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SPIRITUALLY STRIVING UPWARDS TO GOD

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Parashat (Torah reading) Pinchas certainly has some interesting and stimulating narrative—about Pinchas himself, receiving the covenant of peace and the covenant of eternal priesthood after killing Zimri and Kosbi (Numbers 25:10-17), and about the daughters of Zelophehad, successfully challenging the laws of inheritance (Numbers 27:1-11). But then there's page after page about the offerings, the sacrifices that are commanded (Numbers 28:1-29:39).

We imagine that the overwhelming majority of modern Jews would at best describe the sacrificial regimen as simply not relevant to our contemporary search for spirituality. More typically, the sacrificial offerings and their purposes are consigned to ancient, barbaric history. It's a perspective we want to challenge, hopefully to help make reading and learning about the offerings a more spiritually valuable experience.

Spirituality is the buzzword of our Jewish generation. It seems that, however defined, everyone wants more of it. But what is the spirituality we are seeking? And how is it achieved?

In our work with people who have said they were seeking or had a spiritual experience, they were usually referring to one of two things: a feeling or experience of unity or closeness to God or whatever they regarded as eternal and transcendent, and/or a feeling or experience of lightness or joy, absence of mundane consciousness, and lessening of anxiety and fear.

Typically they sought to satisfy their spiritual needs through regular meditation and occasional ecstatic singing and dancing that were not characteristically Jewish in their particulars. These practic-

es were also more or less unconnected to their day-to-day pressures and hopes and to the problems in their communities.

Our own experience of such spirituality was that its costs were minimal, taking relatively little time, effort, and expense, but its effects were disturbingly self-centered and short-lived. Although often uplifting, distracting us from pressures and problems, they satisfied neither our deepest day-to-day needs nor those of the communities in which we lived.

But what is particularly *Jewish* spirituality?

Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook, who lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (1865-1935), taught the particularity of Jewish spirituality. He was the chief rabbi of the Ashkenazi community in Palestine, and his perspective was based on the kabbalistic system of the Zohar.

Rav Kook describes two routes by which a soul's connection to the "supernal divine light" can be improved: The first is common in Eastern mysticism; it involves disciplined working with one's consciousness, one's thinking. The second is found more often in the Western traditions, flowing from Sinai; it emphasizes the importance of ethics and morality in everyday life.

In the Jewish perspective on spirituality, correct behavior isn't simply an external affectation, because it transforms us internally. Thus spiritual transformation occurs not only through meditative recognition of basic truths or ecstatic experience, but also by conducting oneself ethically and morally. And in this way we can spiritually ascend, deepening our personality *and* repairing the world, by

genuinely offering ourselves up to God—not by feeling, thinking, or speaking, but through *action*.

This process of Jewish spirituality has been described (by David W. Weiss in *The Wings of the Dove*) as “a mystique of action.” The idea is that our actions as Jews are to reflect and reciprocate the attributes of God in our day-to-day life, to imitate and thus live in the image of the *God of mitzvot*. The mystery is that we are transformed in the process.

Parasha Pinchas tells us something about the origins of this spiritual perspective, particularly in its enumeration of the Temple sacrifices, which is a somewhat ironic source of spiritual discipline, because many of us are repulsed by the sacrificial system of ancient Israel. The sacrifice of animals strikes us as bloody and barbarous, jarring our sensibilities. So it stretches the imagination to believe that such a system is at the root of our best hope for a spiritually fulfilling life.

Before judging the ancient sacrificial system, however, we ought to acknowledge that the contemporary slaughter of innocent animals continues in the *billions* annually. Moreover, for those of us who are meat eaters, it’s done in our name—that is, on behalf of the “consumers” to whom the meat is sold. What has changed is that the slaughtering is now a commercial enterprise and it rarely if ever serves any higher spiritual purpose—only to slake our appetite for meat and each proprietor’s quest for profits. As for barbarism, today’s euphemistically labeled “meat packing” industry has a documented record of heart-rending animal abuse and sickening health and safety violations.*

The most common and misleading misunderstanding about the rituals of the ancient Israelite sacrificial system, which mistakenly attributes other than Jewish meanings to them, is that they were expected to manipulate and propitiate God. It is a point of view that conflates an ignorance of Jewish history and ritual with popularized conceptions of animal sacrifice that are based on pagan beliefs and practices.

In the Jewish tradition, the root meaning of the word *korban* (קָרְבָּן—literally, approach, come near), often mistakenly translated as sacrifice, is understood kabbalistically as “bringing together” or “uniting.” The kabbalists understand sacrifice as spiritual worship in which the sacrifice itself is

only a symbol that enables human contact with the divine. The sacrifice was *not* thought to have any magical power of its own to affect God which, as we’ve said, is a pagan notion. Its power, as with prayer, was primarily understood to affect the ethical and moral behavior of the people.

What were the symbolic purposes of the *korbanot tzibur* (קִרְבָּנוֹת צִבּוּר), the public offerings in the ancient Temple—and, similarly, the purposes of our congregational prayer today?

- That Israel—each of us individually and all of us as a people—never lose sight of our relationship to God and our covenantal purpose;
- That we have a palpable connection to God through the Torah;
- That the sanctuary of the Torah is the centering and guiding point of our life;
- That the *tamid* offering is our reminder, refreshed every day, of the promise *na’aseh v’nishmah* (נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָח), that “we will do and we will hear,” made on Mount Sinai;
- That we regularly renew our commitment—then, daily through sacrifice in the Sanctuary; nowadays, through prayer in the synagogue—to “*strive upwards to God*” (in the words of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch, 1808-1888), by faithfully fulfilling the Torah; and
- That by choosing the vision and path of Torah, we choose a way of life based on the purest source of meaning and fulfillment, allowing us to experience the truest joy and happiness.

Withal, these purposes are effectively an acknowledgment that we do not derive true joy and happiness from the obsessive pursuit of physique, position, possessions, prestige, and power.

The liturgical services that we know today are a continuation of the early sacrificial rites, the purpose of which was to point us continually—daily, monthly, and yearly, individually and as a people—to the *aishdat*, the fire of Torah, as the guide to *offering ourselves* up, striving upwards, to God.

In the ancient Jewish world there was no religion, just a way of life, of which the sacrificial system was an integral part. Similarly, Torah and Judaism teach us that there should not be any separation between what we do in synagogue once or twice a week and what we do the remainder of the time.

Striving upwards to God requires that both our heart and our head be moved, not in pieces but as whole persons and as a unified kehilla, a purposeful congregational community, not one day in the week but everyday.

* For example, see the Associated Press report of July 20, 2004, noting that, “An investigator for an animal rights group [PETA] captured video of chickens being kicked, stomped and thrown against a wall by workers at [Pilgrim’s Pride] a supplier for Kentucky Fried Chicken”; see also, Sarah D. Wire, “U.S. probes chino slaughterhouse, supplier to school lunch program,” *Los Angeles Times* (January 31, 2008).

When we begin to take them apart—separating Torah and Judaism from the weekday world, separating study from prayer, separating spirituality from *mitzvot*, separating *mitzvot* from action in our day-to-day life—we set ourselves up to *feel* everything but *know* little or nothing of what we are to *do* about it; or we set ourselves up to *understand* everything but *do* little or nothing of consequence to transform ourselves or the world around us. Our vaunted spirituality may then become an escape hatch from our moral and ethical obligations—ultimately destroying the hope that allied with our God of history we can raise ourselves up and then transform the world around us.

What is the connection, then, between spirituality and our organized religious life, which is the legacy of the ancient sacrificial system? Why should those of us who seek spiritually rewarding experience contribute to and benefit from a congregational community?

Israel Salanter, a nineteenth century rabbi who possessed what nowadays we would regard as “mind-blowing” spirituality, wrote: “Spirituality is like a bird: if you hold onto it tightly, it chokes; if you hold onto it loosely, it escapes”—leading us to think that spirituality is a very tricky business.

Possibly he was trying to teach us:

- That the experience of unity with God and the lessening of anxiety and fear are not achieved quickly, casually, or individually;
- That they require disciplined Torah learning and practice that transforms both us and the communities in which we live, so that together we are consciously and actively striving upwards to God;
- And that this purpose is best accomplished through the religiously disciplined spirituality of a congregational community that seeks to transform the world and its inhabitants in the image of God.

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