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I recently received a communication from an individual who had been very active in his synagogue, but who has grown increasingly disillusioned. He feels that his congregation is controlled by a small clique of wealthy individuals who have little regard for the feelings of members of the congregation. He finds that the rabbi of his synagogue is not easily accessible and is not a particularly spiritual person (e.g. he often misses daily prayer services, he enjoys talking and telling jokes during services, he kisses up to his favored congregants etc.) While this congregant and others have voiced their concerns and criticisms, the "establishment" goes on its own course.

I have heard this same general complaint from individuals in various synagogues in different cities and towns. Instead of serving as loving spiritual homes, some synagogues operate more like country clubs. They serve the interests of an elite clientele, but do not address the genuine spiritual, emotional and communal needs of their members. As a result, members gravitate in search of other synagogues; or they attend their synagogue less often and less enthusiastically.

The basic source of the problem is that sometimes rabbinic and lay leadership see the synagogue in almost secular terms. It is a sort of business or club where people can display control or power, where people seek honor for themselves. Its success is measured by how many dollars are raised or by how many members are on the membership roll.

But synagogues are not secular institutions. They are religious institutions and need to live up to the highest religious values. They need to focus on their spiritual agenda.

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."

A synagogue is a holy place dedicated to the glory of God. If prayers are to ascend to heaven, the synagogue must reflect sanctity and humility. In some cases, though, synagogues fall short of the ideal. Instead of being dedicated to the glory of God, it sometimes happens that synagogues seem more dedicated to the glory of human beings. There are synagogues where the rabbis strive to be quasi-cult figures promoting their own glory—not God's. There are synagogues where the cantors or lay readers strive to show off their voices, promoting their own glory—not God's. There are synagogues where congregants engage in "shul politics" in order to gain power for themselves, seeking to aggrandize their own glory—not God's. Such synagogues are "crowded with prayers" because the prayers do not ascend to heaven.

Indeed, it seems that the Divine Presence is absent from such synagogues. The human ego has crowded out the Divine. There's no room in such synagogues for those who seek to pray sincerely, to serve the Almighty in humility, to live for the glory of God.

When Rabbi Hayyim Angel was still a rabbinical student, he wrote a short statement responding to the question: Who are religious Jews? That statement well reflects ideal Judaism:

"Religious Jews are those whose hearts smile when their mouths do. Religious Jews feel pain in another's misery, joy in another's happiness. They know that perfection is impossible, yet they strive for it. They are trees rooted in the earth with their branches extending towards the heavens. Religious Jews are cisterns who do not lose a drop; they are springs of water which steadily increase. They observe the commandments with an adult's intelligence and a child's enthusiasm. They act in a manner that is a credit to themselves and which earns them the respect of both Jew and non-Jew. They are prepared to sacrifice for God, their people, their laws, and their homeland. Religious Jews are a unified mass of sand, yet individual stars who shine on the world."

These words should be taken to heart by all synagogue Jews, especially those in rabbinic or lay positions of leadership. If people do not know what it is to be religious Jews, they also do not know how to properly operate a religious institution.

In this week's Torah portion, we read: "And you shall not profane My holy name, and I shall be hallowed among the children of Israel; I am the Lord who sanctifies you, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God; I am the Lord" (Vayikra 22:32-3).

We are commanded to sanctify God's name by living righteous, pious lives. We are commanded not to desecrate God's name through inappropriate behavior. The Torah adds the words: "I am the Lord". This phrase reminds us that we are answerable to God. We may try to deceive others, we may even try to fool ourselves: but we cannot deceive God. People find ways to rationalize their behavior, and to justify themselves--even when their behavior is not proper. The Torah tells us: we must be very careful in evaluating our motives and the impact of our words and deeds. "I am the Lord" who cannot be deceived. We need a proper religious worldview if we are to create proper religious institutions.

Synagogues must be sanctuaries where our prayers can ascend to the gate of heaven, where we can transcend ourselves and reach deeper spiritual insight and fulfillment. If the glory of God is forced out by those who promote the glory of humans, then the name of God has been profaned. The spiritual loss to our synagogues and to our communities is inestimable.

Angel for Shabbat