Spiritual Yearning:Thoughts on Parashat Eikev, July 31, 2010

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I recently attended Shabbat morning services at a synagogue that was having a "Carlebach Shabbat". A group of "Carlebachians" led the services, and sang many of the prayers to music composed by the late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach.

I happened to be sitting next to one of the organizers of this Shabbat event, and I asked him: what does a "Carlebach Shabbat" service provide, that seems to be lacking in the "regular" synagogue service? He pondered for a few moments, and then answered in one word: "Yearning".

I have been pondering this response ever since.

Yearning: a desire to come closer to God, a desire to transcend ourselves, a desire to let our souls be moved by the music so that we might reach a higher level of awareness. Yearning: an awareness that we crave spiritual uplift, that we ache to feel God's presence. Yearning: a recognition that something is profoundly lacking in a world of routine, materialism, technological gadgetry.

In last week's Torah portion and this week's Torah portion, we are instructed to love God with all our hearts and souls i.e. to have a sense of yearning for God. Ramban explains that "hearts" refers to our desires/emotions; "souls" refers to our minds/intelligence. We are taught, therefore, that proper service of God entails a full commitment of our emotions and our reason, our hearts and our minds.

If we tilt too far to the side of emotion, we run the risk of falling into a pseudo-religious experience that is akin to superstition and primitive religion. If we tilt too far to the side of intellect, we run the risk of sapping our religious experience of warmth and personal meaning.

Yearning for God requires us to maintain a delicate balance--allowing our emotions to flow, while allowing our intellects to maintain integrity.

This week's Torah portion informs us of a serious obstacle to spiritual health: thinking that "my strength, and the power of my hands, have achieved this victory". The human ego can be its own worst enemy. People accomplish things,

but may forget to be grateful to God for these accomplishments. The more they succeed in worldly matters, the more they attribute their success to their own talents; the more highly they think of themselves, the less they may think of God. They lose the sense of spiritual yearning. They become self-satisfied and content. They luxuriate in their material success, not realizing that in the process they undermine their own souls. They set the wrong values for themselves and for their families. Spiritual rot sets in. Nothing is more antithetical to genuine religious experience than complacency and self-satisfaction.

Yearning: the power to love God with all our hearts and all our souls; the power to overcome our egotism; the power to maintain spiritual focus; the humility to live our lives in constant striving to experience God's presence. It is not easy to attain the highest levels of spiritual growth: this requires a deep and abiding sense of yearning.

When we are at prayer in a synagogue--whatever the custom of that synagogue--let us draw on the words and the music of the prayers, let us pray with kavvanah and devotion, let us pray with love and yearning.

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