Spirituality and Rituality: Thoughts for Parashat Terumah

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By
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The essence of authentic religion is developing a deep spirituality, a feeling of God's presence in one's life. This spiritual sense not only imbues the individual with personal meaning, but also leads to living a moral, righteous life.

Our Bible presents the words and prophetic experiences of ancient Israelites, providing examples of religion at its highest spiritual moments. Yet, the Bible understands that our daily lives cannot maintain the highest level of spirituality at all times. We need rituals and rites that can serve to bring us into relationship with God on a daily basis, not only at moments of spiritual insight.

This week's Parasha teaches about the building of the Mishkan, the temporary sanctuary that was to accompany the Israelites during their sojourn in the wilderness. A number of subsequent chapters in the Torah deal with the "Temple ritual," the priests, the sacrifices. The purpose of the Mishkan, and later of the Temples in Jerusalem, was to provide rituals and ceremonies that would bring the worshiper closer to God. By entering the holy precincts, one was to feel its sanctity, and become uplifted spiritually.

The problem with ritualized ceremonies is that they do not always achieve their goals. The Mishkan/Temple/Synagogue service can become rote. People can go through the motions without internalizing the religious experience. Our prophets inveighed against the gross non-religiosity of the Temple, when the priests and the people clung to the external ritual forms but did not penetrate to the spiritual content of the rituals.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in an address to the Rabbinical Assembly in 1953, discussed this problem as it relates to modern day synagogues: even when people attend the synagogue on the Sabbath—and hence should be very much tuned in to a spiritual experience—they still might not internalize the religious message. Here is an excerpt from that talk:

"Of course, people still attend ‘services’ – but what does this attendance mean to them? Outpouring of the soul? Worship? Prayer? Synagogue attendance has become a benefaction to the synagogue, a service to the community rather than service of God, worship of the congregation rather than the worship of God. A variety of suggestions have been made to increase synagogue attendance: invite distinguished guest speakers, radio commentators and columnists; honor individual members of the congregation; install stained-glass windows, place pledge cards on the seats and raise funds, remind people of their birthdays or anniversary dates. Well intentioned as these suggestions may be, they do not deal with the core of the issue. Spiritual issues cannot be solved by administrative techniques. The issue is not how to fill buildings but how to inspire hearts. The issue is not synagogue attendance but one of spiritual attendance. The issue is not how to attract bodies to enter the space of a temple but how to inspire souls to enter an hour of spiritual concentration in the presence of God."

Several years ago, I wrote an article touching on this issue. Here is what I said then…and what still needs to be said today.

My dear and respected friend, Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo, recently wrote an article about the "relocation" of God. He stated: "Synagogues – whether Orthodox, Conservative or Reform – are no longer His primary residence. Surely some of the worshippers are pious people who try to communicate with their Creator, but overall, the majority of these places have become religiously sterile and spiritually empty. So God is moving to unconventional minyanim and places such as Israeli cafes, debating clubs, community centers, unaffiliated religious gatherings, and atypical batei midrash. The reason is obvious. In some of those places people are actually looking for Him. And that is what He loves; not those who have already found Him and take Him for granted. He is moving in with the young people who have a sense that He is there but cannot yet find Him."

While I believe that mainstream synagogues continue to be "God's residence" and continue to play a vital role in contemporary religious life, I think Rabbi Cardozo touches on an important reality.

Why have growing numbers of thoughtful and spiritual people turned away from "establishment" synagogues?

Here are some possible reasons.

Mainstream synagogues are often perceived as being run by a small clique of wealthy "machers", more interested in promoting their egotistical aims than in

worrying about the spiritual needs of the community. Synagogues seem, to many, to have turned into businesses--mainly concerned with meeting budgets, increasing memberships, and fundraising. While these are certainly important concerns, what about the synagogue's soul? Why does the synagogue exist in the first place? What is the spiritual agenda? While budgetary goals are spelled out, spiritual goals are generally neglected. So why would spiritually sensitive people want to be swallowed up in this "business"?

Mainstream synagogues often measure success or failure in terms of quantity rather than quality. A synagogue is deemed "successful" if it fills seats at services and events, even if these services and events are religiously sterile. Yet, spiritual souls are often most comfortable in services and classes that allow them to transcend themselves, to learn, to grow. Why would thoughtful, spiritual people be attracted to an institution that focuses so much energy on quantity, and so little energy on real quality?

Mainstream synagogues often want rabbis who can raise money and get new members. The rabbis are, in effect, salesmen--whose success or failure is measured by how many dollars they produce and how many seats they can fill. What spiritually sensitive person wants such a rabbi? What self-respecting rabbi would allow himself to be marketed in this way?

Vaclav Havel wisely advised: "Seek the company of those who are searching for the truth, and avoid those who have found it." The "establishment" seems to be composed of those who have found the truth, or who don't really care much about the truth. The synagogues run services like clockwork, sometimes more meaningfully conducted, sometimes less so. People who are spiritually alive are looking for religious vitality, for a sense of striving. In many synagogues, though, they get services by hazzanim interested in showing off their voices; or by laymen whose mastery and understanding of the liturgy is less than scintillating.

I have been a rabbi in a mainstream Orthodox synagogue for many years. I can testify to the tremendous impact of such synagogues on the lives of so many people. I can testify to the beautiful souls who really pray, who really study Torah with purity. I can testify to the sense of communal solidarity that is formed among religiously-alive congregants.

But I can also testify, based on my years of interaction with many rabbis and synagogues, that the "establishment" is indeed at risk of losing its soul, its raison d'etre. Rabbi Cardozo is not wrong when he points to synagogues as being religiously sterile and spiritually empty.

Will our synagogues revitalize themselves by once again becoming spiritual centers for those searching for authentic Jewish religiosity? Will they once again focus on quality of spiritual experience rather than on quantity of dollars? Will they once again become the gathering place for Jews who are searching for truth, for God?

Or has the soul of our synagogues already been sold away?

Angel for Shabbat