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SPREADING JEWISH SPIRITUALITY

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The three major festivals in the Jewish calendar—Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot—are referred to as Shalosh Regalim. Of course, “*shalosh*” means *three* and “*regalim*” refers to *feet*, and they began as pilgrimage festivals. Every man was commanded to go up to Jerusalem three times each year for these festivals. (Exodus 23:17 and 34:23-24, and Deuteronomy 16:16.) And not uncommonly their wives and children accompanied them.

But why were they commanded to make these pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem?

We can imagine several reasons. The pilgrimage was an opening to acknowledge God’s gifts by making offerings from those gifts. The effect is to teach us that we are not alone in the responsibility for our successes and failures, but that there is a creative force for good alive in the world. The pilgrimage also strengthened and unified the family by acknowledging God’s role in human affairs. The effect is to bolster our moral character and that of our children, so neither they nor we are any longer alone when meeting life’s day-to-day moral challenges. And lastly, the pilgrimage strengthened the community and nation by joining us together spiritually as one people rejoicing before God. The effect is to support and sustain a community whose spiritual power spreads far beyond our families and ourselves, but nonetheless is dedicated to the moral well being of each of us as individuals.

So the pilgrimage was not only for the individual and the family, but also for the community and nation. We learn from Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888): “Each one has to fit himself into the national circle in the ‘City of God’ with his own individual offerings . . . and there, not only enjoy life himself with his household but make the poorer people [which includes those who are spiritually as well as materially impoverished]

also . . . get to know the blessings and happiness that flow from the Torah or God. . . . and only by virtue of belonging to this national body to become conscious of his secure and untroubled position on earth.”

If we lived in those times, what would we think of the people who were *not* going up to Jerusalem? Maybe we would say to ourselves, “I’ll take care of myself and not worry about them,” or tell ourselves, “It’s none of my business if they don’t want to go up.” And it’s no stretch of the imagination to see that we can think in similar ways about our own contemporary participation in Judaism and congregational life.

But Judaism teaches us to consider more than our own spiritual and religious interests. The rabbinic guideline of *lifnim mishurat hadin* (i.e., going beyond the letter of the law) teaches us that we should not consciously calculate to do the minimum required by the halakhah (i.e., by the rabbinic law, literally “the way” or “the path” for Jewish life). In effect, it would not be enough to make the pilgrimage alone or with only our own family if we personally knew other Jews who had lost their way from Judaism. If so, we would be obliged to inquire after their well being and whether we could provide encouragement and support for them to make the pilgrimage too.

What does it mean to say that we are “obliged” by Judaism to act in a particular way?

The essence of such obligation is that one has incurred a debt, to which a duty attaches by contract or agreement, for something received. In this sense we are obliged to meet our duties in the Covenant, to recognize and respond to the design and workings of creation as blueprinted in the Torah, not because we can’t choose to ignore them, but because in meeting them we continue to be the recipients of God’s blessings. By way of an over-

simplified analogy, when we fail to play any sport by its rules, we cut ourselves off from the rewards of the game, in its place creating chaos and conflict that degrades individuals and their relationships with one another. Our obligations in Judaism are designed to have precisely the opposite effect—to foster unity in common purpose, which is uplifting to us communally and thus individually.

There are many teachings in Judaism to the effect that not only are we obligated to care for the property of our neighbor, but our neighbor's spirit and soul as well. The Scripture says, "You may not hide yourself" (Deuteronomy 22:1-3), so the rabbis teach that we must not be indifferent to the loss of Jewish faith and practice by other Jews. For example, Rabbi Yosef Yozel Hurwitz of Navaradok (1848-1919), one of the giants of the mussar movement, teaches us that, "Accordingly, everyone must feel it his responsibility to come to the aid of anyone who, to his knowledge, finds himself in spiritual danger. . . ."

But what is the uniquely *Jewish* spirituality that may be endangered?

Rabbi Hillel Rachmani (Yeshivat Har Etzion, Virtual Beit Midrash Project) describes the essentials of Jewish spirituality as taught by Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook (1865-1935), chief rabbi of the Ashkenazi community in Palestine, whose philosophy reflected the fundamentals of 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, and involves working with one's consciousness, one's thought, one's spirit. The second is found more in the Western tradition (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) and emphasizes the importance of behavior and ethics. . . . Ethical behavior as an expression of free will is not simply an external veneer, but effects an internal revolution. Spiritual metamorphosis occurs not only via meditative recognition of fundamental truths, but is also triggered by an individual's decision to conduct himself according to correct ethical principles. In this way man can spiritually ascend and simultaneously deepen his personality by genuinely connecting with God. What a Buddhist attains with meditation, argues Rav Kook, should be arrived at by living a just life."

David W. Weiss describes Jewish spirituality in terms of "A Mystique of Action" in *The Wings of*

the Dove: "Judaism is permeated by a mystique of action. The archetypal concept for the Jew is *mitzvah*; the medium of redemption is action. . . . It is the *mitzvah* that transforms, not declarations of faith. . . . Man is obliged to reflect and reciprocate the attributes of the Divine in the thrust of doing; for the Jew the ground of action is the *imitatio dei of mitzvot*. The mystery is that in their course, man is transformed." (Emphasis in original.)

The religious obligation of reaching out to other Jews who are in "spiritual danger" of alienation from Torah and an ethical Jewish life is a far cry from our contemporary social and religious mores; it shocks our sensibilities, which reflect the valuing of individual autonomy and independence as our highest ideals. And yet we are not entirely unconscious of the anomie and alienation that accompany our contemporary way of life. We often find ourselves captivated by the nostalgic recollection of community that existed in the past, with its face-to-face relationships and mutual support, which invariably forms the underpinning of such obligations.

Rabbi Hurwitz elaborates on the communal implications of the obligation: "When one becomes aware of as grievous a failing within society as its present educational structure, which has taken such a tremendous toll of our youth—how much more so must he summon up all of his powers to guard the breach, remove the impediment, and raise up the standard of truth. . . . This [is to be] accomplished through the formula of 'Teach each other,' by means of which . . . [is] cultivated . . . the goal of community service. . . . Where each is concerned with the spiritual perfection of his neighbor and objectively measures himself against the other to see where their respective strengths lie, there is no basis for propagation of Torah more solid than this."

Rabbi Hurwitz also teaches a mussar lesson on the ideal of a congregation spreading Jewish spirituality, particularly "when the survival of Torah and the fear of G-d are at stake"—not entirely unlike our own times. The objective must be to train "community servants" or leaders, to create a "united fellowship" (התאחדות הברית) whose members can "teach each other."

Lest we think that the obligation to spread Jewish spirituality has no relevance to life in the 58th century of our people, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, (1895-1986), the leading *halakhic* authority of his generation, teaches us that, "Another factor that enlarges the obligation on those who are capable of bringing others closer to Torah is the fact that many people who are far from a Torah life can be categorized as *Tinokos Shenishbu*, people held

* The mussar movement arose in the nineteenth century "for the education of the individual toward strict ethical behavior in the spirit of halakhah." It was a community movement in response to the destructive effects of mid-nineteenth century ideologies that were undermining fear of G-d and Torah learning.

captive by Gentiles [or by their worldview] since infancy (*Yoreh De'ah* 159:6). It is a *mitzvah*—an obligation—to bring such individuals back to the Torah and Judaism (*Mishneh Torah*, Hilchos Mammrim 3:3). When there is no one else to accomplish this, then one must even take time from his Torah studies to do so. . . . How much time can and must one devote to this task. . . ? As in charity, where one has an obligation to give a tenth of his income to the poor, so must one spend one tenth of his time working on behalf of others, bringing them close to Torah. If one is endowed with greater resources, he must correspondingly spend more of his time with others.”

Why, simply because we believe in and practice the Jewish way of life, should we want to lead other Jews to it? Why should we want to spread Jewish spirituality and committed participation in congregational community?

Because, stated most simply, the power of that spirituality and congregational commitment to uplift us and transform our individual life, our family, our community, and the larger world in which we live, is directly proportional to the numbers of us who are invested in them. Spreading Jewish spirituality is not only in our own individual self-interest, but also in the interests of the Jewish people and all the communities in which they live.

But *how* are we to lead other Jews to it? What can we do and what should we avoid doing?

We certainly won't lead them by promoting it to them like we would sell soapsuds or real estate, or by arguing with them about it like we do about politics or public policy. We certainly won't lead them to it by pushing synagogue programs that compete with secular education and entertainment, or by ridiculing their religious and spiritual beliefs or lack of them. And we certainly won't lead them to it by acting publicly as if we're indifferent or embarrassed by own Jewish belief and practice.

What are the alternatives that are likely to be more productive?

First, we can help to build up a congregational community that values the unique potential contributions of each individual member and that teaches the relevance of Torah and Jewish spirituality to the day-to-day pressures and hopes of every member.

Second, within the context of a congregational community, we can organize ourselves to act as neighbors—“brothers” in the language of Tanakh (Hebrew Bible)—to honestly show loving-kindness in practical ways. Traditionally that has meant providing hospitality to the stranger or visitor, visiting the sick, helping the needy bride, comforting the mourner, and making peace between one person and another and between husband and wife—and, of course, our communal loving-kindness need not be limited to these examples.

Third, we can organize congregationally to ensure that there are opportunities to share from the heart, at appropriate times and places, our own experiences of being uplifted by Torah, Judaism, and congregational life. Although, of course, such “testimonials” should be free of ideology and exhortation.

And fourth, we can contribute to the development of leadership within our congregation by offering support to others, by asking them respectfully to do something in a Jewish way for the sake of the community, something that they haven't done before, and by following up to mentor them afterwards.

At Mount Sinai, when the Torah was given to and received by the whole people, the children of Israel said, “We will do and we will hear.” First we will do what we believe to be God's will. Then we will come to understand why it is to be done. At that moment we were a unified people. As the Sages said, “Like one person with one heart”—every Jew became responsible for every other Jew.

We too could be a unified people, spreading Jewish spirituality, leading those who are alienated from Torah and Judaism to a more fulfilling Jewish life for all of us.

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