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BRINGING SPIRITUALITY INTO THE SYNAGOGUE*

Rabbi Avraham Weiss

Mark was laying absolutely still, a tracheotomy tube in his throat, his artificial feet extending just beyond his blanket. It was the eve of Pesach. “Which holiday do you like best?” he haltingly asked me. “*Rosh ha-Shanah* is a favorite,” I replied, “as it celebrates the creation of the world.” “For me,” Mark responded, “every morning I wake up is *Rosh ha-Shanah*.” And then, he started to sing *Dayenu*, the Seder song in which we thank God for everything He has given us. As I joined in singing the verses of *Dayenu*, Mark, with a precious twinkle in his eyes, softly called out “amen,” as if I had recited the morning *birkhot ha-shahar* blessings of renewal. I leaned over and kissed his forehead and said, “Thank you for saving my soul.” As I stepped away to leave, Mark whispered, “Every moment, every moment.”

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The purpose of this paper is to offer a particular approach to spirituality. There are other models. Still, it is an understanding that I have found to be of meaning, and one steeped in Jewish sources. We will analyze spirituality by first defining the term; second, offering a pathway to achieve spirituality; third, suggesting ways to bring spirituality into synagogue; finally, outlining what rabbis need to do to bring spirituality into their communities.

DEFINITION

My working definition is rather simple. Spirituality means to transcend the self to feel the presence of God. That is, spirituality involves going beyond, with God playing an instrumental role in the process.

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THE PATHWAY

How is spirituality achieved? In broad terms, it involves two distinct stages. It begins with a counter-intuitive idea. Many people associate spirituality with an upward movement, a reaching up toward God. I would like to suggest the opposite: spirituality is triggered not by reaching upward but by reaching inward.

The idea that spirituality is attained by moving inward is found in the first sacrifice accepted in the Torah. Sacrifices relate to spiritually connecting with God. After Cain's sacrifice is rejected, the Torah states: "*ve-Hevel heivi gam hu.*" (Gen. 4:4) Normatively this is understood to mean that Abel, like Cain, brought a sacrifice. The *Sefat Emet*, R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger, offers an alternative reading. Abel brought *gam hu*, also himself—he reached deep into his soul and brought his true inner essence. As a consequence, his sacrifice, unlike Cain's, was accepted. In the words of *Sefat Emet*:¹ "*Gam hu: gam et atzmo [et ha-ani she-lo] im ha-korban, ve-lakhen nitkabel lifnei Hashem Yitbarekh—Abel brought himself [his inner I] with the sacrifice and, therefore, it was accepted before the Lord, may He be blessed.*"

From this perspective, spirituality begins by reaching inward to become fully conscious of the *I*, and, by extension, the moment the *I* is experiencing. There are many who believe that spirituality is an out-of-body experience. The opposite may be true. Spirituality is being fully involved, completely in the moment.

Judaism is not unique in this formulation of spirituality. It differs in its consequences. 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. This is much like a young woman who recently told me that, as a musician, her spirituality surfaces when listening to a symphony orchestra. The moment, she said, "is so awesome, everything stands still; I lose my sense of self."

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. Ted Williams, arguably the greatest hitter in baseball, described this phenomenon. Asked what his secret to hitting was, he said, as the pitcher threw the ball even at speeds close to one hundred miles per hour, everything for him stopped. He could literally see the seams of the ball. That, for Williams, was, I believe, a spiritual moment. Everything came to a halt. It was only Williams and the ball.

In Judaism, we find echoes of these positions, from Chabad's *bitul ha-yeshb* to Slobodka's *ve-tehasreihu me'at me-Elokim*. However, our critical contribution is

¹ *Sefat Emet, Parashat Bereshit, s.v. be-sefer Kol Simbah.*

that consciousness of moment can be a synthesis of these positions, and, 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 awareness of the presence of God and God's role in bringing about, nurturing, and giving meaning to the particular experience.

This is apparent when taking Cain's offering a step further. *Gam hu* may refer to one's inner Godliness. After crossing the sea the Jewish people call out: "*Zeh Eli ve-anveihu*—this is my God and I will glorify Him." (Ex. 15:2) Here the Jews proclaim that their relationship to God is one of *anveihu*, a compound of *ani* and *hu*. In the spiritual experience, I feel the mystery of the *Hu*, the Other, who is always near me and in me. From this perspective *ve-Hevel heivi gam hu* means the bringing not only of the inner essence of man or woman, but the *Hu*, the inner part of God in each of us. Consciousness of moment is a transcendent movement when we reach beyond—not up, but in—tapping into one's Godliness which is crucial to feeling the inner moment.

This, I believe, is the deeper meaning of *kavannah la-tzeit bah*, the conscious intent required before performing a *mitzvah*, that one does the *mitzvah* to fulfill God's command, *le-kayeim ba-zeh ka'asher tzivah Hashem*.² In the words of *Sefat Emet*: "*Asiyot ha-tzivuy yoter mekubal me-ta'am ha-metzuvah*—the doing of the commandment is more acceptable by reason of the Commander."³ Not only is awareness of God required before a *mitzvah's* performance, but, as Rav Chaim of Brisk adds, in the context of prayer, it is important to recognize that one stands before God while performing the *mitzvah*.⁴ Although he makes this an imperative in prayer, it is sound advice for all *mitzvot*. Thus, *halakhah* serves as a foundation for the spiritual experience. Often, *halakhah* is seen as constricting, limiting one's spirituality; we become so involved in the minutiae of *halakhah* that it blocks our connection to God. Nothing could be further from the truth. *Halakhah* is the base, giving wings to the spiritual moment, helping us to connect to God Himself.

Ritual, especially ritual associated with rites of passage, is an example of how spirituality can be experienced by taking cognizance of the moment. It is not the time to give lengthy impersonal *divrei Torah*. Rather, the Torah presented should be a very brief segue for blessings, and for encouraging "sharing," where the principals, together with family and friends, offer personal reflections about what this moment 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. It is spiritually uplifting to read after the *sheva berakhot* under the *huppah*, words of blessing

² *Mishnah Berurah, Orach Hayim* 60:7.

³ *Sefat Emet*, first comment on *Parashat Abrei Mot*, s.v. *be-Rashi*.

⁴ *Hidushei Rav Hayim ha-Levi, Hilkhos Tefilah* 4:1.

that bride and groom have written to each other. The *mesader kiddushin* can then ask for a moment of silence wherein all present can offer their blessings to bride and groom. Or, at the last *kaddish* recited for one's beloved, it is meaningful to have the mourner offer a personal reflection about the person for whom her or she has said the *kaddish*.

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 a *Yizkor* of spiritual depth, where one is encouraged to be in dialogue with the departed, may raise all kinds of issues about one's relationship to the deceased.

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, *halakhah* may show the way. While *halakhah* is often viewed as blocking spirituality, it *should* do the reverse—it should, in fact, foster consciousness of moment. For example, the Mishnah which declares that a groom should not recite *Shema* on his wedding night is based on the principle that *ha-osek be-mitzvah patur min ha-mitzvah*. Bride and groom should be so immersed in the moment that even if they could find time to say *Shema*, they should not.⁵ Similarly, the mourner may be prohibited from learning Torah so that he or she fully feels the emotions of *shivah* and does not escape into the *yam shel Torah*.⁶

Something extraordinary occurs here. Once engaged in the first stage of spirituality, and moving inward, and feeling consciousness of moment, we are catapulted to the second stage, in which we are able to reach great heights. Joseph Ibn Saddiq (twelfth-century Spain) echoes this idea. He writes, "by man knowing his own soul, he will know the spiritual world from which he can attain some knowledge of the Creator, as it is written, 'From my flesh I shall perceive God.'" (Job 19:26)⁷ A century later, Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera (also of Spain) expanded on this idea:

They said that whoever knows his soul knows his Creator, and whoever is ignorant of knowing his soul is all the more ignorant of knowing his Creator. How can one believe that a person is wise concerning

⁵ *Mishnah Berakhot*, 2:5.

⁶ *Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah*, 384:1.

⁷ *Ha-Olam ha-Katan*, translation by S. Horovitz.

something else when he is ignorant concerning himself? And so it was written in the Temple of the Ascetics: “Know yourself, man, and you will know your Creator.” Therefore, they said that the knowledge of the soul is prior to the knowledge of God, and that is the most excellent knowledge after the knowledge of God.”⁸

In the end, spirituality means kindling the spark of God in each human being. Once kindled, our souls can soar to connect to the infinite God and to the godliness in our fellow person. Spirituality is therefore achieved in two stages: first, through an inward focus, and then, by moving upward and outward. Hence my definition: Spirituality means transcending the self to feel the presence of God.

BRINGING SPIRITUALITY INTO SYNAGOGUE

This definition and approach to spirituality yields several teachings relative to bringing spirituality into synagogue, revolving around the three Hebrew terms for synagogue—*Beit Tefillah*, *Beit Knesset* and *Beit Midrash*. These terms encapsulate the three directions in which spirituality moves.

BEIT TEFILLAH

As a *Beit Tefillah*, a synagogue is a place where we reach inward through prayer, traversing beyond the self to touch the Divine. R. Avraham Yitzchak ha-Kohen Kook makes this point in his introduction to his siddur, *Olat Re'iyah*: “*Hatefillah milematah le-ma'alab*—Prayer rises from down below to high above.” “*Ve-khol ma she-nered yoter le-tokh tehom penimiyut nafsheinu . . . henehnu yekholim la'amod be-kavim yoter meduyakim et aliyoteinu be-mahalakh hatefillah*—The more we penetrate to the recesses in the inner regions of our soul, the greater the accuracy with which we shall be able to measure the extent of our ascent during the progress of our prayers.”

It is by no means easy to accomplish this spiritual state in a synagogue setting. Synagogues are often caught up in form and structure, in buildings, in institutional bureaucracy, shul politics, and perfunctory observance—in the external rather than the internal. But spirituality in synagogue means going beyond, going deeper within to touch God, in others and ourselves.

How can we do this? Through preparatory focus in the spirit of “*basidim harishonim hayu shohin sha'ah abat u-mitpallelin*—The pious people of old [who] would meditate an hour before praying.” (*Berakhot* 30b) Such practice helps make the structured *tefillah* more meaningful. *Kavanot* can set the spiritual tone for a specific prayer. A quick sentence right before a recitation of a *tefillah* can serve as a point of inspiration. For example, before *Lekhab Dodi*, congregants

⁸ *Sefer ha-Nefesh*, translation by R. Jospe.

can be encouraged to consider contemplating Shabbat in Yerushalayim when singing “*mikdash melekh*.” Or, before *Ashrei*, a rabbi can point to the genocide in Darfur and suggest that it be pondered when reciting “*Somekh Adonai le-khol ha-nofelim ve-zokef le-khol ha-kefufim*—the Lord supports all the fallen ones, and straightens all the bent.” Or it could be pointed out that *hazarat ha-shatz* is no less than a *Shemoneh Esrei*, but while the silent *Amidah* is focused on the individual, the repetition focuses on the community. Hence, during the repetition, people should concentrate on communal concerns and if possible, remain standing, as it is another *Amidah*.

Also, through movement, we can attain a special emotional and mental state necessary for prayer. This may explain the underlying reason we take three steps back before the *Amidah*, the ultimate prayer, and then move forward. When we take these steps back, we are in effect moving inward, entering our own space, our own consciousness of moment. In that setting we appropriately recite “*Hashem sefatai tiftah u-fi yagid tehilatekha*—My Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Your praise.” Similarly, other movements and postures in prayer—whether standing, sitting, falling on our faces, lifting our hands, swaying, and so on—prepare us for different moods the *tefillah* attempts to evoke.

In addition, it is through song that is participatory and soulful, rather than a musical performance in which congregants become mere spectators that we can achieve heights of spirituality. It is song that expresses our deepest emotions and longings, that binds community and connects earth and heaven. When possible, we may experiment with live music for *havdalah* or on Sunday *Rosh Hodesh*, or *Hanukkah*.

And, of course, through silence, private meditation, and reflection, we can reach deeply inward. The standardized words of prayer are not meant to limit our thoughts, but to inspire spontaneous feelings that take us beyond.⁹ This may be enhanced by praying outdoors in the framework of R. Shemuel ben Nahmeini, who declares that “[the three prayer services] correspond to the three times that the day visibly changes over [God’s] creatures—*ke-neged sheloshah pe’amim she-hayom mishtaneh al ha-beriyot*.” (*Yerushalmi, Berakhot* 4:1) As *Mishneh Berurah* notes, “*Ke-she-nitbatelah kavanato yisah einav la-shamayim le-orer ha-kavanah*—when one loses *kavanah*, lift the eyes heavenward to awaken *kavanah*.”¹⁰

BEIT KNESSET

Beit Knesset, a house of gathering, is where all come together. Here lies the “outward” ingredient of spirituality—the readiness to embrace everyone, and es-

⁹ This is very much in the spirit of the *halakhah*, “*im ratzah le-hosif be-khol berakhah me-ha-emitza’iot . . . mosif*—if one wishes to add to any of the middle blessings . . . one may add.” See *Shulkhan Arukh, Orach Hayim* 119:1.

¹⁰ *Mishnah Berurah, Orach Hayim*, 90:8.

pecially those in need. The test of spirituality in synagogue is not how the community receives the most powerful, but how it welcomes the most vulnerable.

Rambam makes this point when he codifies that on Purim it is preferable for a person to be liberal with his or her donations to the poor (*matanot la-eyyonim*) than to be lavish with the Purim feast (*se'udat Purim*) or in sending portions to friends (*mishloah manot*): “*She-ha-mesameiah lev ha-ameilalim ha-eileh domeh li-Shekhinah*—one who brings happiness to the hearts of these unfortunate individuals resembles the Divine Presence, who revives the spirit of the lowly and the brokenhearted.”¹¹

Viktor Frankl argues that what impels most people to act is the desire to seek meaning in life. From a theological perspective, Frankl is echoing the most fundamental principle in Judaism, that every person is created in the image of God. As God gives and cares, so do we, in the spirit of *imitatio Dei*, have the natural capacity to be giving and caring. In doing so, we imitate God and reflect how God works through people.

Too many synagogues fail in this mission. The role of a synagogue is to aid and repair the soul, not to pass judgment, condemn or ostracize. An instructive model for the synagogue is a hospital. Just as a hospital is dedicated to healing physically, so the purpose of a synagogue is to heal spiritually—to bring greater spiritual health. The goal of the synagogue is to admit not only those who are healthy but those who are not; not only to accept those parts within us that are whole, but also those aspects within each of us that are broken.

Yet another model for synagogue is a *bayit*.¹² As a *bayit*, a home, is a place of welcome and love, so too should the most basic message of a *beit kneset* be one of welcome and love. Indeed, a *bayit* conjures up the image of family. In functional families, members love one another no matter the path they have chosen. Similarly, a *beit kneset* should be a place where we unconditionally love others regardless of their levels of learning, observance, physical or mental well-being.

Some suggestions to achieve this goal include offering, “Free and Open High Holy Day Services,” “Free and Open Passover Seders,” “Free and Open Shabbat Meals,” and for those wary of religious observance, “Free and Open Thanksgiving Meals,” and complimentary first-year membership in the synagogue. Moreover, synagogues, and their sanctuaries, should be built with ramps to the ark and the lectern. A beautiful synagogue, a spiritual synagogue, is one that is accessible and sends the message that all are welcome and no one is excluded. Synagogues should also provide resources for the visually and hearing impaired. As for spiritual leaders, rather than sitting apart from and in front of the congregation, they should consider sitting among their congregants in an effort to reinforce the sense of community, the sense of family.

¹¹ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Megilah* 2:17; see also Isaiah 57:15.

¹² At the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, we affectionately refer to our synagogue as the *Bayit*.

From the perspective of *beit kneset*, spirituality is fostered in a prayer setting which is inclusive—intergenerational and heterogeneous, where young and old, more versed and less versed, more observant and less observant, learn and grow through contact with each other. Inclusive—wherein the *mehitzah* allows women to see, hear, and be heard just as the men are. Inclusive—wherein we encompass the angst and dreams of all of *Am Yisrael* especially in *Eretz Yisrael*, in the spirit of R. Yehuda Ha-Levi, “*libi be-mizrah, va-ani be-sof ha-ma’arav*—My heart is in the East, but I am at the uttermost of the West.” Even though we may be in the Diaspora we can be *dorshei Zion*, seeking and yearning constantly for Zion.¹³ Inclusive—wherein we connect with a sense of universal consciousness with *mishpehot ha-amim*, the families of humankind. Hence, we should sponsor commemorations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday, where African-Americans and Jews can come together in hope and song, as a living example of, “*Ki veiti beit tefilah yikareh le-khol ha-amim*—for My house shall be a house of prayer for all the peoples.” (Isaiah 56:7)

BEIT MIDRASH

Finally, a synagogue is called a *Beit Midrash*, a house of teaching and learning, where the “upward” values of Torah are taught. The teaching of Torah values, even when those values conflict with contemporary culture, is a primary ingredient of spirituality. Within synagogues, spirituality is possible only when there is a readiness to criticize the ethics and materialism of modern society, and, through teaching and learning, offer a higher, Torah-bound alternative.

During much of the twentieth century, Jews who felt themselves to be outsiders in America sought in their synagogues a way to feel that their religion reinforced—indeed, glorified, Americanism and democratic values. Now that we feel at home in America, synagogues have a unique opportunity to restore their spiritual mandate by raising a voice against cultural conformism and seeking a higher distinctiveness that can be a new source of pride.

Some concrete examples: Do our synagogues encourage excess in bar/bat mitzvah or wedding celebrations, or do they strive to infuse lifecycle events with higher spiritual meaning? When we distribute honors institutionally, are they based on wealth alone or do they demonstrate our admiration for all who live in accordance with a lofty vision of Jewish values? Is the goal of our sermons and teaching to say what people want to hear, or are we willing to lovingly challenge our congregants in order to encourage growth and change? A spiritual synagogue should not only make its congregants comfortable, but also uncomfortable. Do we talk about God in synagogue, and is the presence of God felt in our *divrei Torah* and *shiurim*?

¹³ *Rosh ha-Shanah* 30b.

Of great importance is the recognition that for a synagogue to be spiritual its message must go beyond its confines. Perhaps this is the meaning of the *halakhah* that synagogues have windows.¹⁴ The windows connect what is happening inside to what is happening outside, bearing in mind that spirituality is inextricably bound to feeling the consciousness of the moment, that moment transcends space. Thus, the way we interact with family, the way we conduct ourselves in business, the way we reach out to the needy in our daily lives should be no less spiritual than the way we pray, study Torah or give charity in synagogue. Spirituality is an expression of *kedushah*, of suffusing all we do—at every moment, in every place—with sparks of holiness.

WHAT RABBIS NEED TO DO TO BRING SPIRITUALITY INTO THEIR COMMUNITIES

To succeed in spreading spirituality, rabbis must inspire their communities to be *committed*, *invested*, and *grounded* in the endeavor.

Rabbi and congregants must first be committed to the culture of spirituality, the culture of creating a vibrant, dynamic spiritual center. But commitment *to* is not enough. It is critical to invest heavily *in* developing creative paths to spirituality, such as learning seriously about *tefillah* and finding meaningful ways to integrate spirituality into our lives. And the spirituality we invest in must be grounded with a deference to *tirah de-tziburah*; it should not be open-ended. Much like Yaakov's dream of a ladder extending heavenward but anchored in the ground, spirituality in synagogue must have a solid foundation, with a formula that has a beginning, middle and end.

Most important, spirituality requires humility. Spiritual leadership requires someone who is clearly at the helm, but someone whose leadership is so clear, it appears he or she is not leading. In effect, dynamic spiritual leadership is a dialectic of assertiveness and self-effacement. As God balances greatness with humility (*gedulato ve-ivvatanuto*) so, too, should we. Humility also means that no matter how learned a rabbi may be, one should be open to every person (*kol adam*), as everyone has a spiritual message to share. And humility means the recognition that we are never quite sure we are getting it right; we are never complacent; we are always aspiring to new levels. Spirituality in synagogues is more a *process* than the achievement of a goal. If we think we have made it, we have failed. King David said it best when he asked: "Who will ascend the mountain of the Lord?" The answer is embedded in the question. The one who is constantly seeking is the one who ultimately arrives at the mountain of the Lord.

¹⁴ *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayim, 90:4.*

For rabbis to bring spirituality into their synagogues and communities, adaptive, rather than technical, changes are needed. A class, a convention on spirituality is laudatory, but it is our rabbinic training and rabbinate which must be fully and wholly immersed in the culture of spirituality.

That is what we try to do at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School—emphasizing the emotion as well as the intellect, the heart as well as the mind, and the interfacing of spirituality with *halakhab*. Therefore, we carve out days for spiritual retreats and constantly try to foster spirituality in our Torah learning, in our *tefillot*, and in our daily lives. Our goal is not to clone other spiritual models, but to inspire our students to find their own unique voices. There was only one Rav Soloveitchik, only one Rav Shlomo, only one R. Heschel, and, *yibadel le-hayim*, there is only one *mori ve-rabi* Rav Yehuda Amital. We must glean from their spiritual Torah, but express that spirituality in a way that is authentic to us.



I looked deeply into Mark's eyes as he responded "Amen" after each stanza of *Dayeinu*. I thought of the words of the prophet: "*Hineh yamim ba'im, ne'um Hashem, ve-hishlalti ra'av ba'aretz*—days are coming, says the Lord, when I will send a famine to the land, *lo ra'av la-lehem, ve-lo tzama la-mayim ki im lishmo'a et divrei Hashem* . . . not a famine for bread, or thirst for water, but to hear the words of the Lord." (Amos 8:11) Those days are here.¹⁵ On our campuses, in our synagogues, schools, and communities, our holy task is to respond to the thirst by sharing and spreading spirituality with passion, eloquence, and soul—every moment, every moment.

¹⁵ This is why I believe that Hillel's campus model of having an executive director, often without a rabbi, is flawed.