

Spiritual and Religious
Rosh Hashanah
5775

The biblical Jacob was not known for being a religious person. He did not go to shul; he did not keep kosher; and he did not seem to contemplate or believe in a deity. He seemed mostly focused on material things—getting his share within the family hierarchy by whatever means possible. The God of his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac was not yet *his* God. Jacob, let's say, was unaffiliated.

But something happened to Jacob-- something unexpected. It happened as he was running away from home, from all he knew, from his brother Esau's wrath, and from his father Isaac's dismay. He was running all day, and then the sun set, and he was alone. And Jacob came upon—"a certain place." He lay down at that place, fell asleep and had a dream. He dreamt that there was a stairway reaching up to the sky and on that stairway were divine beings moving up and down, and that beside him was the presence of the Holy One who said to him, "Remember, I am with you." And Jacob awoke and felt something surprising that he had never felt before and said: "Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it!" Shaken, he

said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.’”

Jacob was surprised and shaken, but he was awakened. He had had a spiritual experience, not in an established worship setting reciting an established liturgy, but alone, in nature, experiencing the wonder of existence and the connection with the transcendent unity that is God. He experienced *awe*, and “awe,” Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, “is a way of being in rapport with the mystery of all reality.”¹

This spiritual experience opened new possibilities for Jacob, and he did not want the experience to just disappear. He yearned for it to remain and make a difference in his life. That yearning is the root of religion. “The root of religion,” Heschel writes, “is the question what to do with the feeling for the mystery of living, what to do with awe, wonder, or fear.”²

So it is not surprising that in this very passage four phrases that Jacob uses to describe his experience have been frequently adopted as names for synagogues. Jacob calls that “certain place” *Beth Elohim*, “House of God,” (the name of the synagogue in which I grew up in Wellesley). He also calls it *Beth El* and *Sha’ar or Sha’arei Shamayim*

(gateway to heaven), both names of synagogues throughout the country. Why are so many names of synagogues taken from this story? Perhaps because when we establish synagogues, we want spiritual experiences like Jacob's to be the foundation of our religious lives. We want to *remember* those moments and build our religious lives around them. In Heschel's words, we want those experiences to "kindle a light that is never quenched."³

In the process of building established houses of worship, however, spirituality often does get quenched. Take Jacob, for example. While Jacob's experience was momentous, it quickly devolved into the sort of religion many people today want nothing to do with. The Torah's realism is unsettling in its portrayal of Jacob in the aftermath of his spiritual experience. First, Jacob bargains with God in the form of a petitionary prayer that seems mundane and even manipulative. "If God remains with me," Jacob says, "if He . . . gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father's house—the Lord shall be my God" (Gen. 28:20-21). After that less-than-spiritual prayer, Jacob moves to a building project. He sets up a pillar, a permanent marker for this previously unmarked place he stumbled upon. "This stone," he said, "which I have set up as

a pillar,” “shall be God’s abode; and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You” (Gen. 28:22). Had a few more people been around at the time, he may well have established a building fund and membership dues.

You may say, that underlying the story of Jacob’s Ladder, is a contrast between spirituality and religion. Certainly that contrast is being made today in the form of a critique on the part of a growing number of people who are separating out the spiritual experience from the “religious” structures and commitments that hold or encourage those experiences. Jacob had a spiritual experience alone and in nature and felt the direct presence of something larger than himself. Why compromise such spirituality by institutionalizing it, whether with pillars and tithes or with modern rules or creeds? In other words, why not be spiritual, but not religious?

“Spiritual but not religious.” Many of us in our community and many of our friends and family would identify with this description. (Many of us would say we are both, and still others neither.) It turns out, according to the Pew Foundation’s research on Religion and Public Life,⁴ that fully 20% of all Americans today call themselves spiritual but not religious, including those who belong to churches

and synagogues, and those who don't. The fastest growing religion in America today is the "those who don't". When asked their religion, they answer "none in particular." But those "nones" as they are called, are not necessarily rejecting spirituality per se. Some are, but others who are unaffiliated say they believe in God or a universal spirit, and a full 37% of them call themselves "spiritual but not religious." Taking all the Americans that call themselves "spiritual but not religious," 44% say they pray daily, though rarely or never at formal worship services; 34% say they are atheists or agnostics, which means a lot of people who describe themselves as atheists also describe themselves as spiritual. Paradoxically, a significant number of those spiritual atheists and agnostics even say they believe in God to some extent. They just don't believe in the God they imagine their houses of worship are teaching.

So what is this paradoxical phenomenon of the spiritual but not religious, and what can we say about what those of us who identify with that description believe? Linda Mercadante, a professor of Historical Theology and an ordained minister, conducted interviews of many who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious or SBNR's as the researchers call them, and reported on those interviews

in her recent book *Belief without Borders*. Her research concludes that as a whole, SBNR's are not necessarily seekers or doubters. They are not necessarily atheists but more like a-theists, "in that they are not really trying to prove religion wrong" but rather "moving authority, trust, belief, and divinity itself from 'out there' to 'in here' . . . " and lying "in the space between religion and secularity standing 'halfway in and halfway out of religious identity.'"⁵

Why would someone who embraces in varying degrees some idea of the divine, of prayer and of spirituality reject "religion"? Partly, Mercadante shows, because there is a rejection of what is now associated with religion, namely exclusivism that can lead to violence, a wrathful or interventionist God, an afterlife that rewards or punishes, an authoritarian tradition or a repressive community (p. 230).

This kind of rejection is sometimes frustrating for liberal rabbis and ministers like me because we also reject it. As Rabbi Zalman Schachter, one of the great teachers of the last century, who died this summer, may his memory be for a blessing, used to say, "the God you don't believe in, I don't believe in either." I don't believe in the simplified theology of a punishing, personified God. I don't believe in

religious exclusivism that is one cause of intolerance or violence. I don't believe in authoritarian and repressive religious community. And I also critique religious practice when it becomes materialistic and self-serving. Yet, I still consider myself religious and am wholly committed to our own tradition. I would describe myself as seeking to be spiritual *and* religious, and I want to share why. But first, I want to explain why I also value the idea of being "spiritual but not religious."

The distinctly American consciousness of being spiritual but not religious goes back to transcendentalism in the mid-19th century, which valued both nature and the nobility of the individual soul while critiquing institutional religion. Ralph Waldo Emerson for example, began his 1838 address to seniors at the Harvard Divinity School with the words "In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life." I love that line! Moving from his wondrous descriptions of nature and our own soul connection to it, he talks about the "sentiment of virtue," a sentiment from which a person says "I love the Right; Truth is beautiful within and without, forevermore. Virtue, I am thine: save me: use me: thee will I serve, day and night,

in great, in small, that I may be not virtuous, but virtue;' — then is the end of the creation answered, and God is well pleased.”⁶

This “sentiment of virtue,” Emerson taught, is the “essence of all religion.” It is prior to any institutional religion. As Emerson says, “The soul is not preached.” It is something we must experience for ourselves. Religion is secondary and must speak to that soul, though too often, it does not. What too often happens, as Emerson writes in his essay “Self Reliance,” is that just “[a]s man’s prayers are a disease of the will, so are his creeds a disease of the intellect.”⁷

William James, in his masterpiece *Varieties of Religious Experience*⁸, continued this distinction between institutional and personal religion (393). In his 1,000 pages or so on religion, he declined to address organized religion at all, which he describes as “second-hand religious life” that is “determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit” (p. 15). He wrote rather about what he called “personal religion pure and simple.” In this personal religion, “the individual transacts the business by himself alone, and the ecclesiastical organization, which its priests and sacraments and other go-betweens, sinks to an altogether secondary place. The

relation goes direct from heart to heart, from soul to soul, between man and his maker” (p. 34).

James wrote 100 years ago and Emerson 150, but their words still ring true today and underlie, for example, the poems of Mary Oliver, who moves so many people across traditions so deeply. Oliver’s poems embody a spirituality without institutional religion. She writes of “the prayers that are made out of grass?”⁹ and asks in a poem of the same name “Where does the Temple begin, where does it end?” And in another poem writes:

If there's a temple, I haven't found it yet.
I simply go on drifting, in the heaven of the grass
and the weeds.¹⁰

I am inspired by all these thinkers because of their deep sense of the spiritual. I value the desire of “spiritual but not religious” because it values something beyond materialism and is open to the transcendent, whether that is through nature, art or music, relationships, or social action. I also value it because of its underlying critique of religious institutions and practices that need to be called to account

Such a critique, however, does not date to the 19th century but to the Hebrew Bible itself. The strongest critique of religion has

historically been *within* religion, and I want to turn now to the religious critique, specifically the Jewish critique, of institutional religion.

You may say that Abraham himself was “spiritual but not religious” in the way he rejected the religion of his father, literally breaking his father’s idols according to midrash and asking himself the larger questions of the meaning of life. Another biblical critique of formal religion is the story of Chana, which we just read today. Chana goes to the sanctuary with a personal heartfelt prayer, asking God for a child. Her prayer is so deep that her lips move without words. But the sanctuary official, Eli the priest, can’t recognize true spirituality when he sees it and thinks she is drunk. It is Chana, and not any religious official such as Aaron or Eli even Moses, who is the model, according to the Talmud, for prayer.

The great challenge of an attempt at regular, communal prayer, is to be able to prayer more like Chana than like Eli. Rabbi Zalman Schachter, *alav hashalom*, spoke of prayer as freeze dried coffee. Those spiritual experiences of our ancestors from Jacob to Chana on to our own generation are preserved in our prayer book through a kind of crystallization so to speak into freeze dried prayers. If we

taste those crystals by themselves they would be bitter and have nothing in common with the drink we desire. Yet if we add hot water, that is to say, if we add our own yearnings, questions, awe and wonder, then we transform those crystals into something real and alive.

At our best, our synagogues and our religion are about that transformation. But we are not always at our best. As Heschel writes, “Religion has always suffered from the tendency to become an end in itself, to seclude the holy, to become parochial, self-indulgent, self-seeking, as if the task were not to ennoble human nature but to enhance the power and beauty of its institutions or to enlarge the body of doctrines.”¹¹ That of course, is idolatry, and the need to smash idols exists in every generation and within every religious institution. The prophet Isaiah, for example, excoriates his fellow Israelites for fasting on Yom Kippur in a self-indulgent way. “Is this the fast I desire?” Isaiah shouts in the name of God. A fast for appearances’ sake? A fast of unthinking routine while continuing with life and behavior as usual? “No!” Isaiah says. Your fast must be subversive not complacent: “to let the oppressed go free, to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, And to take the

wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him, And not to ignore your own kin” (Isaiah 58).

Critics from within, from Isaiah to Abraham Joshua Heschel, were all committed to religion, to community, to prayers, rituals and texts. They were not abandoning the coffee crystals, so to speak, they were rather reminding us to add the hot water. You may say that the idea of “spiritual but not religious” says something like: the coffee crystals are bitter; transforming them is either not possible or not worth the effort. Let’s just stick with the hot water. I want to share now, why I think it is worthwhile keeping those crystals.

Congregationalist minister Lillian Daniel, in a biting article in the Huffington Post that spread widely on the internet called “Spiritual but not religious? Please stop boring me,” wrote: “Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn't interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.”¹²

Like many polemical critiques, this one is hyperbolic and not entirely fair, but nevertheless important. The main point is that spirituality cannot begin and end with the private and individual. Spirituality's strength is that it brings us beyond our own limited experiences and emotions and into a larger conversation. Let's return by way of example to William James. James says he not interested in organized religion because he sees it as second-hand. He sees as human intellectual weakness our tendency to classify an object or experience along with something else. "Probably a crab," he writes, "would be filled with a sense of personal outrage if it could hear us class it without ado or apology as a crustacean and thus dispose of it. 'I am no such thing,' it would say, 'I am MYSELF, MYSELF alone.'" ¹³

That is exactly, however, the problem. I am NOT "myself, myself alone." I am a part of something larger—both biologically, culturally, intellectually and spiritually. I am realized through being a part of a dynamic tradition and caring community. Those web of connections with their dynamic relationships are not accurately described as "second-hand" or imitative, though sometimes they are. They are also creative in a way that is out of reach when I think of myself as "myself, myself alone."

American culture is highly individualistic, so talk of religion as essentially collective may be challenging, but it is very Jewish. I am an individual, but I carry with me Jacob's moment of awe, just as Jacob carried with him Abraham and Isaac's. I only know of Jacob's experience through my heritage as passed down through the collective consciousness of hundreds of generations. And I live out its meaning to the best of my ability through community. It is that community that the category of "spiritual but not religious" often lacks.

The Pew Foundation's research on religious life in America confirms this lack. They found that "[c]ompared with other adults in the general public, the unaffiliated are less likely to say that belonging to a community of people who share their beliefs and values is very important to them." While 61% of Black Protestants, for example, talk about the importance of shared community, only 28% of unaffiliated Americans think shared community is important. And something we should pay attention to, only 28% of Jews said that being part of a Jewish community was essential to being Jewish. More Jews said that having a sense of humor was essential to being Jewish than being part of a Jewish community.¹⁴

There is no question that personal, individual religion is an essential component of spirituality. As Heschel wrote, the “future of congregational prayer depends on whether the Jews will learn how to pray when they are alone.”¹⁵

There is also no question that religion becomes meaningless and derivative when we accept unquestioningly what is handed down to us. It is a Jewish tradition to question tradition and make it one’s own. Why in the Amidah prayer do we repeat the word “*elohei*” when we say *elohei Avraham, elohei Yitzchak, elohei Ya’akov*, “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Because, the midrash teaches, every person and every generation must experience the presence of God in their own way and make God and tradition their own. “To have faith,” Heschel writes, “does not mean . . . to dwell in the shadow of old ideas conceived by prophets and sages, to live off an inherited estate of doctrines and dogmas. In the realm of spirit only he who is a pioneer is able to be an heir. The wages of spiritual plagiarism is the loss of integrity . . .”¹⁶

Personal spirituality is essential not only because it enriches the collective by its demands for meaning and integrity, but also because it holds collective religion accountable and honest when it

becomes self-serving, and worse—hateful and violent. But if the individual is needed to keep the religion accountable and honest, what is to keep the individual honest? What is to keep our egos from worshipping our own needs and reciting a liturgy of rationalizations? What is to keep us from personal and social ideologies that justify greed, racism, war, and violence—problems not only of the religious in the last century but very much of the secular? If religion can be a fraud, so can our own desires, fears and prejudices. “Individual faith, therefore is not self-sufficient: it must be countersigned by the dictate of unforgettable guidance,” Heschel writes.¹⁷ That is why Heschel teaches that “the Shema, the main confession of Jewish faith, is not written in the first person and does not express a personal attitude: I believe. All it does is to recall the Voice that said: ‘Hear, O Israel.’”¹⁸ The power of that voice is that it is directed to the collective. It is addressed to us regardless of whether or not we are ready and able as individuals to hear it.

Traditionally, the Shema is recited twice a day, every day. Routine? Maybe. But it also constitutes a spiritual *practice*, and the need for such a practice, the need for discipline and commitment in addition to transcendent moments is the second reason I aspire to be

spiritual *and* religious. Spiritual growth is linked with a spiritual *practice*. Each of us, as human beings, is capable of a deep experience of awe and of transcendence, as Jacob was. But for most of us, these experiences, powerful as they are, are few and far between and have limited impact on our everyday lives without more time and attention. Jacob, went on his way after his experience. He did not have another experience of God's presence for 20 years, when he was again alone at night and wrestled with a mysterious being—either internal or other worldly. For those who aspire to be spiritual *and* religious, once every 20 years is not enough. There is a desire to experience the holy not only on mountaintops but also in ordinary life. There is a desire to train ourselves to be open to the presence of God even when the spirit does not move us.

Let's take Pesach as an example. In the Torah, in the book of Numbers it is written, "the Lord spoke to Moses in the Sinai desert, in the second year of their exodus from Egypt, in the first month saying, the children of Israel shall make me the Passover sacrifice in the appointed time" (Numbers 9:1-2). That verse is remarkable. It makes perfect sense that the Israelites would celebrate Passover with all their hearts and spirits while the Exodus was already happening.

But the year after? The second year? Why celebrate then? They were already out of Egypt? And why celebrate the next year and the next? And why would their children who were never even in Egypt celebrate? Or why would we, who are free to live wherever we want, and have enjoyed prosperity and freedom beyond comparison in Jewish history, forgo bread and pasta and delicious croissants for a whole week in order to remember Israelites thousands of years ago in a hurry to escape from slavery to freedom? What is the relevance? Isn't it second-hand and routine? Religious minutia? And yet, there are those years when we are not free, and we need the strength and faith to believe we can move from oppression to freedom. And there are those years when we live among people in our towns or country or all over the world who are not free, and they are inspired by the story we have kept and ritually enacted. And there are those times that in our complacency as free and prosperous people that the ritual wakes us up to issues of oppression and liberation that we have been ignoring yet demand our attention.

And why would we pray within these walls, when many of our spirits do not want to be contained to a specific space saying specific words at a specific time. Indeed, religion cannot promise the awe

Jacob felt all the time. Sometimes prayer is earth shattering, sometimes comforting, sometimes boring. That is the nature of a discipline and commitment. But one thing that spiritual discipline ideally does, is that it keeps our spiritual awareness, our spiritual muscles so to speak, in shape, so that we increasingly open to the Presence that in truth, is around us every moment, if, as the Koztker Rebbe teaches, we let it in.

I believe that spiritual *and* religious is what Heschel refers to when he talks of bridging the “realm of tradition and the inner world of the individual.”¹⁹ I believe that spiritual *and* religious seeks to keep both ourselves and our religious institutions honest and true to our commitments. I believe that spiritual *and* religious connects us to movements of people and leaders from Moses to Martin Luther King, Jr. who called on the strength of their faith and heritage to challenge humanity’s most oppressive tendencies. As Jews, we believe we were all together, metaphorically or otherwise, at Sinai. But as spiritual *and* religious Jews, we believe as Heschel writes, “Sinai has not solved the ultimate problem vicariously. Sinai is the question, the Call, and it is upon us to give the answer again and again.”²⁰

How will we answer? First we have to hear the question, the call. May we strengthen each other this coming year in hearing the call—both the call within ourselves that is our own unique voice, and the call of our heritage, Sinai, that is beyond the our self. May we seek truth and speak truth, breaking the idols of our institutions and our egos.

May we learn from one another, from those of us who regard ourselves as spiritual but not religious and those who regard ourselves as both spiritual and religious or as neither. May we seek to expand the ways we connect our hearts, our personal experience and our tradition. May the teachings and practices of our precious legacy expand the possibilities for the experience of the holy in community. May we nurture each other's spirit and Jewishness, in a community that honors love, respect and freedom.

L'Shanah Tova Tikatevu v'Tehatemu. May we all be inscribed and sealed in the book of life for a meaningful and joyful New Year.

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- ¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Essential Writing*, selected with an introduction by Susannah Heschel (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), p. 56.
- ² Heschel, *Essential Writings*, p. 188.
- ³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. 334.
- ⁴ <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise-religion/>
- ⁵ Linda A. Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2014), p. 234.
- ⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Divinity School Address," July 15, 1838. <http://www.emersoncentral.com/divaddr.htm>
- ⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 1841. <http://www.emersoncentral.com/selfreliance.htm>
- ⁸ William James, *Writings 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987).
- ⁹ Mary Oliver, "Mindful."
- ¹⁰ Mary Oliver, "What Is There Beyond Knowing."
- ¹¹ Heschel, *Essential Writings*, pp. 107-8.
- ¹² Lillian Daniel, "Spiritual But Not Religions? Please Stop Boring Me," *Huffington Post*, 9/13/2011. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lillian-daniel/spiritual-but-not-religio_b_959216.html
- ¹³ Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), p. 392.
- ¹⁴ <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/10/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey-overview.pdf>
- ¹⁵ Heschel, *Essential Writings*, p.115.
- ¹⁶ Heschel, *Essential Writings*, p. 105.
- ¹⁷ Heschel, *Essential Writings*, p. 147.
- ¹⁸ Heschel, *Essential Writings*, p. 147.
- ¹⁹ Heschel, *Essential Writings*, p. 115.
- ²⁰ Heschel, *Essential Writings*, p. 113.