

Spirituality in Reform Judaism

By Deane H. Shapiro, Jr. and Johanna Shapiro

Surely the Lord is Present in this place, and I did not know it. —Genesis 28.16

THE BREATH (RUACH) of spirituality is blowing across Reform Judaism. Reform leaders such as Rabbis Daniel Syme and Lawrence Kushner have movingly shared their own personal search for and experience of God in recent books. Rabbi Sanford Seltzer, the Director of the Commission on Religious Living, cites research documenting the increase in rituals within Reform Judaism as a sign that spiritual life is on the rise. And Rabbi Alexander Schindler, President of UAHC, envisions the decade of the 1990's as one of heightened spirituality within Reform Judaism, a time when ritual and contemplative prayer will become increasingly integrated into political and social action efforts to repair the world.

These developments are exciting and challenging, for we believe that there are several reasons why Reform Judaism has an opportunity to help formulate a Twentieth-Century spiritual theology which is unique in human history. Reform Judaism was created, in large part, as a result of the Haskalah (enlightenment) in the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth centuries. Released from the literal ghetto in the 1800's, Reform has also been released from potential intellectual and particularistic ghettos. A Reform-based Jewish theology does not have to deny the remarkable strides in scientific and rational understanding of our world in the past two centuries, but rather can include, honor, and learn from scientific knowledge about human nature and the world.

Further, Reform Judaism has been a pioneer in open communication and dialogue with other religious traditions unique in Judaism's history. This is especially fruitful because it is only within the last hundred years that, for the first time in human history, all the different religious traditions are available and accessible. Reform Judaism is distinctive in its extraordinary emphasis on existential freedom and openness to authentic and pluralistic approaches to the search for an understanding and experience of God's meaning and purpose. Reform has, and can continue to learn from

the knowledge and wisdom of other traditions, just as it has and can influence and contribute to other traditions.

As with any pioneering endeavor, there are risks and dangers; and not all agree that an increased emphasis on spirituality in Reform Judaism is necessarily beneficial. For example, some are concerned that increasing Jewish spirituality (which they define as home and/or synagogue based ritual and liturgy of a worshipful and contemplative nature), will a) dilute the social action component of Reform Judaism; and b) dilute the attachment to and identification with the particularistic organizational structure and ethnic life of Judaism.

Author and lecturer Leonard Fein articulates this first concern, stating that Jewish spirituality, which will bring Jews comfort, may become an end in itself—"a Judaism about comfort rather than challenge." His greatest fear appears to be that the synagogue will become a place to escape from the world, rather than a place from which to transform the world. Professor Steven Cohen echoes this view, arguing that, because current Reform leaders have placed a new emphasis on Jewish spirituality, spirituality is beginning to replace social action as the central motif of the movement.

Rabbi Mark Weiner most forcefully states the second concern. He defines Jewish spirituality as devotion, theological faith, and home observance, which he sees increasing at the expense of communal Jewish identity. Both Weiner and Cohen cite studies showing the increased number of intermarriages and converts within Judaism, and say that even though studies show that inter-married families may be more "Jewishly spiritual," there may be less sense of communal Jewish identity. Weiner notes that these individuals "display continued ties to Christian practice, weaker commitments to Israel and Soviet Jewry, and less emphasis on social relationships with other Jews." He suggests that "the substantial presence of many Jews without deep, personally historic roots to Judaism could comprise a kind of 'Trojan Horse' which dilutes the compelling character of Jewish identity." This view is again echoed by

Cohen who expresses concern about diminished

involvement in the organized Jewish community...One looks in vain for an emphasis on Jewish ethnicity, Jewish organizational life, and Jewish philanthropy. The Reform understanding of God now embraces prayer in Hebrew, as well as working for the homeless, but does it also demand an annual gift to the United Jewish Appeal...The increasing number of Jews by choice and mixed married couples together with renewed emphasis on the spiritual ...portend increasing alienation of reform Jews from non-congregational Jewish involvement.

A Working Definition and Three Challenges

TO ADDRESS THESE CONCERNS, it is first necessary to point out some confusion about the term *Jewish spirituality*. Observation of rituals does not necessarily imply spirituality. Rather, given the freedom that is implied in Reform Judaism, of considerable importance is the intention which contexts this behavioral observance. The Latin root for religion, is "re-legio," to reconnect. Religion is a way to reconnect us to our Ultimate Source, to God. Increased "spirituality" would involve, by this definition, cognitive and/or behavioral activities designed to help the individual and community reconnect to God. *Jewish spirituality* would involve doing those activities within the particularistic framework of Judaism. In this vein, a Kipah may be worn to establish an identity with other Jews, as part of our tradition, and/ or, as one Chassidic midrash suggests, "as a way of feeling the hand of God covering us."

With this working definition, there are three challenges with which Reform Judaism will need to grapple as part of a renaissance of Jewish spirituality in the 1990's and beyond: a) the experience of God; b) the relationship between experience and ethical behavior; and c) our Jewish particularism in relationship to a universal God, including the topic of inclusion and exclusion.

Spirituality and Experience. Does increased ritual observance occur in a way that helps the individual and the community search for and experience God in today's world? Our tradition tells of Moses—as an individual—experiencing God at the burning bush (Ex. 3:4) and later in the crevice of a mountain (Ex. 33, 21-33). Our tradition also recounts the collective experience of God by the Jews at Sinai. How do we, as contemporary Jews, schooled in rationality and students of the Haskalah, experience God? How do we re-connect

with the awe, wonder, gratitude that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel so poetically articulates, the unitive (*unio mystica*) experience that Professor Moshe Idel claims unequivocally is part of our tradition. How can we learn to open our hearts so that the words of the *Ve'a'havta*, which are "on our heart," may be let in.

Heschel has pointed out that there are three primary ways to God's presence: contemplation, learning, and deeds. In other religious traditions, we also see that there are several paths *within* each tradition. This is as it should be, for any tradition to survive will require it be sensitive to the diversity and individuality of its congregants.

Reform Judaism has prided itself on its rationality, and its emphasis on deeds. Part of a Reform Jewish spirituality will involve intellectually understanding different ways in which God has been understood throughout Judaism. In this regard the book by Rabbis Rifat Sonsino and Daniel Syme, *Finding God: Ten Jewish Responses*, provides an excellent and cogent overview. Another part of the new Jewish spirituality for Reform may also involve a rediscovery of the contemplative path, including ritual, prayer, and meditation, which is part of our heritage. In regard to Jewish meditation, the works of Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kaballah* and *Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide* are the best sources. Contemplation need not be substituted in place of rationality, but can be a compliment to it. Even our greatest rationalist philosopher, Maimonides, advocated contemplative practice that went beyond the rational. As Schindler noted, there is a need in Reform Judaism to overcome a "lingering hyperrationalism and embarrassment about religious fervor."

Experience and ethical behavior. The second challenge is the relationship between spiritual experience and behavior. Fein argues one side of the equation. He appears to believe that the Sabbath is merely a stopping point before the "holy week." We emphasize the other side, suggesting that social action is not an end in itself, and the Sabbath is not merely a way station to a holy week. Rather, as Heschel states, the Sabbath is the pinnacle of creation, the deepest level, a non-dual moment of awe, joy, wonder, where we can stop effort and feel gratitude at the majesty of creation.

At the deepest level, we do not see the dichotomy between spirituality and social action. Rather, we argue, like Schindler that "the social action component of Reform Judaism...[can] be increasingly integrated with and inseparable from our religious mission."

As our prophetic tradition emphatically illustrates,

the experience of God cannot be divorced from ethics. Both individuals whom Schindler cited—Gandhi (from the Hindu tradition) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (from the Christian tradition)—showed that no meaningful spirituality can occur divorced from ethical commitment. “I am Holy so you shall be holy” (Lev. 19.1) is embedded deep within Judaism.

The Particular. Finally, the challenge arises as to what is uniquely Jewish about Jewish spirituality. This question directly touches on the issue of the universal and particular. The challenge is the tension between the universality of God’s message, which is all inclusive, meant for Jew and non-Jew, and the particular relationship, form, language, style of worship that we as Jews have in trying to understand, experience, and live God’s word in our lives.

We believe that the highest goal of Judaism is its universal expression, the caring directed not only toward Jews and Jewish organizations, but toward all, “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” God is a universal God, not just the God of the Jews. The universe at its deepest level is a universe that is sacred, unitive, inclusive. Rituals, from all traditions, at their best both honor the particular and point to that unity and universality. In a paraphrase of Pirkei Avot (1.14), “if we are not for Jews, who will be; if we are only for Jews, then who are we.”

We find disturbing some of the comments by Weiner and Cohen, which seem to imply that intermarriage and converts are at least partially catalytic for increased Jewish spirituality within Reform, as well as the cause of the problems exemplified in that spirituality. Rather than blame the “newcomers—the them” for a loss or particularism in ethnicity, we should instead thank “them” for helping reinvigorate contemporary Reform Judaism by their interest in spiritual expression and a spiritual dimension within Judaism.

Jewish spirituality offers to link us to a nearly four-thousand-year-history of a people in relation to God; not a Jewish God, but a God for all peoples. A particular without this universal goal runs the risk of becoming dangerously inbred and self-protective. It is only when the particular can be linked to the universal, when the particular is a vehicle for the universal, that it becomes a means, not an end in itself.

Spirituality is a way to bring God back into the picture. It is self-evident that no religion can make any sense without a spiritual dimension. Spirituality, as we have defined it, involves efforts to reconnect with our Ultimate Source. There are several, non-mutually exclusive ways to do this: the contemplative, including

prayer, meditation, rituals and liturgy; deeds of social action that help mend the world; and study and learning of the Torah and our history, traditions, roots.

We see the renewal of Jewish spirituality, far from being a threat to either Jewish social action or Jewish organizational structure, as an opportunity to infuse both with a sense of life and purpose which only an awareness of God working through the world can create. We become co-creators with God. As Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav said:

In order to live simply we must have faith that everything is in our hands and at the same time believe that everything is sent to us only through God. It may be impossible to do this. But through living this paradox in practice, you will never be far from God, nor will you ever fail.

Reform Jews can be modern spiritual pioneers, working to create a liberal theology for the Twenty-First Century. This particularistic theology—as it is formulated, evolved, unfolded, lived and experienced—has the opportunity to be imbued with an intellectual openness and a universal compassion unique in human history.

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