# Religious Enlightenment: Thoughts on Parashat Naso

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By
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Some time ago, I attended a Bar Mitzvah at a prominent Modern Orthodox synagogue. The Bar Mitzvah boy attends a Modern Orthodox day school, as do most of his many friends who attended synagogue that Shabbat morning. Among the adult guests were many individuals who are active in their Modern Orthodox synagogues.

I left synagogue that morning with a feeling of frustration, even sadness. What should have been a festive occasion and a celebration of Judaism at its best…was instead a glaring example of something amiss in the Modern Orthodox world.

Although almost all of the children were students in Orthodox day schools, their behavior in synagogue was lamentable. They talked throughout the services, as though prayer had no meaning to them. A number of the girls were dressed in mini-skirts and sleeveless blouses, as though they were attending a disco rather than a holy place of worship.

The behavior of the adults was not any better. People talked, joked, laughed and carried on as though they were in a café or at a social event. Some of the women wore décolleté dresses that wouldn't be appropriate anywhere for a modest person, and certainly not in a synagogue.

And this is the "cream" of what passes for Modern Orthodoxy!

We do so many things properly. We sacrifice so much to give our children good Jewish educations, to maintain Jewish homes, to support our community institutions. Yet, we seem to be missing a key ingredient in religious life: the sense of holiness.

The external forces of secularization have taken a toll on our internal spiritual lives. We—wittingly or unwittingly—adopt a secular lifestyle that is dressed up in religious garb. As long as we generally keep kashruth and Shabbat and send our children to day schools, we think we're Orthodox enough. But the essence of

holiness is missing. The awareness that we live our lives in the Presence of God is lacking. Even in synagogue, even during prayers…we manage to block God from our consciousness. We seem to be secular people even as we sit in sacred space.

This week's Torah reading includes the priestly blessing which the Cohanim give to the children of Israel. Rabbi Ovadia Seforno, the great medieval Italian Jewish commentator, describes the tripartite blessing as follows: the first verse wishes us good material sustenance; the second verse wishes us good spiritual sustenance; the third verse wishes us eternal blessing in the world to come.

Commenting on the second verse, he writes: "May [God] enlighten your eyes with the light of His countenance, so that you will see wonders in His Torah and His creations…."
The blessing is for us to experience the Divine light so that we can truly see and see truly; so that we can find enlightenment and excitement in our study and observance of Torah; so that we can look on God's creations with thoughtfulness and spiritual uplift.

Modern Orthodoxy is not a compromise position, but a principled approach to Judaism which demands religious observance and religious experience. It teaches us a way to live in the secular world without losing our souls in the process. It fosters intellectual and spiritual growth, the sense of wonder…the sense of holiness. When Torah and mitzvoth are lived on a superficial level without full awareness that we are in the Presence of God, then they lack the key ingredient that endows them with meaning.

How can we regain and maintain a sense of holiness in a secular world? How can we inculcate ourselves and our children with an awareness of the Presence of God in our lives?

The first step is to recognize our problem. The second step is to reorient our way of thinking, observing mitzvoth, and praying. The third step is to help our synagogues and day schools become bastions of religious life at its best.

If each of us would devote some time every day to thinking deeply about our spiritual lives, we could transform ourselves. If each of us would try to experience prayer as a genuine confrontation with God, we could enhance our sense of holiness. If each of us would insist that our homes, our schools and our synagogues be infused with lofty Torah values, we could re-generate a vibrant and thoughtful Modern Orthodox Judaism.

May God enlighten our eyes with the light of His countenance so that we will see wonders in His Torah and His creations.

Angel for Shabbat