

When Yom Kippur day begins winding down toward mid- or late afternoon tomorrow, most of us will be experiencing pangs of hunger, which is to be expected after not having eaten in twenty or so hours. This is a day of confessing our sins, asking God for forgiveness, and spending long hours at prayer in the synagogue, but for many of us, the first association the holiday evokes is fasting. In the *unetaneh tokef* prayer, the day is referred to as *yom tzom kippur*, the day of the **fast** of atonement. Fasting is intended as a form of self-affliction, an expression of remorse or contrition for the sins we have committed. Later Jewish tradition, however, emphasized an additional motif for fasting: on Yom Kippur we become like angels, beings who are entirely spiritual in their nature and therefore have no need for food. The Day of Atonement becomes an occasion on which we devote ourselves totally to the spiritual dimension of our existence.

It is, thus, appropriate to speak tonight of this spiritual dimension, and it is timely as well, because if Jews (outside of the precincts of Orthodoxy) are to survive as a communal religious and cultural tradition in the open and free society that is contemporary America, it is necessary for us to find ways of adapting our heritage to our time and place, so that we can respond to people's thirst for spirituality and for a sense of community and belonging. What worked in earlier times to assure the continuity of Jewish life may no longer be as effective for us. We are now several generations removed from the great era of East European Jewish immigration to the New World. The pull of ethnic memory after an interval of a hundred years since the heyday of Ellis Island and the Lower East Side will not be sufficient to sustain Jewish loyalty and guarantee Jewish survival. Our young people have no memory of immigrant grandparents. And many of the most loyal and dedicated members of our congregations are Jews by choice, who have no personal family ties to or feelings of nostalgia for the ethnic culture that Polish and Russian Jews brought to America. Some seventy years after the liberation of the concentration camps and the establishment of Israel, the potency of the American Jewish civil religion of Holocaust and rebirth may also be weakening.

Spirituality is a topic with which Jews have often been uncomfortable. The very word for some sounds vaguely Christian, too touchy-feely or excessively other-worldly. My Seminary training was academic and intellectual, focusing on the study of texts – Scripture, Talmud and codes of Jewish law – with some practical instruction in pastoral psychiatry, homiletics (that is,

sermon writing) and the ins and outs of conducting services and life cycle ceremonies. Rabbi Abraham Heschel was the sole faculty member during my time who spoke about *kavvana*, the quality of inner devotion in prayer and about the way that Judaism could enrich the individual's inner life. We students read Gershom Scholem's classic work, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, but I recall no discussions about how the mystical traditions of Judaism could be integrated into contemporary Jewish religious belief and practice.

A disclaimer is in order. While I believe in the necessity of a revival of Jewish spirituality, I, perhaps because of the nature of my rabbinic training or because of the era in which I came of age, am hardly the person to take the lead in this endeavor. Several years ago, Nancy and I attended our nephew Isaac's bar mitzvah which took place at a very innovative and active Jewish religious fellowship (congregation would not quite be the right word) in California. The Shabbat eve service featured a ten-piece band, and the rabbi, a thoughtful and deeply spiritual woman (who has been listed as one of the fifty most influential rabbis in America) led as part of the worship an extended time of meditation. While appreciative of the way that the meditation heightened for me the experience of Shabbat rest and peace, I remember thinking, "this is not something I could do in my congregation, not because of the congregation, but because I would not feel genuine or authentic trying to lead it."

Fortunately, I do have a guide in matters of Jewish spirituality, whose works have assisted me in understanding what exactly spirituality entails and the complexities of adapting it to a Jewish context and practicing it within the parameters of Jewish tradition. Rabbi Arthur Green was an upper-classman at the Seminary when I entered as a freshman and was a personal student of Abraham Heschel. He was a founder of the pioneer Jewish religious fellowship, Chavurat Shalom in Boston and went on to an illustrious academic career at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Seminary, at Brandeis University and at the rabbinical school established by Boston Hebrew College. Over the years I have seen him in person only once, at a symposium held at Spertus College in Chicago, but I have had the opportunity to read some of his writings that aim at fashioning a contemporary Jewish spirituality that is compatible with modern thought. I would characterize him not as a New Age guru but as a scholar and theologian. His theology, which recognizes the challenges to traditional belief posed by the

theory of evolution and by Biblical criticism, would doubtless be deemed radical by traditionalists, but he writes with erudition and style and argues his case cogently.

The prospects for a vibrant Jewish religious and cultural life outside of Israel and outside of the Orthodox community can seem dismaying at times. The 1960's with the resurgence of Jewish ethnic pride, the growth of the *chavurah* movement, the establishment of chairs of Jewish studies on almost every major campus, and the flourishing of a Jewish counter-culture exemplified by the popular Jewish Catalogue series seemed to portend a Jewish renaissance. Rabbi Green wonders, however, whether that decade was but a brief and passing moment and whether the Jewish renaissance that was so enthusiastically welcomed at the time was even then limited to a small and elite group within American Jewry. Certainly, that conclusion might be warranted by the findings of the most recent Pew Research population survey of American Jews, which reveal growing numbers among our younger generation who are "Jews of no religion" and but a small percentage among that group who affiliate with a synagogue. We have failed to transmit to a large percentage of our young people more than a cursory and superficial acquaintance with the depth and richness of their Jewish legacy.

Despite the reluctance on the part of the young to participate in organized and institutional religion, there is, as I mentioned, a yearning for community, for a sense of belonging and for spirituality. Spirituality, admittedly, is not the same thing as religion. It can be accessed within many different faith traditions, both Eastern and Western, as well as through totally non-religious venues. But the thirst and the yearning do provide an opportunity for the synagogue to re-invent itself and make itself relevant and appealing to the young. Rabbi Green attributes the interest in spirituality to a number of factors. In the modern age, we are acutely aware of just how precarious life is. Humankind since 1945 has been in possession of weapons capable of destroying the entire world, and ecological disaster certainly looms in the future for many areas of the globe, unless concerted effort is made by the family of nations to prevent it. Here in America we live in an affluent society, and many of us have enjoyed the blessings of material success, but we have learned that wealth and professional achievement alone do not guarantee us happiness and do not render us immune to the adversity and misfortune that are part of the human condition. We rely on science and technology to provide us with comfort and convenience and to enable us and all humankind to lead lives of dignity and fulfillment, free

from want and need, free from the scourges of hunger and disease. And yet we know that science cannot be a value in and of itself, that it is a tool for the enhancement of life that can be as easily misused and applied for the purpose of harming and exploiting as readily as it is used to benefit. We look for something that transcends the material, something larger than the individual self, something that is enduring, indeed eternal, and something that anchors us in a sense of ethical obligation.

Rabbi Green's pamphlet on the possibilities of a modern Jewish spirituality is titled *Restoring the Aleph*. Aleph, of course, is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet; it is also in Hebrew grammar the prefix used to indicate the first-person singular in the future tense. In moments of doubt, we question whether there is a future for humankind, and we wonder as well whether our Jewish tradition has a future. To speak of restoring the Aleph is to articulate a sense of hope, of optimism regarding the Jewish future and the future of humanity.

Young Jews, then, may be open to a renewed and re-energized Jewish spirituality. This doesn't mean that any significant number of them would be willing to commit to a totally observant Jewish lifestyle or to embrace the isolation from the broader culture that that entails. But as Heschel once wrote, leading a Jewish life is not a matter of all or nothing. Nobody, as Heschel said, fully succeeds in observing the most basic of *mitzvot*, loving one's neighbor as oneself.

Spirituality as Rabbi Green, based on the Jewish mystical tradition, defines it means an openness and receptivity to inner experience. Prayer, in other words, is more than reciting or singing the words in the *siddur* or *machzor*. Our thoughts, our feelings, and our consciousness are engaged as well. We have a sense of the unity and wholeness of Being, of all that is, and an awareness of being surrounded and embraced by God's Presence. We feel ourselves connected to God and to the totality of existence in all of its vastness and diversity. Or as Rabbi Green expresses it, our own self is linked to God, the Self of the universe, and to all other selves. Jewish spirituality, therefore, has an ethical component. If we feel ourselves connected to others and to the wholeness of being, we are obliged to act toward them with respect, concern and compassion. This entails as well a sensitivity to nature and a concern for the sustainability of our planet and the conservation of its natural resources. We learn a sense of gratitude for life itself and for our connection to the whole, gratitude that is expressed in acts of generosity and giving back.

Mysticism can foster an elitism, a disdain for those who have not been graced with mystical experience or have not as yet developed a rich inner life, and a desire to focus on one's own soul and evade the routines and responsibilities of day to day life. But a proper Jewish spirituality regards such feelings and desires as pitfalls and advocates not isolation but involvement in and service to the community. That's why in times past, knowledge of mystical lore was reserved for those who were of mature age, anchored in the responsibilities of family and community, and committed to the observance of *mitzvot*.

Jews have sought and found spirituality in the teachings and rituals of other religious traditions, particularly those of India and the Far East. There are differences that set spiritual traditions apart from one another as well as commonalities that are shared among them. Jewish spirituality, for reasons that Rabbi Green enumerates, is a demanding and difficult one. As practiced over the generations it requires regularity and discipline. This is true of other religions as well. In spiritual practice as in human life in general there are peaks and valleys, moments of heightened awareness and spiritual bliss and enlightenment as well as times of boredom and humdrum routine. We are taught that without the valleys, we would be unable to appreciate the peaks, without the discipline we would not have the sensitivity to the presence of the sacred. Jewish spirituality, moreover, is linked to a religious culture and to a language (Hebrew) that requires intensive study. Not all of the concepts associated with the Jewish spiritual tradition are readily translatable. In an era where the individual and his/her needs and desires are given free rein and paramount importance, Judaism's spirituality is focused on the communal. And as if all of that were not enough, Rabbi Green notes that there is never a shortage of people in the Jewish community who are ready to tell you that you're doing it all wrong and that the way you're practicing Judaism is not authentic. We would do well to disregard such voices and seek our own path to the life of the spirit. Finally, the language of Jewish prayer abounds in images and metaphors that are either far removed from our own experience and sensibility or theologically questionable. Rabbi Green does not advocate jettisoning the traditional imagery but calls instead for supplementing it with prayer language that speaks of God within rather than above and that assigns a greater and more active role to humanity in discovering the Divine Presence and in bringing about redemption.

A recent article in *The Atlantic* dealt with an interesting phenomenon, what the writer labelled “the commodification of Orthodox Judaism.” Both in Israel and in the United States, Jews and sometimes non-Jews are seeking opportunities to observe or participate in rituals of Jewish religious life not on an ongoing or recurring basis but as a one-time experience. Thus, one might take a tour of Chasidic prayer houses in an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Jerusalem, immerse in a *mikveh*, or pay to participate in a Shabbat meal or to have one catered in the home for one’s circle of friends. On the positive side, this may reflect the search and yearning for the spiritual, of which we have been speaking. The Shabbat meal at the end of the work week in particular is an enjoyable, time-honored and effective way of winding down from the stress of the workplace and the anxieties we encounter there. It is also a way of creating, at least for a few hours, a sense of community and experiencing human contact that is face-to-face and not based on utilitarian considerations. Orthodox Jewish rituals or venues are often the ones that are sought out, because they are presumed to be more authentic and certainly appear more exotic to the non-observant. On the negative side of the ledger, the phenomenon at its most superficial can seem like religious tourism. When you experience religious rituals as “one-off” happenings, it is certainly better than never experiencing them at all and having no understanding of what they are about, but you are missing the regularity and discipline to which I alluded and, unless you participate in Shabbat meals regularly and with the same group of people, creating a stable and enduring sense of community will be difficult.

On a more serious level, there have been some noteworthy attempts to respond to the quest for Jewish spirituality outside the framework of regular, mainstream denominational synagogues; these have taken the form of so-called independent *minyanim*, which exist in most larger Jewish communities; they are characterized as being not “counter-cultural” (as in the 1960’s) but sub-cultural and have in many cases been funded in part by mainstream organizations – synagogues and Jewish Federations. Some of the features common to these independent *minyanim* include a much younger age demographic, egalitarian worship, the sharing of Shabbat meals, an emphasis on music (particularly, instrumental music) as part of services, a sense of inclusiveness and welcoming to Jews of diverse racial backgrounds and sexual orientations, and a voluntary dues structure. From what I have read, many of these groups have been highly successful in attracting the young, connecting them to Jewish spirituality and

creating a sense of community. Doubtless, there is much that the mainstream denominational synagogue can learn from these independent endeavors.

Rabbi Green at the conclusion of *Restoring the Aleph* grapples with the question of why someone searching for spirituality would choose to commit to a tradition as rigorous and demanding as Judaism. He argues that Judaism has a place within the handful of truly great religious traditions that are part of humankind's cultural heritage and that, among that group, it has the smallest numbers because of the persecution Jews have suffered over the ages and because of the attrition we've experienced through assimilation during the last two centuries. I accept the premise but am not sure that it would necessarily create a sense of obligation on anyone's part, given the individualism that is so prevalent in our time. Perhaps more persuasively, Rabbi Green notes that Jewish tradition has ample resources for the practice of meditation and contemplation and a rich and rewarding set of rituals and symbols that express our sense of the spiritual in a way that engages our bodies, our minds, and our emotions.

Tonight and tomorrow we will be focused on the spiritual. In our worship may we sense the presence of God within us, and may our oneness with the Divine and with the wholeness of all being inspire us on this Day of Atonement to turn away from sin and from all that estranges us from God and from each other.

