Seeking Correct Diagnosis and Treatment:Thoughts for Aharei Mot--Kedoshim

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Aharei Mot--Kedoshim

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Receiving an incorrect medical diagnosis can be very serious, even fatal. If one's condition is not accurately determined, the prescribed treatment (or non-treatment) can cause needless suffering.

Receiving an incorrect spiritual diagnosis can also prove to be dangerous. If one does not know the root of one's problem, one cannot properly address it.

Sociologists point out that the Jewish community faces a number of problems: assimilation and intermarriage; non-attendance at synagogue services; low levels of Jewish education among large numbers of Jews; low birth rates etc. Modernity has posed--and continues to pose--serious challenges. In a website asking "will your grandchildren be Jewish?", data is presented demonstrating that for most non-observant Jews, the answer is NO.

During the 19th century, Jews were confronted with the problem: how can we make/keep Judaism attractive to Jews who live most of their lives in the secular world? The diagnosis given by some was: let's water down Judaism so that it demands less of Jews. If it's easier, it will be more attractive. Movements were formed that did away with many of the ritual commandments of Judaism; that removed much Hebrew from the prayer services; that styled synagogue services to be more "modern". This pattern continued in the 20th century, and continues in various manifestations today.

This diagnosis has proven to be wrong. Few Jews became more religious, or more devoted to Judaism. Few attended services more often, certainly not even once a week. The sociological data of the past generations is available: those Jews who chose "easy" forms of Judaism not only did not become more religious themselves, but their children and grandchildren generally moved further away

from Judaism.

Because of generally low rates of synagogue affiliation and attendance in synagogues today, synagogue leaders wonder: what can be done to improve the situation? What is the right diagnosis? If we don't diagnose the problem correctly, our treatment may prove to be useless or even detrimental.

Various diagnoses are given: make services more "relevant"; introduce different music; be more "spiritual"; get more people to participate; provide free "kiddush" meals etc.

While these suggestions may have merit, they all deal with superficial matters and don't get to the root of the issue. They offer short term bandaids, and don't offer a real cure that can bring healing and strength to the Jewish religious organism.

This week's Torah portion teaches us to be holy, because God is holy. It teaches us that life needs to be placed into a spiritual context, so that we understand that God is at the center of our being. Religious life--holiness--is attained not by increasing our egotism, but by humbly seeking to serve God and humanity in a spirit of selfless devotion.

At the root of the spiritual malady of modern religion, including Judaism, is a loss of this sense of holiness. People are generally far more concerned with advancing their own secular lives than in serving the Lord. Yet, if religion is not taken with full seriousness and commitment, it is doomed to fritter itself away.

The duty of religious leadership today is to focus on the real challenge to our spiritual health--the loss of holiness, the loss of the sense of the sacred. Offering this program or that innovation to gratify peoples' egos and comforts will not be of long-lasting value.

The "diagnosis" is: a loss of the holy. The "cure" is: to take Judaism more seriously, to reconnect with the Almighty, to infuse life with the fulness of Torah learning and observance. We don't want "gimmicks" or short-term and short-sighted suggestions that aim at inflating our egos; we want serious, long-term, visionary suggestions that aim at sustaining our souls and our spirits.

Many people don't want to hear the diagnosis, and certainly don't want to accept the suggested treatment. They prefer short cuts, easy and gratifying modes of feeling Jewish. Holiness isn't on their agenda. Devotion to Torah and halakha is not their priority. They ask for a "feel good" religion that makes few demands.

They do not realize that this approach is not only superficial for themselves, but it undermines the Jewishness of their children and grandchildren.

Judaism has flourished these past 3500 years because a core of Jews in each generation has seen the Torah as a Tree of Life, has lived according to its teachings and laws, has lived in search of the holy. Judaism will flourish for the next centuries and millenia because of a core of Jews in our generation and future generations who take Judaism seriously; whose mission is to serve God with all their hearts, all their souls and all their might. Sorry, no short cuts!

Angel for Shabbat