# Spirituality

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The very term “Spirituality” has in recent years acquired negative connotations. In Judaism, it is often associated with an expression of religious fervor devoid of halakhic content or commitment. It conjures up New Age pseudo-religion, unreliable, inconsistent, flaky sentimentality. To borrow a Christian bon mot, “Mysticism,” it is often asserted, “starts in a mist and ends in a schism.” Nevertheless both rationalism and mysticism are equally integral elements in Jewish, indeed all, religious life. It is the relationship between them that I want to explore in this essay.

It is probably true to say we can all distinguish between someone we consider religiously observant (perhaps the correct Hebrew term is “*Aduk*” or perhaps “*Shomer Mitzvot*”) and one we consider to be a person “of Spirit,” someone with “*Ruhniut*.” Some might even want to use this as a way of differentiating the Lithuanian tradition from the Hassidic. Yet that would not be completely fair. And both may be combined in the same person.

On the one hand, we may point to the rigorous, Germanic approach of the late Professor Yeshayahu Leibovitz, who considered religion a matter of duty, a commitment to fulfill obligations, a purely rational phenomenon. And on the other hand, we may consider the late Nazir of Jerusalem who was lost in an ethereal world of “*deveikut*.” Halakha is clearly defined and empirically verifiable. The test

for a witness in a Jewish Court of Law is not theology, but whether one adheres to the laws of Shabbat in public. The personal encounter with God—*deveikut*—is the essential element in any mystical tradition. *Deveikut* is not something anyone else can verify. What is its origin?

**In the Bible**

The biblical narratives distinguish between those personalities who have a reciprocal relationship with God and those who are loyal to the traditions of the tribe and the people but whose engagement with a divine supernatural force is their defining characteristic. Aharon, the functionary, with his emphasis on inter human relations is an example of the first. The second was initiated by Avraham. Moshe is the archetype of a person who encounters God face to face. Only “The Fathers” and Moshe are described as struggling to “know” who and what God was and to feel God’s presence on a personal level.

The Torah itself allows for different paradigms, the priest and the judge (Deut. 18:8 and 19:18) and the prophet and the king (Deut. 18:14,18 and Deut. 17:14) one might also add “the elders” both national (Num. 11:16) and local (Deut. 21:4). All are overshadowed by the unique leadership of Moshe and then certain Judges. After Samuel, the king emerges as the typical leader. In the unique cases of both David and Shelomo can one say that the political and the spiritual were combined. Otherwise it seems throughout the first commonwealth it was the prophet who preserved the mystical tradition. Often he was in conflict with the monarch. The priesthood usually allied itself with the ruling power, what we would call the establishment. Its primary role was to make sure the National Sanctuary ran according to its rules. I cannot think of one example in the Bible of a priest communing or pouring his heart out to God in the way for example that David does. And this is precisely why it is Eliyahu the Prophet and his Chariot of Fire that is seen as the forerunner of the great mystical tradition. It is fire throughout the Bible that is used as the dominant (though not exclusive) symbol of the divine presence. What better metaphor for passion could there be?

Furthermore the Bible, being a pre-philosophical text, is not concerned with the rational arguments for faith. There is no explicit command to believe. The first of the Ten Commandments is phrased as a given, not as something one needs to find proofs of. Rather it is an assumption of involvement and commitment. Indeed the biblical use of the word *emunah,* faith, is quite removed from the Aristotelian idea of intellectual belief. It is more a matter of being convinced, firm, secure, like the arms of Moses during the battle at Rephidim against Amalek.

**In the Talmud**

The Talmud continues this distinction of approaches, most obviously in the persona of Honi HaMa'agel (*Mishna Taanit* 3:2 and Gemara). His intimate relationship with God is recognized and yet challenged by Shimon Ben Shetah, the leader of the mainstream Pharisaic community. Shimon can recognize the unique contribution of Honi and his ability to go beyond the normal constraints of public religion. And yet he also recognizes the danger of what he sees as "Lese Majesty." That particular talmudic passage goes on to give examples of the dangers of "wonder rabbis" using mystical powers in ways that normative halakha would not approve, as in the case of R.Yosi Ben Yokeret (*Taanit* 23b).

The ambiguity is there. One might think that the talmudic opposition to Greek culture and thought would place the whole of the rabbinic world firmly in the non-rational, mystical camp. The highlighting of Elisha Ben Abuya's apostasy, only hinted at as being because of his following Greek rational thought, might lead one to think that rationalism was simply not a talmudic value. Yet those rabbis who follow in the Honi tradition are not always regarded as being correct. Hanina ( *Berakhot* 17b), who sustains the whole world, is contrasted with the Gabeans, who might not be as mystically advanced but produced no heretics. The hint is clear. Similarly it is precisely the strange exceptions such as Shimon bar Yohai, who is valued for his obvious spiritual greatness, nevertheless is implicitly criticized for going beyond the boundaries of halakha when he puts working men to death for not spending their time in study (*Shabbat* 33b). It is the very objection to Shimon Bar Yohai's absolutism that highlights the difference between an exceptional degree of spirituality that is inevitably the realm of a few, as opposed to the normative, if less exciting Judaism of the masses. Still Shimon Bar Yohai, Pinehas Ben Yair, Hanina, and the others are regarded as being exceptional precisely because of their spiritual relationship with God rather than as being in the first rank of scholars. They contrast with such personalities as Shimon Ben Gamliel as a man of authority rather than spirit.

**In Medieval Theology**

It was the dominance of theology in first millennial Christianity and Islam that exercised such a powerful influence on Jewish thought. The Aristotelian bifurcation between spirit and matter led almost inevitably to the distinction taken for granted until the late nineteenth century. It was precisely against this over emphasis on rationalism that Kabbalah emerged as such a potent force at the very time when mysticism in Christianity began to challenge established norms, and similarly Sufism in Islam. Kabbalah's creation of the system of *sefirot* integrated all "parts of the human, from the creative, reproductive *sefira* of *yesod* , to the intellectual *sefira* of *hokhma* and the intuitive of *bina* that challenged a

rational world view. The human was a holistic reflection of God beyond. Nevertheless the distinction remained deeply rooted as evidenced in the persistence in some circles of the "*gartel,*" which divided the holier upper body from the more suspect lower regions.

*The Ghost in the Machine*, Arthur Koestler's 1967 book, was based on the work of English philosopher Gilbert Ryle. It illustrated the fallacy of how we had all come to think of the mind as good and the body as bad. Since Aristotle, we in the West have seen the intellect as the purest expression of humanity. In the world of ideas that Judaism lived, *mind* was good, *body* was bad.

It is possible that Maimonides himself understood the problem of the distinction between the "rationalism" of which he was a devotee, and the "emotion of mysticism" in his subtle distinction between the expression "to believe in," a process more dependent on intuition and feeling, rather than the more rational "to believe that." In *Sefer HaMitzvot* and *The Yad*, describing the command to believe in God, he uses the words "*SheNa'amin sheYesh,*" "we should believe **that** there is," as opposed to "*LeHa'amin Be-*" 'to believe **in**.' But when it comes to his *Ikkarim*, his principles of faith, there is no command to believe that God exists. The usage of belief there, is **"in"** and the principle is that God is the creator and director of the Universe. Perhaps Maimonides intentionally allowed for a different way of encountering the divine.

Mysticism has always been an antidote to intellectualism. And yet it would be inaccurate to transpose the rational and the mystical in Judaism too rigidly. The greatest of Lithuanian rabbis such as the Vilna Gaon, studied the *Zohar* and even the Mussar Movement took its main text, *The Paths of the Righteous*, from a Kabbalist. Perhaps it was no different from the Talmud referring to those who specialized in Aggada as opposed to Talmud (*Hagigah* 14a). Still, there is a difference because the personality that devotes itself to one is usually very different from the one who gives himself to the other.

**In Current Times**

And so it seems that the choices of rational or mystical depend more on personal preference than some intrinsic bias within Judaism. The modern quandary stems from the inescapable fact that formal, behavioral religion and its commitment to strict practice of the minutiae of halakha can be arid without the passion that mysticism can bring to it. This explains why a diet of Western religion that emerged with the Enlightenment has left so many people feeling uninspired and alienated. It explains why the mysticism of the orient has found such fertile ground in alienated Jews and Israelis. Jewish mysticism was until recently locked

away in a well-guarded world where established rabbis held the keys and made sure only suitable initiates were permitted in.

The reaction to this in our free and open world has been the popular appeal of an ersatz Kabbalah that is hardly distinguishable from self-help panaceas but bears little resemblance to the high degree of devotion, commitment, and religious observance that genuine Kabbalah requires. Judaism, I would argue, in its ideal form requires the holistic combination of all aspects of the human being. It should not be a matter of deciding whether at the Shabbat table one sings *zemirot* or tells *divrei Torah*. One should do both. It is just that some people are tone deaf just as others are intellectually challenged.

So if some of us are drawn to one and others to the other, how can one explain the obvious preferences that some of us have? In recent years a lot has been written about the physiological aspects of religion. One of the pioneers in the new field of neurotheology is Andrew Newberg, a physician at the University of Pennsylvania and director of the Center for Spirituality and the Mind. He has published a book, *Why We Believe What We Believe: Uncovering Our Biological Need for Meaning, Spirituality, and Truth*, written with his colleague Mark Robert Waldman.[1] Carl Zimmer's research [2] and Dean Hamer's book [3] have both highlighted the genetic basis for spirituality. *Psychology Today* has published articles linking spiritual experiences to serotonin. [4] The NPR website has an article on research showing the changes in the brain of those who meditate and pray, as does *Wired Science*. [5] Of course none of this tells us anything about God. But it does tell us something about ourselves. It does confirm what we see with our own eyes, that some people seem more naturally spiritual and conversely many people who are outwardly religious seem to show little interest in or propensity for spirituality. Clearly there is a need to encounter the divine as much as there is to express other parts of our intellectual and emotional makeup and some human brains seem to have a greater need than others.

The genius of our religion is that it provides for the very wide spectrum of human needs in terms of experience and intellect. The fact that it insists on behavioral detail while leaving the theological requirements loosely defined, enables the range of human minds to find their places within the religious spectrum. Provided one adheres to the common denominator of halakhic behavior, the room for individual spiritual experience is left up to each one of us to either indulge or neglect. Maimonides thought that through neglect we could totally eradicate the soul gene, or the soul element within us (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 8:5). Mysticism on the other hand regards the souls as eternal, transcendental, indestructible. So long as you and I both keep Shabbat, what we think about our soul is, is subjective.

The sad fact is that in too many parts of the Jewish world such freedom of thought is too rarely accorded.

[1] www.npr.org › ... › Religion› The Science Of Spirituality.

[2] Zimmer, Carl(October 2004). "Faith-Boosting Genes: A search for the genetic basis of spirituality". *Scientific American*. http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?articleID=000AD4E7-6290-1150-902F83414B7F4945.

[3] Hamer, Dean (2005). *The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired Into Our Genes*. Anchor Books. ISBN 0385720319.

*[4] Psychology Today.* http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200402/serotonin-and-spirituality.

*[5] Wired Science.* http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2009/03/religionbrain/