

2006 – Erev Rosh Hashanah

An old joke tells of an elderly Jewish woman who sets out from her home in Brooklyn to see an old spiritual guru in India. After a long and arduous journey, she reaches his mountaintop ashram and demands to be received by the old guru. At first she is told that the great spiritual leader cannot see visitors. But being a stubborn Jewish grandmother, the woman will not take no for an answer. Eventually the temple guard agrees to let her in, but only on the condition that she disturb the guru as little as possible. “You may go in, but you must promise to say no more than five words to the great guru.” The woman agrees, and makes her way deep into the temple sanctum to the meditation chamber. There she steps in front of the guru and says – “Enough already, Sheldon! Come home.”

Last year I spoke about today’s apparent conflict between science and reason and the newly emerging focus on spirituality in Jewish life. Spirituality is the ever-present buzzword in religion and life today. But over the course of the past year, I realized that there are more basic questions with respect to spirituality that need to be answered. As the joke I just told suggests, when we think of spirituality our images tend to be from outside of Jewish tradition – Zen meditation, ashrams in India, ecstatic dancers of tribal cultures of Africa and South America, etc. For many this leaves the impression that spirituality is something that is outside the Jewish mainstream. It’s the perception that in engaging in spirituality as Jews, we are at best bringing an alien tradition into the fold of Judaism, as medieval Jewish scholars did with Greek philosophy, and at worst we are being distracted from authentic Judaism by what Rabbi Arthur Herzberg has referred to as a “trend that won’t go away.”

So – what is spirituality? And how is it (and should it be) expressed in Jewish life and practice? Looking at the dictionary definitions reveals little except possibly the vagueness of the concept itself. Various dictionaries define spirituality in a circular manner, as “The state, quality, manner, or fact of being spiritual,” “concern with things of the spirit,” or “sensitivity or attachment to religious or spiritual values.” These definitions may be technically correct, but they don’t help much in explaining the actual nature of spirituality today.

ReligiousTolerance.org is more helpful. It explains that spirituality “is defined quite differently by monotheists, polytheists, humanists, followers of new age, Native Americans, etc.,” but provides two alternative common meanings:

1. *Devotion to metaphysical matters, as opposed to worldly things.*
2. *Activities which renew, lift up, comfort, heal, and inspire both ourselves and those with whom we interact.*

And research by Martsof and Mickley (1998) highlighted the following areas as common threads in spirituality, including:

- *A search for meaning to help find the significance of life; making sense of situations in life; and deriving purpose in life.*

- *Deriving values and ethics.*
- *Experience, awareness, and appreciation of a "transcendent dimension" to life beyond self.*
- *Connecting with self, others, G-d, and nature.*

What emerges from these definitions is that spirituality, at its core is, a search for meaning, a drive to find purpose in life, and arises from a deep yearning of the human soul to reach to connect with something greater than oneself. Spirituality is born out of a recognition that at worst the physical and material is bad, or at best that it is one dimensional and shallow, needing an appreciation of the spiritual to give it depth and meaning – like empty wine bottles without wine. And spirituality is focused on individual experience and one’s feeling of connectedness, meaning, and purpose within that experience. Jews who are uncomfortable with spirituality point to several aspects of this definition that must be answered in uncovering an authentic Jewish spirituality. At the heart of these critiques are three primary concerns – the individual focus of spirituality as opposed to Judaism’s traditional concern with the community; the apparent primacy of feeling over action; and the disconnection, sometimes even disgust, with the physical and material world inherent in much spirituality as expressed today.

The first concern is one that goes much deeper than the realm of spirituality. For many years it has been accepted that Jews in the western world have been deeply influenced by the individualism of the society around them. This individualism in Jewish and secular life has been of deep concern to those who fear, with good reason, the disintegration of Jewish community life. The Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam coined a phrase to describe this general trend. Noting that more Americans than ever go ten-pin bowling, but fewer than ever join clubs and leagues, he called it 'Bowling Alone.' Thus Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, describes spirituality as “what happens when religion goes bowling alone.”

The second issue, the primacy of feeling, leads from the first. Judaism has always been more concerned with action over feeling. What you do is always more important than why you do it. Thus one is always encouraged to fulfill a mitzvah, whether it provides a good feeling or not, whether your intention is genuine or not. It doesn’t matter if I have generosity in my heart – what matters is that I give tzedakah; and it doesn’t matter if I truly feel the power of the daily prayers – I should recite them anyway.

And finally, as a religion that puts deed above creed, Judaism has always been focused on this world more than the next. The traditional models of Jewish spiritual leadership are all deeply engaged in the world and with the society around them. Moses may have encountered G-d in the wilderness, but his spiritual tasks in life – why he deserves such an exalted place in Jewish thought – are his actions in freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. With few exceptions, the prophets’ visions propelled them not to retreat from society but to improve it. And the Rabbis of the Talmud and beyond were always involved in the real world through making a living in a craft or profession, and their legal

rulings were concerned with the minutiae of daily life, from synagogue to home to work and everything in between.

An authentic Jewish spirituality answers all these concerns. It balances the traditional concepts of kavanah (feeling and intention) and kevah (structure and ritual); it recognizes that feeling connectedness through traditional practice strengthens the practice and does not diminish it; it balances the individual's needs with those of the community; and, most of all, it encourages Jews to be engaged with the world and not separate from it.

The best model for such spirituality is unsurprisingly found in Judaism's most spiritualistic exponents – the Hassidim. One of Hassidism's central historical principles is the idea of avodah she be-gashmiyut – service or worship through the everyday. If G-d is indeed everywhere and in everything as traditional Judaism believes, then it follows that the spirit of the divine can be encountered everywhere and in everything. The spark of the divine can be experienced in everything we do or see in life, whether it be spectacular and extreme or mundane and ordinary. Whatever we do and wherever we are, we can connect with G-d – whether we are eating a meal, working at our desk, appreciating a beautiful sunset, or working to make the world a better place. Thus all acts, however great or small, can become acts of avodah, of service or worship to G-d. This is what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel had in mind when he described marching in civil rights demonstrations as praying with his feet.

An authentic expression of Jewish spirituality, therefore, seeks to infuse holiness in all we do and to look for the divine, the presence of G-d, in everything we see around us in the world. As Michael Strassfeld states beautifully in [A Book of Life: Embracing Judaism as a Spiritual Practice](#), “A spiritual practice of Judaism strives for awareness of the moment, every moment, helping us to live life to its fullest. With that awareness, we can discover moments of self-awareness. With that awareness, we can truly hear those who are speaking to us and strive to respond to them in an open-hearted way. With that awareness we can feel the presence of G-d as our beloved companion, and out of that awareness we can perform deeds of Tikkun Olam, restoring the world to wholeness and healing.”