to the logic of a computer, may have been technically correct, but, like the computer in “Hitchhiker,” left us devoid of meaning. Increasing numbers of religious leaders and lay people began to consider that perhaps they had been asking the wrong question and using the wrong tools. Indeed, some famous scientists could not help but agree. Albert Einstein expressed his views of the limitations of science by saying that “. . . scientific method can teach us nothing else beyond how facts are related to, and conditioned by, each other. The aspiration toward such objective knowledge belongs to the highest of which man is capable. Yet it is equally clear that knowledge of what is does not open the door directly to what should be. One can have the clearest and most complete knowledge of what is, and yet not be able to deduct from that what should be the goal of our human aspirations.”

Recognizing this spiritual emptiness and the perceived inability of science and reason to provide meaning and purpose to life, the Reform Movement and many other religious movements have sought to re-engage with the spiritual and transcendental in the world, which reason and science cannot perceive or measure. The language of the 1999 Statement of Principles is replete with holiness and spirituality, faith in the face of the terrible realities of the modern world, and the assertion that G-d, Torah, and Israel are forces that give meaning and purpose to our lives. Where once ritual practices were rejected as offensive to reason, they are now encouraged as paths to spiritual experience. Where once reason was the guiding force, it is now the search for meaning that is the primary focus of our religious life, whether or not such meaning and belief accord to the postulates of reason or the findings of science.

But while this search for transcendence and seeking for the holy and the spiritual in an empty material world is positive and helps give meaning and spiritual fulfillment to many who felt it lacking, we should not be blind to the possible pitfalls of our Movement’s embrace of the warmth of spiritual seeking over apparent cold reason. In a scathing article in the CCAR Journal, Rabbi Dr. David Aaron of Hebrew Union College lambastes the 1999 Statement of Principles and the movement’s general move to spirituality and mysticism as “anti-intellectual” and “anti-rational.” Today’s Reform Movement, he argues, encourages “. . . a religion that embraces irrationalism [and that] finds expression in paradox and quasi-mythological images more than in reasoned discourse.” While Dr. Aaron may be overly harsh in his critique, he raises an important issue that we must face as modern Jews. In seeking after mystical experience and looking for meaning beyond the limits of our physical senses, we engage in a basic purpose of religion. But we also risk falling into one of its most dangerous traps. For millennia, recognizing the limits of reason and science, people have looked to religion to give them meaning and purpose and to explain what G-d wants of us. But without reason, without the empirical proofs of scientific analysis, we risk filling in the gaps in our understanding with irrational beliefs and wishful thinking, crossing the line from mysticism to supernaturalism, from spirituality to superstition. In seeking spiritual answers to life’s questions without the benefit of reason and intellect, we run the risk of upholding entirely unreasonable beliefs because they feel good, or ascribing divine purpose and meaning where there is none. An orthodox rabbi I know, who teaches in a yeshiva outside of Jerusalem, told me that once a student went to take the bus for the half-hour ride into Jerusalem. He came back a few minutes later. “Why didn’t you take

the bus?" asked the rabbi. "Well, I just missed the bus and realized that G-d was telling me I was not supposed to go to Jerusalem today." "Did it never occur to you," responded the rabbi, "that G-d might be telling you that you were supposed to take the next bus?" Lacking any proof or reason, the student had nevertheless decided he knew what G-d wanted. He is certainly not alone in today's world in interpreting personal feelings and intuition as spiritual commands despite having nothing but his opinions and emotions justify his position.

But as with so many things in life today, the conflict between reason and science on the one hand and spirituality on the other is a false dichotomy. Being spiritual does not mean being irrational, nor does being rational exclude spirituality. They simply do not, and should not, operate on the same aspects of our lives, and we make a grave mistake when we believe they do. Reason engages the material world and the intellect. With it, we analyze, assess, and explain the physical workings of the world around us. Much of what science has taught and proven, such as the questions of evolution and the age of the earth, have shown that, literally understood, the teachings of traditional religion and some of the spiritual teachings of an earlier age are false. And Jewish thinkers since Ibn Ezra and Maimonides in Medieval Spain have recognized that G-d cannot communicate anything inconsistent with the natural world as understood by science and reason. If science showed a belief to be wrong, then that suggested to them that the belief needed to be re-assessed and re-interpreted, not that the science was wrong.

But what reason cannot do, at least for most of us, is engage the intangible, emotional, and ethical aspects of our existence. The scientist Erwin Schroedinger, in his book My View of the World, stated, "The scientific picture of the real world around me is very deficient. It gives a lot of factual information, puts all our experience in a magnificently consistent order, but is ghastly silent about all and sundry that is really near to our heart, that really matters to us. It cannot tell us a word about red and blue, bitter and sweet, physical pain and physical delight; it knows nothing of beautiful and ugly, good or bad, God and eternity." This is why so many have turned to spiritual seeking – not because they reject reason, but because reason only engages one part of them – their mind. But spirituality, in seeking the transcendent, the uplifting, and the creative, speaks to our heart and soul.

On Yom Kippur we seek to make ourselves better, to make ourselves whole and at peace with who we are and who we were in the past year. To do so, we must engage both our reason and our spiritual resources. We use our reason to remember, analyze, and assess our deeds in the past year. Where previously we avoided facing our sins, deluding ourselves about our many misdeeds, on Yom Kippur we review our deeds in the cold light of reason, unobscured by our emotions and discomfort. And on Yom Kippur we draw on our spiritual and emotional sensitivity to feel the pain that our sins have caused ourselves and others. We look deep into our souls in a way our intellect cannot and find our true and noble selves waiting to emerge if only we allow it. And in the plaintive, stirring, and powerful melody of the Kol Nidre, we cry out to G-d for forgiveness that we cannot give ourselves. And thus we emerge, made whole, reconciled with our pasts, ready to face our future, and at peace with the needs and dictates of both our minds and our souls.