Holiness: The Unique Form of Jewish Spirituality

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In a list of new developments in Judaism in the twenty-first century, one would have to include the search for Jewish spirituality. This includes the discovery of spiritual practices such as meditation, yoga, and prayer—often adapted from Eastern religions. In this essay, I will examine this phenomenon by employing a method of investigation that attempts to address contemporary issues through textual study called “Textual Reasoning” (http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/tr/). Textual Reasoning proceeds by identifying an important contemporary problem and engaging traditional methods of Talmud Torah—including text study in “havrutot,” small discussion groups—to find creative ways of addressing the problem.

In a number of Textual Reasoning sessions that I ran in Jerusalem this past summer (2010) we looked at issues of spirituality by relating them to notions of kedushah, or holiness. I am currently writing a Jewish theology of holiness (Blackwell Press, forthcoming), so I saw these Textual Reasoning sessions as a way to help me with this project. The word spirituality, “ruhaniut” does not exist in the Torah. There is, of course, ruah, “wind” or “spirit,” which seems to represent a vitalizing life force, and ruah Elohim, or ruah Adonai, the spirit of God, which represents the power, wisdom, and light of God. But there is far more attention given to the term “kodesh” and this term seems to be the closest Jewish parallel to what is meant by spirituality in the contemporary world.

We know, of course, that the term “Holy Spirit” was most significantly developed by Christianity as it became the third figure in the Christian Trinity and the continuingly available power of new life that is active in the Church and in the Christian community. Indeed, it may very well be that the interest in spirituality in the West began as an offshoot of a Christian concern, and then came to include elements from Eastern religions. However, our focus here is not Christianity but Judaism and its relation to contemporary forms of spirituality. As I said, in our Textual Reasoning study group, we decided to address this relationship by comparing notions of spirituality with kedushah.

To provide a focus for our text study, we looked at one of the central expressions of the nature of kedushah in the Torah, vaYikrah 19, which Rashi, following Sifra Kedoshim, says contains the essence of the Torah (rov gufei haTorah). Our initial discussion of contemporary spirituality included a rather vague sense that spirituality involves a search of the individual for a religious experience, a mystical oneness with nature and/or God, or a special encounter with nature or humans that gives life meaning. These experiences are often presented as occurring outside of religious tradition. And thus we have the oft-heard phrase, “I am spiritual, but not religious.” I offered my sense that the “spiritual” included a large range of experiences from the unplanned spontaneous “peak experiences” that one might have in a visit to the Grand Canyon, to a more disciplined attempt to achieve “enlightenment” through meditation or yoga. In our first study session, a member mentioned that there was an “Institute for Jewish Spirituality” and that we ought to consult its website to get a more in depth sense of what Jewish spirituality is about. We did this and the reader will see that I include quotations from this website in this essay.

Our Textual Reasoning study sessions began by asking the following questions.

Is spiritual practice based on meditation congenial with traditional forms of Torah study and halakhic practice?
How is holiness like and unlike notions of spirituality?
Does Judaism have its own unique forms of spirituality? Is spirituality implicit in rabbinic holiness or must it be added to it from the outside?
In making this investigation, we acknowledged that the focus on vaYikra and its rabbinic commentaries might limit our ability to answer our questions about the relation of holiness to contemporary spirituality. We noted that a fuller study would require looking at other texts, most notably Kabbalah and Hassidut. But we began with the hypothesis that by looking at vaYikra some important insights and distinctions between Jewish notions of holiness and contemporary notions of

spirituality could be found.

Textual Reasoning, in general, likes to function, somewhat like empirical science, with a hunch or hypothesis or intuition that is then subjected to experiment and deliberation through textual study to see if the hunch or hypothesis can be confirmed or disconfirmed. In this case, the hypothesis was that there is an important difference between holiness and spirituality and that holiness offers a unique form of Jewish religiosity that is often insufficiently articulated and appreciated by both Jews and non-Jews. Our text study involved looking at vaYikra 19 first, on its own, and then with a range of commentaries from Rashi, Ramban, to Haketav Vehakabalah,
Israel Salanter, and Hatam Sofer.

Spirituality: What Is It?

A quick and easy way to access what contemporary Jewish spirituality is concerned with is to look at the website of the “Institute for Jewish Spirituality.” The website describes its objectives in the following way.

The work of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality is the work of spiritual renewal and rejuvenation. It is the work of making the concepts, teachings and practices of Judaism lively, meaningful, and transformative for individuals and communities. It is a mode of careful attentiveness to the whole of one’s experience. It is a process of peacemaking and a path of justice making. It emphasizes telling the truth, respecting one’s experience, responding rather than reacting, and gently returning one’s attention again and again to the initial intention of the practice. It involves an awareness of impermanence, and the interconnection of all that is and a deep appreciation of the fact that every act has an intention and a consequence. We can use a variety of Jewish concepts to describe this work: healing the self and the world; bringing the light of the infinite into the finite; actualizing the divine qualities of wisdom and compassion; restoring a sense of wholeness to the fragmented.

From this quotation, we can see that the founders of the movement see spirituality in the context of an American Judaism that needs renewal and rejuvenation. As such, it is part of a larger movement sometimes referred to as “Jewish Renewal” that finds its origin in the “Havurah movement” of the 1960s and produced the rather well known “Jewish Catalogue” series of books. That movement began as a return to traditional aspects of Judaism mixed with elements of the 1960s counter-culture such as anti-war activism, freer sexual exploration, and openness to Jewish and Eastern forms of mysticism and

meditation. The website goes on to describe meditation as the “core practice of Jewish spirituality” and it tells us how meditation came to occupy such a central place in its activities.

Meditation is a practice that entered the cultural vocabulary of the latter half of the twentieth century, a time of investigation of Eastern religions and philosophies. In one respect, the turn East epitomized for many the expression of a set of values opposed to American materialism, acquisitiveness, and busyness. In another respect, and perhaps particularly today, it represents a method of slowing down, of calming the mind, of relaxing the body in the face of our culture’s unrelenting pressure to “do.” If meditation were only to afford its practitioners that brief respite, the gift of just “being” as opposed to “doing,” it would be enough.

It is noteworthy that the Institute for Jewish Spirituality does not mention Torah or the God of Israel in its opening statement of its mission of Jewish rejuvenation. It is also noteworthy that it identifies the central problem that it is addressing as “American materialism, acquisitiveness, and busyness.” These are problems of the wealthy and the satisfied, and although the movement talks about a path of “justice making” there is no mention of actual problems of injustice or poverty in the Jewish or larger world. Since meditation is identified as the movement’s “core practice,” spirituality seems to be mainly an issue of self-healing and therapy for the individual and not the larger Jewish community. The Institute speaks of its particular type of meditation as “mindfulness meditation” and describes this as follows. “In this process we observe or witness the nature of mind, we see how conflict occurs, how illusion is born and grows, how connected each moment is to the next and how transient is every thought, experience, conclusion.” The goal of noticing these things is to learn how to “let go” of attachments to things, feelings, and thoughts that control us and thereby to open a sphere of tranquility, calmness, and equanimity. Thus, we are talking about an inward process of reflection and mind control. Those who want to practice meditation are encouraged to go to retreat centers away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life in which participants experience significant periods of silence. The Institute makes it clear that its meditation practice is an import from Eastern religions (most notably Tibetan Buddhism). Thus, the spirituality that is to cure what ails American Jews, finds its source outside of Jewish religious texts and culture in an inward individual practice outside of Jewish communal centers.

We will now juxtapose the goals and practices of the Institute of Jewish Spirituality with the rules of the life of holiness as we have them in vaYikra 19. For brevity’s

sake, we will end at verse 18.

vaYikra19:1–18
Chapter 19

1. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying,

2. Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them, You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.

3. Every man shall fear his mother and his father, and you shall observe My Sabbaths. I am the Lord, your God.

4. You shall not turn to the worthless idols, nor shall you make molten deities for yourselves. I am the Lord, your God.

5. When you slaughter a peace offering to the Lord, you shall slaughter it for your acceptance.

6. It may be eaten on the day you slaughter it and on the morrow, but anything left over until the third day, shall be burned in fire.

7. And if it would be eaten on the third day, it is abominable; it shall not be accepted.

8. And whoever eats it shall bear his sin, because he has profaned what is holy to the Lord, and that person shall be cut off from his people.

9. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not fully reap the corner of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest.

10. And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you collect the [fallen] individual grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger. I am the Lord, your God.

11. You shall not steal. You shall not deny falsely. You shall not lie, one man to his fellow.

12. You shall not swear falsely by My Name, thereby profaning the Name of your God. I am the Lord.

13. You shall not oppress your fellow. You shall not rob. The hired worker's wage shall not remain with you overnight until morning.

14. You shall not curse a deaf person. You shall not place a stumbling block before a blind person, and you shall fear your God. I am the Lord.

15. You shall commit no injustice in judgment; you shall not favor a poor person or respect a great man; you shall judge your fellow with righteousness.

16. You shall not go around as a gossipmonger amidst your people. You shall not stand by [the shedding of] your fellow's blood. I am the Lord.

17. You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your fellow, but you shall not bear a sin on his account.

18. You shall neither take revenge from nor bear a grudge against the members of your people; you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

In reading this text, one could say that it might be hard to find a text that is more different from the description of mindfulness meditation and the goals of the Institute of Jewish Spirituality. From the beginning “And the Lord Spoke to Moses” to the frequent refrain and last words quoted “I am the Lord,” the transcendent God of Israel makes the divine will known. Holiness begins with God and is brought to the people in the form of commands. It is issued from the outside, from the transcendent God in commandments that also stand outside the individual and are not found in his or her inner mind or soul. What the text suggests, is that holiness, in essence, is found in God and that humans can become holy, not by looking within, but by looking without to God. The statement “You shall be Holy, for I am Holy” suggests that being holy involves a process of imitatio Dei, of imitating God. And some rabbinic commentators (Sifra Kadoshim on 1:1) have made this explicit.

A significant contrast with spirituality is that holiness, as we find it in vaYikra, is not a matter for the individual alone. Indeed, vaYikra suggests quite the opposite; as Moses is instructed “Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel.” Being holy is then, in the main, a communal issue. Or perhaps, we can say it this way: Holiness requires a community in order to be achieved. From this text, we can also say that being holy is not a matter of contemplation; it is to be found as a result of actions, actions that take place in a social context. Respecting mother and father, observing Shabbat, properly bringing sacrifices, leaving gleanings for the poor, paying workers promptly, treating the deaf and blind rightly, rendering fair judgment in court, and finally living alongside the fellow-person without hatred or grudge, and, indeed, with love; these are the things that make one holy.

Comparing the practice of mindfulness meditation to the rule of holiness in vaYikra 19, one might rightly ask: Where is the self in all this? Indeed, instead of focusing on the “nature of mind,” instead of observing “how illusion is born and grows, how connected each moment is to the next and how transient is every thought, experience, conclusion,” vaYikra tells us that we are only holy when we focus on others.

Textual Reasoning with vaYikra19

When we began to study vaYikra 19 in our Textual Reasoning group, we noted one thing that was omitted. The holy act par excellence for Judaism is to study Torah. Thus, one of us said, that meditation, for the Torah, is first an act of textual study rather than a study of one’s mind. vaYikra 19:17–18 suggests that it is proper for the holy person to meditate on his relations with others. For example, figuring out how we are to rebuke a sinning friend might, indeed, require meditation. But it very well might be that in inserting the Torah text on rebuking a friend into our meditation we make that very act of meditation holy and we are then assisted by holy love when we carry out the act of rebuking.

One of our members suggested that we could take from Jewish spirituality the lesson of meditation and learn how to relate to our friends by meditating long and hard on these verses from vaYikra.

You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your fellow, but you shall not bear a sin on his account. You shall neither take revenge from nor bear a grudge against the members of your people; you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

Having studied these verses before our session, I remarked how they display an exquisite balance and deep psychological insight. The verses suggest the situation in which a brother or cousin or neighbor is committing a moral offense. What is your obligation here? Do you ignore it? Do you intervene? Should you be angry with him or her? If you must intervene, how do you do so? This is obviously a complex issue, and to assist you the Torah offers some guidelines. Do not hate your sinning brother, but still, you must rebuke him, for if not, you will incur the guilt of his sin. But when you rebuke him, do so not out of hate or revenge but only out of love.

The comment that one should meditate on verses 17 and 18 to learn how to relate to a sinning sibling or friend reminded another of us of an additional series of verses that we are commanded to meditate on—day and night, when we lie

down and rise up, when we sit at home and when we walk along the way. These are the words of the Shema: Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad, Hear O Israel, The Lord our God the Lord is One. As we considered the meditation that we are commanded to do on the words of the Shema, we discussed the extent to which meditation is part of the Jewish tradition or added to it from the outside. At this point someone recalled Isaac going out to the field to meditate (lasuah, see Bereshith 24:63) before meeting Rebecca. Another recalled Hanna's prayers to God and her silent prayers before Eli (Shemuel 1: 2,1:10). Still others mentioned the Psalms as a series of long meditations on the trials and joys of the spiritual life, and finally another person spoke of the Lurianic Kabbalistic practice of meditating on God's many names. At this point, some of us thought that meditation as a practice was both implicit in the Torah and further developed in Kabbalah. Yet others thought that meditation, particularly mindfulness meditation, was different from Jewish forms of meditation because the goal was to learn how to detach oneself from the worries of the world; Judaism seeks the opposite, to attach oneself to the world and to worry about its redemption at every moment. Thus, we had no definite conclusion on whether or not mindfulness meditation offers something of value to contemporary Jews that is not already available in Judaism.

The Commentary Material

In our next sessions, our Textual Reasoning group wanted to more deeply engage the text of vaYikra in the rabbinic tradition. We therefore focused on rabbinic commentaries. Here, we used commentary texts from a theological commentary on the Bible, "Reading the Bible for Meaning" that I am working on with Walter Herzberg, Professor of Bible and Parshanut at Jewish Theological Seminary. As we explored the commentary material, we found a wealth of interpretations that caused us to dwell on the meaning of verse 2: "You Shall be Holy, for I the Lord Your God am Holy." When we studied the commentaries, we followed a suggestion Herzberg had made to me that they could be divided into two basic groups, one led by Rashi and Ramban and another rooted in early midrashic literature, but best represented by Israel Salanter.

Commentators: Group I—Rashi, Ramban, and Meklenburg

Rashi's comment on the verse, "You Shall be Holy" took the discussion of holiness in a direction that most of us did not expect, especially as we were looking for a connection to spirituality. He inserts an element of self-restriction, especially in the area of sexual desire. His comments on this verse are as follows. To be holy, "separate yourselves from sexual immorality and from sin. For wherever you find

restriction of sexual immorality [mentioned in the Torah], you find holiness [juxtaposed with it].” Rashi’s interpretation follows one of his typical interpretive moves—to place the verse in its textual context. His interpretation is then based on juxtaposing the commandment to be holy with the multiple restrictions on incest and other prohibited sexual relations in the chapter (18) that immediately precedes our chapter. Rashi seems to reason that since the previous chapter deals with prohibited sexual relations and the injunction to be holy follows immediately thereafter, holiness must have something to do with sexual restrictions.

As we discussed Rashi, I brought up the issue of purity in relation to holiness. Rashi brings up sexual purity laws related to permissible partners and appropriate times for sexual relations, taharat mishpaha. But we could also speak of all the laws of purity and impurity—those related to dietary practices, avoidance of blood and dead bodies, and the prohibitions and practices related to the bringing of sacrifices. This brought us to the recognition that holiness in Torah is a broader category than spirituality, including the distinction pure and impure and encompassing the larger categorizations of animals, rules of purification from sin, and whole series of practices that regulate marriage, sex, diet, and death. Unlike spirituality, which might come and go and can be limited to certain special practices, the holy must be inserted into all aspects of life. When placed in the larger context of the whole book of vaYikra and the larger system of halakha that emerges from the Torah, becoming holy can be seen as the goal of all of Judaism!

Ramban, indeed, sees the larger meaning of holiness, and he specifically takes on Rashi’s discussion of holiness relating to sexual prohibitions and radically expands it so that holiness comes to take on a kind of ascetic quality:

In my opinion, this abstinence does not refer only to restraint from acts of [sexual] immorality as the Rabbi [Rashi] wrote … The meaning is as follows: The Torah has admonished us against immorality and forbidden foods, but permitted sexual intercourse between man and his wife, and the eating of meat and wine. If so, a man of desire could consider this to be a permission to be passionately addicted to sexual intercourse with his wife or many wives, and be among winebibbers, among gluttonous eaters of flesh, and speak freely all profanities. This is so because these prohibitions have not been [expressly] mentioned in the Torah. Given this, a man could become a sordid person with the permission of the Torah (naval birshut haTorah)! Therefore, after having listed the matters that He prohibited altogether, the Torah followed them up by a general command that we practice moderation even in matters which are permitted…[Ramban Commentary

on vaYikra 19, Chavel translation, emphasis mine]

This comment of Ramban indicates that he agrees with Rashi on two counts—that our understanding of holiness is based on thejuxtaposition to the previous chapter, and that holiness itself is a matter of separation, restraint, abstinence. However, the type of restraint or separation that Ramban suggests is very different from Rashi. For Rashi, holiness is attained by separating oneself from that which is explicitly forbidden by the Torah. According to Ramban, holiness involves going one step further—separating oneself from that which is permitted, and not indulging in excesses. For as Ramban states, the person who overindulges in technically permitted behavior is a naval birshut haTorah, a "sordid person with the permission of the Torah." Ramban appears to get this ascetic view of holiness from the Talmud (Yebamoth 20a). He also mentions that we have a model of ascetic holiness in the figure of the Nazarite in the Torah. For the Nazir is separated from the general population and takes on ascetic practices e.g. refusing alcoholic drink, not cutting his hair and avoiding contact with the dead.

One of us noted that Ramban's notion of holiness suggests that vaYikra 19:2 "You shall be holy" is not the preface to the series of commands that follow it (i.e., to respect parents, observe Shabbat, and so forth) but a separate commandment on its own that can be summarized as "separate yourself not only from what is prohibited, but also from what is permitted!" This means that holiness requires Israel to go beyond the letter of the law to understand its deeper purposes. This deeper purpose is to refine and elevate Jews, to free them from sordid obedience to physical desires of all sorts so that they approach the spiritual holiness of God. With his remarks, Ramban seems to be inserting an element of elitism along with asceticism to the understanding of holiness. He suggests that being holy requires one to rise above what the laws require by restricting oneself even in the realm of what is permitted by God.

Rabbi Jacob Zvi Meklenburg (1785–1865), the author of the commentary called the haKetav ve-haKabbalah, takes matters even further. He suggests that restraint from that which is permitted is not truly holiness, but is rather one level lower. True holiness is attained by an element of perishut described in the classic midrashic commentary on vaYikra called the Sifra. Here, one achieves holiness by separating oneself emotionally when performing commandments that involve physical pleasure. Meklenburg describes the ideal of these holy people as follows. They "indulge in sex exclusively for the purpose of procreation; they eat well on Shabbat only to fulfill the commandment of honoring the Sabbath. They do not

indulge in pleasures per se but only as a product of activities designed for a loftier purpose (haKetav ve-haKabbalah on vaYikra 19:2 v.4 Eliahu Munk translation). Therefore, Meklenburg speaks of a level of intellectual or emotional discipline that leads to a form of restraint and separation not explicitly mentioned by Ramban.

As we discussed the positions of Rashi, Ramban, and Meklenburg on holiness, which include some obvious ascetic dimensions, a division developed in our group on whether this was closer or further from notions of contemporary spirituality. On the one hand, Eastern spiritual disciplines and values of non-materialism have some resonance with the ascetic interpretation of holiness of our commentators. Meklenburg's sense that one should "separate oneself from physical pleasure" even when doing a mitzvah suggested to some that one needs to develop a form of self-control of the type that meditation could help cultivate. We know that there are ascetic values of Buddhist monks, and these very well might have parallels to rabbinic asceticism and to its further developments in Kabbalistic practices.

For others in our group, learning to do miztvoth solely to "fulfill the commandment of the Creator" is a different form of discipline than the one suggested by Eastern meditation since rabbinic practice requires the acknowledgement of God as creator and commander. Doing a mitzvah for the sake of God alone or because God commanded it is different from meditating for the sake of release from all attachments to physical realities.

Commentators: Group II: Israel Salanter, Hatam Sofer, Haim Benattar

While the commentators above all link the interpretation of "holiness" to the verses in vaYikra 18, which precede the exhortation to be holy, another group of commentators base their interpretations on the verses that follow the exhortation to be holy. These are the verses with laws to respect parents, observe the Sabbath, care for the poor and the handicapped, and so forth. The view that all of the commandments in vaYikra 19 supply something of a rule for the holy life is also found among the various midrashim in Sifra (10:2); but Israel Salanter (1810–1883), the great Lithuanian Mussar scholar, expands this position. He explicitly rejects the position of Rashi and Ramban. He admits that it is commonly "accepted in the [Jewish] world to associate the holy person with one who is great in Torah and Fear (of God)." However, he argues "that according to hazal there is another aspect to holiness—how one deals in money matters." Referring to vaYikra 19 he says, it "establishes that the conditions for holiness are: Do not steal, do not lie, you shall not do an injustice in judgment." He emphasizes that these are laws related to daily interaction in "commerce, work, and interpersonal

relations."[i] He supports his reading by noting that verse 2 links the command to be holy to God's being holy: "You shall be holy for I, the Lord, your God, am holy." But in his interpretation, this is done to make a distinction and not a connection between God and humans. "I God am holy, so to speak, in heaven, so if I require holiness of you, my intent is that you be holy in earthly, material matters." Thus, Rabbi Salanter engages a polemic against a notion of holiness that is oriented solely toward heaven in favor of an earthly holiness that is oriented to relations between human and fellow human.

Hatam Sofer (1762–1839, Moses [Schreiber] Sofer)takes a similar approach to R. Salanter, highlighting the importance of involvement with people to holiness. He, however, takes the exhortation to be holy in a somewhat different direction by emphasizing the importance of communal involvement. He states that the holiness in our verse is "not holiness of separation and the Nazirite, but rather … holiness within the community and involvement with people."[ii] He derives this interpretation from the important phrase in vaYikra 19:1 (which, by the way, occurs only once is the entire book of vaYikra). "Speak to the entire community of the children of Israel." He believes that the words "entire community" signal that holiness must be sought in and through relations in the community and not outside it in some act of separation from the community.

The Hatam Sofer is not the only commentator who wonders why Moses is commanded to speak to the "entire community." R Haim Benattar (1696–1743) in his Ohr haHayyim comments on this as well. However, he sees the fact that Moses addresses the entire community as a specific challenge to some of the elitist notions of holiness. He says that the Torah includes the words "the entire community" in order to teach us that "this commandment that He commanded 'you shall be holy' is a commandment that can be attained by each and every person… for there is no radical distinction among the people Israel that would preclude one from this achievement." (Ohr haHayyim, my translation).

In this second group of commentators, our study group agreed that we see a real distinction between the search for spirituality and the search for holiness. Rabbi Salanter stresses that holiness is not really about the spiritual but the material dimension of life. For him, holiness is about how we deal with money! We see this theme carried forward in the comments of Hatam Sofer.

One of our members summarized this second group of commentators as saying something like this. 'It is easy to be holy if you excuse yourself from the community, retreat from humanity, and remain silent. The real challenge is to be holy within the community, to preserve your holiness through relations with

others and within the social world.’

I noted that if we put together the positions of the first and second groups of commentators, we actually have the traditional view that holiness requires both good relations of humans to God, bein adam laMakom and good relations of humans to humans, bein adam leHaveiro. As Jacob Milgram has argued in his great three-volume Anchor commentary on the book of vaYikra, holiness is a complex goal that includes both proper ritual and ethical practices that might take a life-time to achieve. As our group ended our discussions, a number of participants reiterated that it was not really fair to just focus on vaYikra as the point of comparison to the statements of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. They noted that Judaism has a well established spiritual tradition grounded in the texts of the Kabbalah and of the various sects of the Hassidim. Had we chosen a text from the Zohar, or a Hassidic text such as the Sefat Emet or the Tanya or, even better, had we looked for manuals of Hassidic prayer and meditation practices, we would find far more points of contact.

Yet others in the group noted Rashi’s words that, in vaYikra 19, we had most of the “essence of the Torah” and that therefore vaYikra provides the foundations of the Jewish holy life that must be established first before Kabbalistic or Hassidic spiritual practices are developed. Where the Institute of Jewish Spirituality mentions that meditation is their “core practice,” it could never be seen as the core practice of Judaism. Instead, what we did together, study Torah, and what the text we studied suggested, fulfilling the will of God in doing mitzvoth, are the core practices of Judaism. Also, I said that the essentially communal nature of holiness, that holiness is constituted in a community, within a communal context and requires a community, is another vital point of difference with the quest for spirituality which seems to be a mainly individual search. Perhaps, we should consider meditation, like the tradition of Kabbalah in Judaism, as something that can be added to the life of mitzvoth to enhance and develop its spiritual dimensions more explicitly. But this would mean that meditation could never become a core practice to replace mitzvoth.

Another participant wanted to insist, before we closed our study session, that there seems to be a form of Jewish spirituality that specifically fulfills one of the Institute of Jewish Spirituality’s main stated goals: the goal of relaxing the body and concentrating the mind on the present so that one can just “be” in the face of our culture’s unrelenting pressure to “do.” This goal, she suggested, was the exact objective of Shabbat! What better way to “be” and not “do” than enjoying an afternoon of Shabbat rest? Indeed, there is perhaps no better way to slow time

down than by being in a community where everyone stops working, stops driving cars, stops turning on and off electrical devices, and attends only to God, family, friends, Torah, and tefilla. This is a kind of joint communal holy practice that represents the unique spirituality of Judaism—a combination of bodily and spiritual revitalization where an entire community works together to create an ideal time and space where the community is allowed to “taste” and “glimpse” life redeemed.

It might very well be that contemporary spiritual practices have something to contribute to Judaism by helping remind us of what we already have. The contemporary search for spirituality recalls the old Jewish story of the man who searched long and far to find a treasure of riches only to discover that the treasure was there all along buried under his own house.