# The Fire in our Souls, Heads and Hearts

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Not too long ago, I opened up an email that contained the following riddle: What's the difference between a religious Jew and a spiritual Jew? The answer: A spiritual Jew goes off to the forest to commune with God. A religious Jew goes off and worries if there will be money to pay the oil company for the synagogue's boiler.

Although clearly tongue in cheek, this quip got me thinking: Is that how we would distinguish a "religious" Jew from a "spiritual" Jew? Is one just wrapped up with the bottom line material concerns, while the spirit is ceded to others? If we think about it, this is a question that in many ways Orthodox Jews now have the luxury of asking. Until the third quarter of the twentieth century, it was an open question whether there would be a place for Orthodox Jews, be they of the modern, centrist or Hareidi variety. Happily, all realms of Orthodoxy are thriving. Whether we look at the study halls in Lakewood, the Bet Midrash at Yeshiva University, the establishment of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the surge in daf yomi learning in synagogues, offices, or even in a Long Island Railroad car, things have never appeared brighter. Add to that mix the unprecedented explosion in opportunities for women to learn Torah in secondary schools, post-high school yeshivot, general Torah study; or the communal conversation focusing on fashioning professional roles for Orthodox women within the framework of synagogues and yeshivot. On

the surface, things have never appeared better. And yet I am reminded of the old joke of two men sitting on the park bench. One turns to his friend and says, Chaim are you an optimist or a pessimist? An optimist, Chaim answers. If so, asks his friend, why then do you look so troubled? To which Chaim answers—who says it is easy to be an optimist!

We have a lot to be optimistic about—but at times it is not so easy, as we confront some of the challenges that our community faces. There are too many stories of young Orthodox Jews who are leaving the world of religiosity behind them. Even within the world of Hassidism, we hear of “reverse Marranos”: those who retain their Hassidic garb on the outside but have become non-believers on the inside, struggling with belief and identity. And too many people who attend school or synagogue engage in what I call “deposit the body” syndrome. They are present but not present. In essence they have spiritually checked out.

What can we do to stem this phenomenon? Is it just an inevitable consequence of living in a modern world, hemmed in by time and financial pressures? After all, who has the luxury of looking at our spiritual ledger when we are too engrossed in balancing our financial one? What can we do to reach out to those who are not finding spiritual satisfaction through study and engagement with Jewish texts? Is there something we can do to fill in the missing links that will enrich and enliven everyone’s spiritual lives, despite the pressured lives we lead?

As we know, this is not a new conversation. If we look back for a moment at the rise of the Hassidic movement we are confronted by a very similar conversation.

One of the often cited polemics by the Hassidic movement against their Misnaged opponents was that Misnagdim were missing the fire in their souls. Referencing the verse in Devarim 5:5, where Moshe criticizes the Israelites, “you did not come near the fire,” the nascent Hassidic movement said: You are too staid! You don’t know how to engage in Avodat haShem (service of God). We have the hitlahavut (enthusiasm). We have Ahavat haShem (love of God). We have the joy that allows us to move from a mere intellectual approach and take it to a higher spiritual level.

The Misnagim answered: You are ignorant. You only focus on the ecstasy; you forsake the deep learning that can bring you closer to Avodat haShem. Where is your Yir’at Shamayim (fear of Heaven)?

When we look at the contemporary Orthodox religious scene, are we still mired in a conflict between those who emphasize learning as a means to a closer

relationship with God and those who believe ecstatic prayer and service can bring us closer. To address this conflict, I think we need to examine the kind of spiritual communities we are creating in the lives of our children in school; in particular during the high school years. In addition, I think we need to examine the kind of spiritual atmosphere we are building in our synagogues. And last but not least we have to consider the spiritual values we are emphasizing in our homes.

Not too long ago, I was speaking to the principal of a Modern Orthodox coeducational high school. I asked this educator's advice on how to create a more meaningful prayer atmosphere for the students. The principal's reply to me was "the best type of praying is the quickest." I could not believe my ears. There is no question that the time scheduling pressures for high school students are extraordinary. How do you fit into each day all the limudei kodesh, have gym and lunch, and integrate the limudei hol? So "davening" then becomes the perfect foil, it's the perfect expendable item. Get it over with and then the kids can move on to what is really important. Think about it. We are squandering the opportunity to start the day with wrapping these young minds with an understanding of how we should begin our day, in a passionate dance with the Almighty. As the Zohar teaches, the fire that was on the altar went into the hearts of the kohanim and the worshippers so that their song was full of passion and the immense power of prayer filled their beings. Is this too much for a 16 year old to absorb? Assuredly not. Even if only offered once or twice a week, a longer davening filled with melodies and time to explain the words and concepts, a prayer service filled with devekkut will not cause the students' SAT scores to suffer. We have to set the example as to what is not only of academic importance but of supreme importance. We need to reintegrate the spiritual with the intellectual. We have to reclaim the fire. Otherwise the die is cast. We will create the next generation of daveners who think that the best davening is the one that is quickest. As much as we think the students will absorb the spirit from the texts of Torah and Talmud, we have to help them absorb the spiritual from the words of tefillah, our prayers.

And regarding our synagogues?

Perhaps a facet of synagogue life that we might prefer not to confront is what are people gaining spiritually from their synagogue experiences? No matter how long or short, do worshippers feel bored? Do they approach their prayers like the principal of the school, that the best davening is the quickest davening? Now here, let me be the realist and distinguish between a daily minyan (not in a school context) and Shabbat morning. In the world of the early morning minyan, where everybody is rushing off to work, every minute counts. Pity the poor prayer leader

who on Rosh Hodesh drags out Hallel too long! The morning minyan is generally quite happy if an excuse can be found to skip the “Tahanun” prayers and thereby save a few minutes.

But what of Shabbat morning? With a whole day ahead of us to eat and sleep and spend time with family and friends, what’s the rush? And yet the flag of reality has to be waved every week-- go too long and it’s considered tirha d’tzibbura, a discomforting of the congregation. But is it the length of the service that really bothers people or rather is it the aura that surrounds the prayers? What is going through the minds of the average person in synagogue? Are people focused during Shaharit? Attentive during the Torah reading? Awake and engaged during the rabbi’s sermon?

Perhaps one way of raising the level of connectedness is for more synagogues to integrate more of the practices often found outside of a main minyan. For example, in many synagogues that offer Beginners’, Intermediate, or Learners’ minyanim, I have noticed that many of the people who attend these services are actually very knowledgeable. I would not classify these people as being on a “beginner” or “intermediate” level. So when I have asked them why they attend these minyanim, they answer: We like the discussion that surrounds the Torah reading. It makes the text come alive. We enjoy the periodic explanations. We enjoy the warmth and camaraderie.

It should give pause to consider introducing some of these elements into the main synagogue service, even at the risk of a service running a bit longer, as a way of enhancing the experience of those in a main minyan.

Another factor toward raising the spiritual experience for synagogue goers is the overall figure of the Shaliah Tsibbur (prayer leader). There is no question that overall, there has been an evolving relationship around the role of the professional cantor in the world of so many Orthodox synagogues. What was once a central figure of the synagogue service has now been downplayed or outright replaced by volunteer prayer leaders. Yet, while this may be helpful to the bottom line synagogue budget, thought must be given to this decision. Unless the volunteer prayer leaders are truly adept at the art of nusah, often we get exposed to a hodgepodge of styles and melodies, not to mention a variety of singing skills. There is no question that the embracing of the nusah of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach has led to a greater means of capturing a sense of spirituality. But that too must be executed properly, because otherwise it is a tirha d’tzibbura, no less that a hazzan who in the old days dragged out services. For example, at the services that take place at Kol HaNeshamah, (the organization that I co-founded with

Cantor Ari Klein,) we have worked very hard to create an atmosphere of engaged daveners, including explanations at certain places, as well as highlighting congregational singing by combining traditional nusah with Carlebach niggunim, an atmosphere of hitlahavut (fervor) while being led by a hazzan and an a cappella group. The fervor I witnessed this past year on the Yamim Noraim, of hundreds of members of the kahal davening, singing, and dancing—men on the men's side of the mehitsa, women on the women's side of the mehitsa, made me realize that davening and devekut, Yir'at Shamayim and Ahavat haShem can go hand in hand. If executed correctly by the Shaliah tsibbur/hazzan (as I noted above, Carlebach nusah requires as great agility as the standard nusah), it will elevate our experience to a level that recognizes the importance of engaging the soul and the mind, the heart and the head.

The good news is that more and more synagogues are aware of this and are creating a more spiritual experience within the construct of a traditional service. The challenge is to get even more congregations on board, realizing how high the stakes truly are. When we think about it then, how to meld the intellectual with the spiritual is not merely a theoretical question harking back to the Hasisdic-Misnagdic fight of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

It is necessary in our times to bring the fervor back into our schools, our synagogues, and our homes. It also means that we can't just cede it to the professionals. It isn't just up to the rabbis, the principals, the teachers. It is incumbent upon each of us in our homes to set an example of working on both our dedication to Jewish daily practice, to Jewish knowledge and daily study of and dedication to Jewish texts but especially to our religious fervor.