Seeking the Almighty: Thoughts for Parashat Vayiggash

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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Professor Alan Brill recently noted: “Consumerism has turned the church [and synagogue] from an ‘ocean-liner’ designed to move people from point A to point B (connecting people with God), to a ‘cruise ship’, that is, in itself, the destination.” (“The Emerging Popular Culture and the Centrist Community,” in Developing a Jewish Perspective on Culture, ed. Yehuda Sarna (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2014), pp. 31-32.)

In the ideal, houses of worship are supposed to be devoted to the glory of God; their primary purpose is to lead people closer to God. Professor Brill suggests that there is a contemporary tendency to succumb to commercialism, to turn houses of worship into ends in themselves. Instead of aiming to lead people to the Almighty, churches and synagogues increasingly aim to lead people to themselves. They become places of entertainment and glorification of human beings. Their work takes on more and more of a p.r. approach, seeking to hype programs, gain new members, raise new funds. In the process of commercializing religious institutions, God becomes an afterthought.

This is not to say that places of worship can ignore the need to bolster attendance and support. Yet, if these “mundane” needs come at the expense of selling one’s soul, then the price is too high. If religious institutions transform themselves into “cruise ships” rather than “ocean liners,” they betray their very raison d’etre. Ultimately, they betray the spiritual needs of their communities.

In this week’s Torah portion, we read that Jacob sent Judah to Egypt ahead of the family, “lehorot lefanav Goshnah,” to show the way before him into Goshen. The Midrash interprets this phrase to mean that Judah was sent ahead in order to establish a house of study. Jacob realized that his family was moving into a powerful Egyptian civilization that had many values inimical to Jacob’s religious views. He wanted to be sure that proper foundations were laid in the new land, so that his family could stay focused on their own spiritual mission and not be swallowed up by the prevailing paganism in Egypt.

One of the hallmarks of Jewish life throughout the centuries has been an unflinching commitment to maintaining houses of study and houses of worship that reflected the highest
ideals of Torah. Instead of caving in to the enticements and commercialism of surrounding societies, our synagogues and study halls have been bastions of the highest religious idealism.

When these ideals have been compromised, the result has inevitably been a loss of authentic Judaism and the alienation of sincerely spiritual Jews.

“Cruise ships” might seem more fun and more successful in the short run. The challenge of our generation, though, is to keep our synagogues and study halls on course, as “ocean liners” that bring us closer to the Almighty.

Angel for Shabbat