Making Room for Prayer in Our Synagogues: Thoughts on Parashat Vayetsei, November 13, 2010

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"How full of awe is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (Bereishith 28:17)

A story is told of the great Hassidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev. He had been visiting a town, and attended prayer services in the local synagogue. One day, he stopped at the synagogue door and did not enter the sanctuary. The many people who were accompanying him were perplexed. Why did the Rebbe not enter the synagogue? Rabbi Levi Yitzhak told them: I am not entering the synagogue because it's too crowded. But the synagogue was empty! The Rebbe explained: the synagogue is full of prayers, there's no room left for us. Usually, when we pray, our prayers ascend to the gate of heaven; however, in this synagogue, the prayers are recited without proper concentration and devotion, so the prayers don't reach heaven. In fact, they are trapped in the synagogue building--so there is no room left for us in the synagogue.

The people then understood. Our spiritual goal must be to raise our hearts and voices in prayer so that the prayers will ascend to the gate of heaven. This can only happen if we are sincerely engaged in our prayers. If we simply go through the motions, rattle off the words, and then rush off to our business--then the prayers remain in the synagogue, and the room becomes too crowded.

It is often suggested that people become more engaged in their prayers if they actively participate in the synagogue services. If they sing together, if they participate in the synagogue "honors"--then it is said that they reach a deeper spiritual level. The operational word is: "participation". The more we participate, the higher our prayers ascend.

While not discounting this approach, I think it is more fruitful to think differently about our prayers in synagogue. The key need not be "participation" in services, but rather "finding spiritual space". We find spiritual space, oddly enough, when the synagogue service "leaves us alone", when it doesn't call on us to participate, when it doesn't intrude on our quiet inner thoughts and meditations. The

inconspicuous person sitting in the back row may be more spiritually alive and connected, than those who are actively participating in the presentation of the synagogue ritual.

Surely, the prayer services require formal participation and involvement. Yet, the ritual needs to be seen and experienced as a vehicle to help raise us spiritually. The words of our liturgy are bursting with meaning. The melodies of our prayers can lift us and inspire us. "Participating" externally in the services does not mean that we've felt the presence of God, or that we've really offered our prayers in such a way that they ascend to the gate of heaven. What we need more than "participation" is a sense of spiritual space, a sense that we have the freedom to express the feelings of our hearts, minds and souls. Synagogue services that allow us this freedom to find our own spiritual space are those that help us raise our prayers to heaven.

Public worship offers us a framework for reaching out to God as a community. It is a vital component in a healthy religious life. But public worship is at its best when it inspires us to search deeper into our hearts and souls, when it allows us spiritual space for personal prayer and reflection. It's alright to pray quietly and inconspicuously. It's alright to request that our neighbors in synagogue refrain from chattering and disturbing our tranquility. It's alright to fall behind the service in order to focus more carefully on a passage that has captured our imagination. It doesn't matter where we are sitting in synagogue: we all have equal access to God, if we will only realize how powerfully true this is.

We don't want our synagogues to become "crowded with prayers" that are trapped within the sanctuary. We want to feel that we are in the house of God, and that our prayers can ascend to the gate of heaven. We need to make room for prayer in our synagogues.

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