Thoughts for Hanukkah...and on the Nature of Religious Life

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One of the great problems any religious person must struggle with is whether or not it is actually possible to be religious. What, after all, is the essence of genuine religiosity?It is no doubt the cognizance that one lives in the presence of God and feels and acts accordingly. To do so, however, is nearly impossible.

Avraham Joshua Heschel once made the profound observation: “Religion depends upon what man does with his ultimate embarrassment” (1). While we may not agree with Heschel that embarrassment lies at the root of religion, we agree it is unpretentiousness combined with deep humility that moves genuine religion. What lies at the root of all religions is the awareness that it is extremely difficult to live up to the awe of the moment. Our ultimate concern should be to grasp – emotionally and intellectually – that we are the contemporaries of God, and to experience this in the most elevated way.

But for the majority of us it is an impossible mission. How can man ever encounter the Divine otherness? It is the task of religion to guide us through this almost desperate situation.

Paradoxically, admitting the impossibility of this undertaking, and responding to it in a responsible way, is what makes our humility a genuine religious experience. How can one live in God’s presence and not be humble? Live in the shadow of greatness and not sense it? Be part of the great miracle of existence and ignore it? Yet, who among us is in fact spiritually uncomfortable? We have become so insensitive that we are not even embarrassed by our lack of self-consciousness. This almost turns the religious lives of millions, including our own, into a farce. We may sincerely convince ourselves that we are religious, while in fact we are guilty

of self-deception.

For religious Jews this may be an even greater problem than for those who follow other religions. Judaism's constant demand to follow Halacha may give the impression that the religion depends solely on the need to "observe," or carefully perform, all of Halacha with its nearly obsessive requirement to follow all rituals and laws down to the minutiae. How often do religious Jews believe that they are religious because they are observant? This is one of the major pitfalls of Jewish observant life.

In truth, Halacha is not to be observed, but rather experienced as a way to deal with one's lifelong existential awareness that one lives in the presence of God. It is a response to our question of how to live with spiritual discomfort. A remarkable feature of Halacha is that it often asks us to act as if we are deeply provoked by living in the presence of God, while in reality we aren't. This begs the question whether such an act can be authentic as opposed to downright hypocritical. It is here that Judaism is not completely comfortable with its own demands. Should it ask the Jew to act as if he is moved and therefore do as if he is filled with the deepest religious feelings? Or, should it ask the Jew to act according to his real feelings and not pretend?Judaism is fully aware that whichever road it suggests, there will be a heavy price to pay. The Jew may feel hypocritical, or he may not even be aware that he lost his dream since there is nothing that reminds him of it.

In a notable discussion (2) between the great mishnaic schools of Beit Shamai and Beit Hillel, the question is posed whether it is better to light all eight candles of the menorah on the first day of Chanukah, or on the last day. Beit Shamai suggests that one should begin with lighting all eight, subtracting a candle every subsequent day until only one is lit on the eighth day. Beit Hillel's opinion is that we should light only one candle on the first day and slowly build up to eight lights on the eighth day. What is this conflict all about?

I suggest that the disagreement between these two schools is rooted in the question of whether people should express their religious commitment through these acts when they honestly reflect where they stand at that hour, or when these acts express where they would like to be in the future (3). Is Judaism better served by making us act as if we are on a level of high spirituality, while in fact we are not, or does it prefer that we express our religious feelings "ba-asher hu sham" – "where he is at that moment" (4) – reflecting our often middle-of-the-road religious condition?

Beit Shamai's suggestion that one should light all eight candles on the first night is, for the most part, an honest expression of our feelings. We are more excited on the first day than we are on the last. For most of us, the notion of novelty is felt at the start, never at the end. Hence, eight lights on the first day. But such excitement comes with a price. It does not endure. Like the sexual act that wears off after a moment when not accompanied by the binding of souls – Post coitum omne animal triste est (5) – so all religious acts, when experienced solely as novelty and excitement, lose their impact as the exhilaration slowly dissipates. It is therefore logical that on the second day only seven lights be lit and on the last day only one. It is Beit Shamai's conviction that we should not put on a show and pretend that we are more than what we are.

Such an approach is thoroughly honest but lacks a dream and vision of what could be. Beit Hillel therefore believes that if we do not inspire man with his potential and give him a taste of what could be, he will not even strive to achieve higher goals. As Robert Browning said, "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp – or what's a heaven for?" According to Beit Hillel, we should start with only one light on the first day, since this reflects the condition of our soul at the beginning of Chanukah. We need to warm up and slowly strengthen our soul until it bursts with spiritual depth on the eighth day when we reach the fullness of the festival. The lighting of the menorah should be a transforming act, and that can take place only when it is accompanied by an inner experience that touches the deepest dimensions of our souls, step by step. True, we may not feel this way, but we must awaken and educate ourselves toward this goal. The last day should be the greatest. We should act as if, so that one day we may reach this spiritual level. We taste the future in the present.

Novelty is often just a brand new form of mediocrity, while excellence is rooted in the old but revitalized on a higher plain. It is not the honest mediocrity of today that we need, but an exalted dream of tomorrow. It is between these two positions that Judaism operates – a balancing act, as in the case of a tightrope walker. Most of the time, it requires a compromise. Sometimes Jewish law will opt for a realistic understanding of the here and now; other times it will choose the dream. It is a difficult position to be in, not always clear why Halacha will decide a certain way in one case and a different way on another occasion. The problem is that in the end it may not satisfy anyone. But it is the realistic understanding of "you can't have your cake and eat it too" that seems to move Judaism.

Beit Shamai will sometimes have to agree that there is a need to go for the dream, and Beit Hillel will on occasion have to go by the facts on the ground.

Such differences are even found within the Torah, as well as among other Sages and later authorities (6). Judaism cannot survive by opting for only one of these ideals. It would be suicidal. Most interesting is the fact that there is one opinion in the Talmud (7) that says Beit Shamai continued to follow its own view, even after the Halacha was decided in accordance with Beit Hillel. According to this opinion, it seems that Beit Shamai continued to light eight candles on the first day of Chanukah, although everyone else followed the opinion of Beit Hillel (8). This makes us wonder. Tradition tells us that Halacha will only follow Beit Shamai once the messianic times will have begun. There is, however, no source for this in the Talmud (9).Could it mean that for exceptional souls it would be possible to follow the views of Beit Shamai even today?

No two souls are the same. It is this fact that makes religious life a far from easy task. Even if man knows that religion is his response to his ultimate embarrassment, as Heschel would have it, he still will not know how to act. Shall he be honest so as not to pretend, or shall he pretend so that one day he will be honest to his dream?

_____ (1) A.J. Heschel, Who is man? (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965) p. 112. (2) Shabbat 21b. (3) See also: Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, Michtav Me-Eliyahu, Vol. II (Jerusalem, 1963) pp.120-122. (4) Bereishit 21:17. (5) “Every animal is sad after intercourse.” (6) See for example the Torah’s toleration of slavery (Shemot 21:1-6) and the complete rejection of this institution as the ultimate dream to which it seems to aspire (Vayikra 25:55). See also: Eruvin 65a concerning prayer, and Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim, (98:2). (7) Yevamot 14a. (8) See also Shabbat 21b where the story is told that some people followed the custom of Beit Shamai on Chanukah long after a divine voice instructed that the Halacha is according to Beit Hillel (Eruvin 13b). The Biur Halacha in Mishne Berura, Orach Chayim, 671:2, makes an interesting observation that the Halacha is only according to Beit Hillel when it lays down the strict Halacha, not in the case of mehadrin min hamehadrin, the beautification of the Halacha beyond its basic requirements (one light each day of Chanukah). Biur Halacha cautions that such should not be done in practice. This essay, however, argues that such practice may be an actual option. (9) The first source for this is a statement by the Ari z”l, which is quoted by Malbim in Torah Ohr, Bamidbar 19:2.