Real and Fake Religion: Thoughts for Parashat Terumah

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By
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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Terumah

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A story is told of a man who stopped attending his usual synagogue and was now frequenting another minyan. One day he happened to meet the rabbi of his previous synagogue, and the rabbi asked him where he was praying these days. The man answered: “I am praying at a small minyan led by Rabbi Cohen.”

The rabbi was stunned. “Why would you want to pray there with that rabbi. I am a much better orator, I am more famous, I have a much larger following.”
The man replied: “Yes, but in my new synagogue the rabbi has taught me to read minds.”

The rabbi was surprised. “Alright, then, read my mind.”

The man said: “You are thinking of the verse in Psalms, ‘I have set the Lord before me at all times.’”

“You are wrong,” said the rabbi, “I was not thinking about that verse at all.”

The man replied: “Yes, I knew that, and that’s why I’ve moved to the other synagogue. The rabbi there is always thinking of this verse.”

Indeed, an authentically religious person is always thinking of this verse, either directly or in the back of his mind. Such an individual lives in the presence of God, conducts himself with modesty and propriety. The Rabbi Cohen of the story was genuine; he was a spiritual person seeking to live a godly life.

The other rabbi in the story was “successful.” He had a large congregation and external signs of prestige. But he lacked the essential ingredient of being authentically religious: he did not have the Lord before him at all times. He was busy trying to make himself popular, get his name into the newspapers, rub elbows with celebrities. Even when he prayed, his mind was not on God, but on how he could advance himself in the world.

This week’s parashah begins with God’s commandment to Moshe: “speak unto the children of Israel that they take for Me an offering—*veyikhu li terumah.* Rashi comments that the word *li* implies *li lishmi*—that the offering must be given with pure intentions for the sake of God. One might think that donating to the construction of the Mishkan sanctuary was in itself a sign of piety. Rashi’s comment reminds us: it is possible to show external piety while lacking true piety. It is possible to appear to be religious, but not conduct oneself with a religious heart and mind.

A kabbalistic teaching has it that we come closer to God through the power of giving--giving love, charity, kindness. A truly religious person is characterized by an overwhelming desire to share with others, to act selflessly with purity of heart. This is the essence of real religion.

On the other hand, we become more distant from God through the power of taking--trying to amass as much as possible for ourselves--more material goods, more honor, more egotistical satisfaction. We cannot exist without the power of taking, since we must fulfill our basic material needs. But when we exert this power excessively, we drift further and further from God. This is a sign of fake religion.

We all know individuals who are characterized by the power of giving. These are loving people who can be trusted, who are generous, compassionate and loyal. When we meet such individuals, we can sense the image of God in them. They genuinely want to help, to share, to be of service, to contribute. They are humble, and ask for nothing in return for their kindness.

We all also know individuals who are selfish and self-serving. They may act friendly and smile broadly, but we sense that their friendship is as counterfeit as their smile. They may pretend to be loyal and giving--but they are simply interested in advancing themselves. They try to take credit for work performed by others. They are seldom there when work has to be done, but are always there for photo-ops. They ingratiate themselves with those in power, and calculate how they can take the most for themselves while giving the least of themselves. They pass themselves off as generous and kind, but they are only putting on an act. Their real goal is to take, not to give. Such people may fool some of the people some of the time, and even most of the people most of the time: but they never fool God.

In His command to the Israelites to contribute to the Mishkan, God specifies that He only wants contributions from those with generous hearts. He doesn't want contributions from those who are stingy; or who give in order to advance their own reputations and honor; or who give reluctantly or grudgingly. The Israelites were to build a sanctuary to the Lord--but it had to be constructed with "the power of giving", with selflessness and generosity of spirit. The house of God must be built with the finest, most idealistic human qualities.

The aspiration of a truly religious person must be to develop the power of giving; to be genuine, honest and kind. If we are to make our contributions to God's sanctuary--and to society--we must do so with purity of heart, selflessness and humility. We must aspire to real religion.

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