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A Spirituality Crisis
by Rabbi Marc D. Angel
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There is a feeling among many Jews, including many Orthodox Jews, that worship in the synagogue lacks adequate inspiration and spirituality. Among the complaints: the synagogue ritual is chanted by rote; the prayers are recited too quickly; the prayers are recited too slowly; the service is not understood by congregants; people talk too much in synagogue; the services do not involve everyone in a meaningful way.

Here are some of the “solutions” that have been suggested over the years, along with why they have not achieved full success:

Introduce Hassidic/Carlebach melodies—these may be more lively and inspirational than the usual synagogue music. Yes, for some people, singing such melodies is emotionally satisfying. But for many others, such music seems more like a hootenanny than a vehicle for addressing God.

Make the services more egalitarian. Yes, for some people this seems like a way of getting men and women more involved. Yet, the Reform and Conservative movements have been fully egalitarian for many years—without any perceptible improvement in the overall spiritual life of their communities. Indeed, these movements have been suffering from serious loss of membership, and from generally poor attendance at services. While newly established “partnership” services are popping up in the Orthodox world, it remains to be seen whether this represents a passing fad, or if these types of services will fall into the same patterns that have taken hold in the non-Orthodox egalitarian services.

Make services shorter; include more readings in the vernacular. Yes, for some people this makes the synagogue experience more palatable. But it is doubtful whether it brings people to a greater feeling of the presence of God, or whether it will inspire more people to actually attend services.

Introduce meditation practices. Yes, some people may find this helpful to their spiritual experience. But many others may find these practices an outside imposition on Jewish worship and may be repelled by this mode of spirituality.

Whatever suggestions are offered, one can come up with counter-arguments. Each individual and each community has different needs and expectations.

The “crisis of the synagogue” needs to be viewed, I suggest, in a much broader context. The synagogue is only one factor—and not the major factor—in the real problem we are facing. The real problem is: moderns are losing, or have already lost, their sense of intimacy with God. God is simply not a real presence in many of our lives. Even if we observe the commandments, study Torah and say our prayers, we may still not feel the awesome, overwhelming experience of living in the light of the Eternal.

If we are losing, or have already lost, a sense of intimacy with God, making changes in the synagogue service will not restore that intimacy. Whatever gimmicks we introduce, while possibly helpful to some, will ultimately fail, because they are focusing on symptoms rather than on the malady itself.

To a religious Jew who feels God’s presence in daily life, the synagogue service poses little or no problem. The synagogue is just one of many contexts in which one experiences the Divine. It is not the center of religious life, and certainly not the only place to feel God’s presence. One follows the synagogue ritual out of loyalty to tradition, out of solidarity with generations of Jews who have prayed in this manner, out of a spiritual quest to be part of the community’s prayers to the Almighty. But one also says private prayers any time of the day, in almost any place.

If we have personal spirituality, we can bring this into our public spirituality. If we can maintain, or regain, a living relationship with God in our daily lives, then our synagogue experience becomes much higher and much deeper.

Surely, a synagogue needs to do its best to help congregants re-establish intimacy with God; and it needs to conduct its prayer services in a manner that is conducive to spiritual experience and development. But it also needs to realize that it is an enabler of spirituality, not a substitute for spirituality. God doesn’t dwell only—or even primarily—in the synagogue. God dwells everywhere. Most of our lives are not spent in the synagogue, and most of our lives are deeply in need of relationship with the Almighty. If we can develop a full spiritual personality, we will find the synagogue experience to be a meaningful and vital aspect of our lives. We need to be working on how to become more sensitive to our souls, to our personal relationships with God. We need to imbue our daily lives with Torah and mitzvoth in such a way that these activities resonate within us, and raise our spirits.

When Bil’am blessed the people of Israel, he said: “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob; your dwellings O Israel.” The “tents” refer to our homes, the centers of our every-day lives; the “dwellings” refer to our synagogues and study halls. When we first have our “tents” in order, it is a natural extension to have our “dwellings” in order.

It is far from a simple matter for moderns to maintain, or regain, a sense of intimacy with God. Much of the time-spirit militates against genuine religious experience. Religion is not an easy way to God, and is not a short cut to spirituality. Treating symptoms without going to the root of our problem only makes the problem worse.

If we want our synagogues to be more spiritual, we have to be more spiritual ourselves. If we want our "dwellings" to be spiritually alive, then we first have to be sure that our "tents" are spiritually alive.

Angel for Shabbat