Spirituality of the Moment

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The Midrash describes the Torah as black fire on white fire (*Midrash Tanhuma*, *Bereishith* 1). On its simplest level, the black fire represents the letters of the Torah, while the white fire is the space between the letters. On a deeper level, the black fire may be compared to the halakha, the formal, clear-cut law that emerges from the Torah. Parallel to the halakha is the white fire, which may represent the spiritual element of the law. Spirituality is to halakha as heaven is to earth; as soul is to body—giving that which is anchored the ability to soar.

This is not always the case. Halakha is a complex system of law that can sometimes become a barrier rather than a conduit to feeling God's presence. Our essential teaching is that halakha ought to interface with spirituality.

This essay is an abridged version of part of a chapter of my upcoming book, *Spiritual Encounters: Searching for Meaning in Prayer*, scheduled to be published by Toby press in the spring of 2011. Our goal here will be to define spirituality and then show how it forms an integral part of the halakhic system. The particular ways in which spirituality interfaces with tefillah (prayer), particularly with *kavanah* (proper concentration) is left for a larger discussion in the book.

In Life

My working definition of spirituality is rather simple. **Spirituality means encountering the moment, being conscious of the moment, while recognizing God's role in that moment.**

Consciousness of Moment

One of the most important concepts of the Torah is found at the end of *Devarim*, when God declares: "I call heaven and earth as witnesses **today**, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore **choose life**, that you may live, you and your seed" (*Devarim*, 30:19).

For other faith communities, this is a radical idea. In these belief systems, death is venerated. The goal in this world is to limit physical pleasure, to limit living life so that one can merit true life, life in the next world. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik makes this point in his *Ish haHalakhah* when describing the *homo religiosus*, the universal religious person.

Judaism declares—no. What counts most is this world is life as we know it. The next world is one of eternal reward. This world is one of doing, acting, fixing, repairing, redeeming; it is one of choosing

life. For Rabbi Soloveitchik, this is the credo of "halakhic man."

The sentence from *Devarim* that implores us to choose life includes the mandate that we do so *haYom*—today. The portion in which the word *haYom* appears in this sentence is generally read on the Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Indeed, on the High Holy Days, we end the service with the prayer *haYom*, repeating that refrain over and over. On these awesome days, we remind ourselves that the challenge of life is to live *haYom*, every day—fully—to be conscious of every moment being experienced.

We live in a world of memory and anticipation. So absorbed are human beings in remembering the past and being concerned about the future that the moment is fleeting and rarely experienced. We sing about "Yesterday" and "Tomorrow" but rarely about "Today." Even when we are experiencing important events, we are often too excited or worried about what is yet to happen; in the process of waiting for the next moment we fail to experience the power of what is before us in the very present.

The importance of today is underscored in the Talmud which records Alexander the Great asking the sages of Israel the following question: "What should a person do to live?" The sages respond: "Let him mortify himself [i.e., "kill himself" with study and hard work]" (*Tamid* 32a). On a deeper level, Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik suggests Alexander Macedon was asking "What shall a person do to live," i.e., what is the secret to life? The sages respond: "Let every individual imagine that death is imminent," that the moment being experienced is one's last. Such thinking, the sages believe, will inspire people to live life more fully.

It is nothing less than the story of the rabbi who turns to one of his students who has strayed and says, "Fear not. If you repent, even at the last moment of life, all is forgiven." The student was at first relieved. After thinking about it, however, he became alarmed, and asked his teacher, "But how do you know which moment is the last you will live?" "That's my point" the rabbi said. "Live every moment as if it's your last." Here, the rabbi's intent is not that his student be burdened with fear of death; rather it was a teaching to inspire his student to live every moment in a qualitative way—never taking life for granted. To paraphrase Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra: "A person is concerned about the loss of money and not the loss of days. Money can be replenished; days cannot."

The idea that spirituality is attained by living every moment, every instant of life is hinted in the very first question God asked Adam. Adam had just disobeyed God and eaten from the forbidden tree. God appears and asks, *ayeka*—"Where are you?" (*Bereishith* 3:9).

It has been noted that God obviously knew where Adam was. *Ayeka*, however, may be an existential question, one that God is constantly asking not only Adam but all of his descendants. "Where are you," God asks all of us. Have you done your share in fixing and perfecting and making this world a better one?

Perhaps even more, *ayeka* is a kind of mystical question, in which God encourages all of humankind to be aware of their surroundings, to be fully appreciative of all that we are experiencing, to be absolutely immersed in every nuance of life.

Thus, the first step in spirituality is choosing life in all its minutiae. It is becoming fully conscious of the I, and, by extension, the moment the I is experiencing. Yes, there are many who believe spirituality is the escape from the real world. But for Judaism, spirituality emerges from fully encountering and being completely involved in the moment.

Judaism is not unique in this formulation of spirituality. In some eastern religions, for example, the moment being experienced is so overpowering, one feels a sense of nothingness, a negation of being. Total consciousness of moment can yield a sense of worthlessness in the face of all that is unfolding. The opposite feeling can also take place. Consciousness of moment can elevate one to feel a sense of self-importance, to be totally self-absorbed. Spirituality from this perspective yields an approach to life which is anthropocentric, narcissistic, revolving completely around the human being.

In Judaism, we find echoes of these positions, from Chabad's *bitul haYesh*—nullification of self—to Slobodka's *vaTehasreihu me'at meElohim*—the human being is just a little less than angels (Psalms 8:6). However, our critical contribution is that consciousness of moment can be a synthesis of these positions. It is the dialectic of humility and self-confidence; of the two notes carried by Reb Simcha Bunim of Peshischa. One read *veAnohi afar v'efer*—"I am but dust and ashes." The other read, *bishvili*

nivra haOlam—"the world was created for me."

Recognizing God's Role

Most important, spirituality is inextricably linked with God and God's role in the moment being experienced. In the Torah framework, consciousness of moment should lead to an encounter with God—i.e., an awareness of the presence of God and God's role in bringing about, nurturing, and giving meaning to the particular experience.

Awareness of God is a central element of the Jewish concept of *kedushah*—commonly translated as holiness. While most faiths see holiness as an out-of-body experience, distinct and apart from the physical every day, Judaism sees holiness as an in-body experience where the everyday is sanctified by being open to God.

The biblical source for *kedushah* is found in *vaYikra* where God mandates the human being to be holy (19:2). One wonders why there needs to be a specific command to be holy. Shouldn't the sum total of observance of the whole of the Torah by definition lead one to a holy life?

It is here that Nachmanides puts forth a startling concept. He suggests that one can, in fact, keep the minutia of Torah law, and at the same time live an unholy life. One could keep the details of the law, and yet, in Nachmanides' words, still "be an abomination with the permission of the Torah." (Nachmanides, *vaYikra* 19:2).

For this reason, the Torah says: be holy. *Kedushah* teaches the critical importance of infusing the letter of the law with the spirit of the law—with meaning, with purpose, with holiness, with *kedushah*, yes—with Godliness.

Could it be that the word (*k-d-sh*) *kadosh* is a compound of *k* and *d-sh*. The *k*, which begins the word, represents the Name of God. In fact, the very word *kadosh* is an abbreviated form of God's name, the Holy One, Blessed Be He. *D-sh* means to thresh. *Kadosh* therefore means to bring God into everything, to have God as a threshing force, omnipresent in all that we do.

Martin Buber in *Hasidism and Modern Man* approaches *kedushah* in this way.

"God dwells where man lets Him in!" The hallowing of man means this "letting in." Basically the holy in our world is what is open to God, as the profane is what is closed off from Him, and hallowing is the event of opening out…

In this spirit, the students of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak haCohen Kook have quoted their teacher as saying, "There is no such thing as the unholy. There is only the holy and the not yet holy." For Rabbi Kook, the way one eats, engages in business, or makes love is no less holy than fasting, meditation, or prayer. Every act of life has the potential to be suffused with *kedushah* —with Godly spirituality.

A story: A Hassid living in Minsk decided to seek the heavenly world, which he had been told was in Pinsk. Overnight, he slept in an open field, having carefully left his shoes pointed in the direction of Pinsk. As he slept, a scoundrel came by and turned his shoes around. The next morning, the Hassid continued on in the direction that he found his shoes to be pointing. When he reached his destination, he noticed landscape, streets, homes and people that all seemed familiar. He was puzzled, but delighted to have found heavenly bliss. Heaven on earth.

Kedushah is finding spirituality in earthliness. In a broader sense, it is the bringing of God into the world. Hence, my definition: Spirituality means being conscious of the moment while recognizing God's role in that moment.

In Ritual

Rituals, especially rituals associated with life's rites of passage, are examples of how spirituality can be experienced by encountering and taking cognizance of the moment while feeling God's nearness. A good idea is to have those directly involved, together with family and friends, offer personal reflections about what this experience means to them. Although the ritual is a rite of *passage*, the challenge is to

have time stand still, to ponder the religious significance and spiritual power of the moment.
Consider the ritual on our most joyous and mournful occasions—marriage and death. Some may find it spiritually uplifting to read under the *huppah* (wedding canopy) words of blessing that bride and groom have written to each other. The rabbi can then ask for a moment of introspection wherein all present offer their blessings to bride and groom. Or, during *shiva* and especially as it ends, it can be meaningful for the mourner to offer a personal reflection about the deceased. Such moments of personal introspection are similarly meaningful when concluding the month or year of mourning, or when reciting the last *kaddish* or during a memorial service.
It is here that spirituality faces a formidable challenge. The idea that the foundation of spirituality involves living in the moment makes many people uncomfortable. We are, by and large, not happy coming face to face with who we are: our physical beings, our emotions, our relationships, our inner essence. When challenged to encounter our inner "I," we often feel vulnerable; it is a place at which we often do not want to be.
For example, a wedding of spiritual meaning, where aspects of love are touched upon, may conjure up for many in attendance matters related to the inadequacies of their own marriages. Or personal reflections from a mourner can stir deep feelings, positive or negative, within the mourner or among those in attendance about their own relationships.
Virtually nothing of meaning comes easily. Because spirituality is potentially exhilarating, it is equally daunting. All we can do is be sensitive to the challenges of consciousness of moment while carefully forging ahead.
In fact, halakha may show the way by introducing laws that encourage and sometimes compel one to fully experience the moment. For example, the Mishnah which declares that a groom should not recite *Shema* on his wedding night is based on the principle of *haOsek beMitzvah patur min haMitzvah*. Bride and groom should be so immersed in the moment that even if they could find time to say *Shema*, they should not. (The normative halakha today does not follow this Mishnah.) The Mishnah is insisting that bride and groom not be distracted from full concentration on each other. Similarly, during *shiva*, the mourner may be prohibited from learning Torah so that he or she fully feels the emotions of *shiva* and does not escape into deep Torah study.
Not coincidentally, the ritual at both ends of the spectrum—the exhilaration of marriage and emotional pain of mourning—is suffused with symbols and words that mirror the constant presence of God.
The *huppah* can be viewed as a covering symbolizing the heavens, the abode of God. It is suspended over the heads of bride and groom much like the imagery of God hovering over His people like a mother bird gently protecting its fledglings (*Devarim* 32:11). God hovers but doesn't press down, giving a sense of infinite care while allowing bride and groom the space to be themselves.
And at the *shiva*, visitors (according to Ashkenazic practice) recite the words, "May God comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." The Hebrew term for God used here is unusual—*haMakom*. But *haMakom* literally means "the Place," in this case referring to God's omnipresence. In other words, even in a house of mourning, where the bereaved may feel God has abandoned them—even there, God is present.
As taught by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik,

> The Name…haMakom, the Omnipresent, suggests that God is indeed everywhere, even in those places and at those times when we may not readily sense His presence.
> We thus find, for example, that a mourner, who certainly feels as though God has turned away from him, is to be consoled with a phrase that uses this Name, May the Omnipresent console you…). (See Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Yom Kippur Mahzor*)

Thus, the halakha serves as a foundation for spirituality. Often, it is seen as constricting, limiting one's spirituality; we become so involved in the minutiae of halakha that it blocks our connection to God. It should not be this way. Halakha is the base, giving wings to the spiritual moment, helping us encounter God Himself.