

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

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What is our congregation?

Are we a social club that has occasional religious activities? Are we a generic religious organization—a kind of white-label, all-purpose gathering that seeks to provide spiritual sustenance to the lowest common denominator? Are we a home for cultural activities and entertainment events?

No—we're none of those things. Presumably, we're a *Jewish religious community*.

But what does that mean? Are we just another brand of "religion"? And what kind of a community are we?

We're certainly not just another brand of religion, because Judaism never was and shouldn't be a "religion." Our Torah and Judaism inheritance are the foundation of a people and a nation, based on an intimate relationship of the whole people with God. Our national persona began at Sinai and continued throughout our history as dedicated to sacred purposes; that was and supposedly still is our *raison d'être*, the reason for our existence as a unified people. Torah and Judaism weren't created to be the foundation of a separate spiritual institution, a sacred island apart from our secular mainland—a place to visit once a week. On the contrary, the whole Torah-driven nation, all of its functions and functionaries, were to be dedicated 24/7 by covenant to the transformation of the world in the image of God. And every Jewish congregation is a microcosm of the Jewish nation that was commissioned with that purpose.

But let's face it: that commission, that covenantal charge and responsibility that was given and received at Sinai, is more than most of us want to live or even acknowledge for all but a few days of the year. Maybe on Pesach or Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur we're willing to confront it head-on, but the rest of the year we dedicate the bulk of our time, energy, and spirit to achieving the four R's—rewards (i.e., position, power, prestige, and possessions), recreation, romance, and respite. And sad to say, our history as a people affirms the principle that when a spiritual community becomes an end in itself, it brings about the end of its own religious and moral future.

We can find some insight into this situation in *parashat hashavua* (weekly Torah reading) Beshalach, which tells us: "And it came to pass that when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them the way through the land of the Philistines, because that is near, for God said: The people

might change their minds when they see war in front of them, and turn back to Egypt." (Exodus 13:17)

It's clear that we're not always prepared to live up to our spiritual potential, individually or as a people. And this is true even though, as members of the Jewish people, we understand that our continuing survival and success, not to mention our potential for day-to-day meaning and fulfillment, are directly linked to our historic covenantal mission as a people.

So we American Jews are often stuck between a rock and a hard place. We're referring to most American Jews who are *affiliated* with liberal (i.e., Renewal, Reconstructionist, Reform, and Conservative) congregations—those we happen to know best from our own experience. We're stuck between the Rock of our covenantal partner, the God Who freed us from ancient social and cultural slavery, and the hard place of living up to our historic spiritual mission as a light not only to ourselves and our children, but to the nations of the world.

We are spiritually stuck, immobilized in devoted obeisance to careerism, materialism, sensuality, and spiritualism.

- For most of us, it rarely takes more than ten years, often as little as five, to discover that in our daily work we're not liberated by our values, but instead have become enslaved to the demands of our occupations and professions.
- For most of us, our ever-expanding inventory of possessions has the dubious effect of enervating rather than entertaining us, barely distracting us from our unfulfilled longing for love, higher purpose, peace, and contentment.
- For most of us, sensuality—pursuing the comfort of gourmet tastes in food, luxury appointments in our surroundings, and the like—never satisfies, but merely whets our appetite.
- For most of us, "spiritualism"—demanding little and delivering less—has the characteristics of a distracting hobby, a spare-time preoccupation, which we would not even remotely consider as having the potential to change the spirit-poisoning conditions of our lives.

We imagine that you may be doubtful if not disbelieving of what you're reading right now. Maybe you're even thinking, "Who are they talking about? Not us—we're in the promised land, living the 'good life'."

We've heard that refrain in a dozen congregations, from one end of the country to the other—Renewal, Reconstructionist, Reform, and Conservative. But we've observed the culture of liberal American Jewish congregations, and it's relatively uniform in several respects: We don't talk about our problems and pressures, our foibles and failures. The culture of our congregations is that we are all expected to live up to an image of control and success. Our sacred sub-rosa ritual incantation, never to be discussed or challenged, is that all of us are successful and have everything under control.

But what we see from our rabbinate, behind the images of success and control, are the pained and pressured people who retreat from the congregation when they're most in need—emotionally, psychologically, financially, and, of course, spiritually. And yet it rarely occurs to most of us that the congregation has the potential to be an *authentic* community, one in which we can offer and expect not only a kind of vague spiritualism, but tangible, practical help and moral support when we're pressured and in need.

A congregational community in our definition is comprised of people who are in face-to-face relationships. Their shared history includes responding to pressures and challenges in their lives based on the vision and path defined by their sacred literature. Together, in the course of their history, they have evolved shared covenantal faith, values, and customs that guide their responses in the image of their relationship with God. They have survived and succeeded as a community, and thus individually, through their communal action to promote their religious values and self-interests among themselves and in the larger world. And if they comprise a Jewish congregational community, like our forebears in the wilderness, the Torah and its sacred precincts are at the center of their lives.

Yet this kind of community is the rare exception rather than the rule in America's liberal Jewish congregations. Liberal American Jewry is at a place much like what *parasha* Beshalach describes

the mixed multitude as facing—between the proverbial rock and a hard place: Then the people had arrived at the sea. The hard place was behind them—the pursuing Egyptians. The Rock was in front of them—God was demanding that they step into the sea *before* He would open it, as a condition of giving them dry land on which to cross it. (Exodus 14:13) Many of them wanted to go back to the security of Egypt, even to slavery. They were in a crisis, as we are.

Now the hard place behind us is to further enslave ourselves to our careers, materialism, sensuality, and spiritualism. The Rock in front of us is the fear of giving up the narcotizing effect of our diversions in favor of the unknown demands of striving upwards to God by centering our lives on Torah and congregational community.

This place marks a time of danger and opportunity. Going forward into the future, for them and us, requires stepping into the unknown. It demands an act of faith, action based on the belief in the possibility of greater goodness emerging in the world, despite our experience and reason.

We imagine that, at the crucial moment, their self-delusion—the momentary belief that they had a choice—was for many shattered by a simple, unavoidable question: What do I want and hope for, for my children and grandchildren? Is it the security of a life of onions and pots of meat in Egypt, and the price we paid for them through our loss of spiritual freedom?

Or do I hope for a better life for my children and grandchildren—not just the material possessions that they and we endlessly acquire, not just the sensual pleasures of good food, comfortable homes, and various luxuries?

So our decision, whether to go back to some form of spiritual slavery or whether to go forward to some form of spiritual freedom, affects not just us, but all those who come after us—our children, their children, their children's children, *dor l'dor*, through all the generations of Jews to come.

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