Holiness in our Synagogues? Thoughts for Aharei Mot-Kedoshim

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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.”

The people then understood. Our spiritual goal must be to raise our hearts and voices in prayer so that the prayers will ascend to the gate of heaven. This can only happen if we are sincerely engaged in our prayers. If we simply go through the motions, rattle off the words, and then rush off to our business--then the prayers remain in the synagogue, and the room becomes too crowded.

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.

Recent surveys of Jewish life have noted that a vast majority of Jews do not attend synagogue services at least once a week. This does not mean that these Jews lack spiritual yearnings. It does mean, though, that for a great many Jews our synagogues lack the Divine Presence. If and when they do attend services, they do not feel the glory of God. They hear too much idle chatter, they see too many people—even rabbis—reading books or journals during services. They experience synagogues as businesses run by people who are interested in promoting themselves. The sanctity, humility and spirituality are missing.

Happily, though, there are synagogues and prayer groups that strive to keep the Divine Presence among them. They foster reverence, selflessness, and sincerity. Their services are free from external conversations and jesting. They yearn to have their prayers ascend to the gate of heaven.

For those fortunate to pray in such an ideal setting, the prayer experience is uplifting and joyful. For those whose synagogues fall short of the ideal, the prayer experience can be frustrating and unhappy.

Sincere seekers of God must look for communities of worshipers who share their religious sensibilities. If no such synagogue or prayer group is available, then one should try to internalize prayers to the extent possible, keeping one’s mind free from the distractions that infect the synagogue’s atmosphere. One should pray with eyes focused on the prayer book or with eyes closed. One should sit apart from those who chatter or jest. One should avoid looking at those who are busy reading books or journals rather than devoting themselves to the prayers.

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 spiritual seeker must try to forge a private path to the gate of heaven.

This week's Torah reading reminds us of the challenge: to be holy. This may be understood as a prod to spirituality, to a refined and transcendent vision of our relationship with the Almighty and with human beings. If our synagogues reflect genuine holiness, we are uplifted by them; our prayers can ascend. But if our synagogues lack holiness, the absence of the Divine Presence is palpable.

Angel for Shabbat