

Erev Yom Kippur 5784  
On Being Spiritual/Religious  
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In July 1973, several major events occurred. Among them: independence for the Bahamas, the U.S. Senate Watergate Committee learning that President Nixon had secretly recorded incriminating conversations, the deposition of Afghanistan's king, and the launchings of the Soviet Mars 5 space probe and US Skylab 3. In Framingham, Massachusetts, where I had just completed second grade, schools prepared for their first busloads of city kids from Boston, and I went away to sleepaway camp for the first time.

Camp Wind in the Pines was a small, rustic YWCA camp near Worcester, Massachusetts. At this camp we whittled—every camper brought her own knife. We swam and canoed in the lake—which also served the role of communal communal bath—built perfect campfires, took long nature hikes, and collected a lot of flowers.

I had the time of my life there. Besides not having to shower—ever!--the highlight for me was—wait for it—a weekly Sunday evening prayer service. Picture freckled little hippie wanna-be's and slightly older, more greasy-haired ones sitting shoulder to shoulder at the edge of a lake, under the stars, dirty feet in the water, holding candles molted onto strips of birch bark and singing songs of peace, love, and understanding— "*The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind...No One Is an Island...Where Have All the Flowers Gone?*" Just a bunch of girls and the wind in the pines, communing with eternity. "*Mmm I wanna linger mmm a little longer mmm a little longer with you.*" You get the idea. We sent our little candles floating out onto the lake, shimmering on their little birch bark boats like so many altars to our flower power hopes. The way I felt on those nights 50 years ago entered my soul and forever changed my life.

It's easy to call what that was a "spiritual experience". But it had a structure, and ritual, and even mentioned God— "*Kumbaya, my Lord*"--and thus we could also term it religious. Some philosophers, including one of my favorites, Martin Buber, believe that a fundamental difference separates spirituality from religion. I do not agree. I see them as mutually inclusive. I would like to share some thoughts with you about how I understand the interrelationship between spirituality and religious practice.

Let me define my terms before I go any further. Spirituality is not easily defined, but let's go with this: it's a feeling, or attunement, to transcendence. It is not limited to words and rituals and can feel constrained by them. Religion, on the other hand, concerns rituals

and activities we do to worship a deity—God, and their underlying cognitive belief structures. Some of you tell me you're spiritual but not religious, or that you don't see yourselves as spiritual, but you like religion. My argument is that to some extent, spirituality and religion are interdependent and that maximizing both yields benefits neither offers alone. My hope is to offer thoughts for your reflection as we move through this potentially most spiritual and religious day of the Jewish calendar.

I assert that we are all spiritual. Spiritual awareness ranges from one person to another, in the same way some of us have more physical energy or strength than others, while we are, all, physical. We are all cognitive, too, though some of us are more conscious or intellectual than others. And we are all emotional, although we each access and express our feelings differently.

If spirituality is a real quality we possess in ways we lack tools to measure—by the way, we do have tools, but they're not widely accessible—religiosity is not a disposition. Saying that a person is religious says something about things the person does, like going to shul or lighting Shabbat candles, and what they think; for example, that God exists and seeks relationship.

Imagine entering a totally unfamiliar house of prayer for a religion you know nothing about. Someone rubs oil on your hand. Sage is burned and everyone closes their eyes and hums. A drummer plays and you are pulled into a stomping dance. If that experience moves you, it's because your spiritual capacities are engaged; ointment on your hand, burning herbs, and moving your feet are religious rituals that mean nothing until we invest them with spiritual meaning. That is true of all things that we consider religious. They are only as meaningful or vibrant to an individual as the individual's spiritual capacity supports.

With that in mind, if I do not experience religious activity in ways that move me internally, it could be that the rituals are stale, or too long, or there are too many of them—and those would be religious problems to fix. But it also could be that I am limited in my ability to make use of religious activity because I have not developed my spiritual capacity to be moved by ritual. I suspect that most of us experience some of each of those challenges at different times.

Several years ago I participated in a symposium of leading prayer educators, sponsored by the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem. During that symposium we examined the work of Rabbi Dr. Michael Shire, Dean and Professor of Education at Hebrew College, who developed a taxonomy of spiritual dispositions that underlie a person's ability to get the most out of religious prayer experiences. The taxonomy

includes dispositions, or capacities, for awe, wonder, humility, self-awareness, gratitude, curiosity, and more. The upshot was that by nurturing our spiritual capacities, we can make ourselves more available to prayer. Stated differently, the more we cultivate rich inner lives, the more prayer will feel transformative to us.

I applied that theory to my work with 7th and 8th graders. At times set aside for studying prayer texts, I would tell my students, “today, we are not going to look at the words of any prayer. Today we are going to work on building our inner lives.” 75 adolescents and I, with the help of a few trusted colleagues, would engage in various contemplative practices and activities to get in touch with our deepest hopes, needs, and dreams, and nurture our sense of awe, gratitude, humility, and so on. Based on subjective analysis, students became more reflective and authentic in their davening as a result of nurturing their inner lives. Images of nature in psalms become more evocative. Prayers of request felt more earnest, prayers of gratitude more heartfelt.

I contacted Dr. Shire and told him what I was doing with my students. He was blown away that I was applying his conceptual model instrumentally, and with middle schoolers, no less. We wished we could have measured the effects quantitatively. But I’m sticking with the theory: when we take our spiritual lives outside of this sanctuary seriously, we get more out of our experiences in religious spaces.

And it works the other way, too. When we take what we do inside this sanctuary seriously, we strengthen our ability to experience the world spiritually, much like going to the gym gives us more energy to zip around the grocery store and unpacking our feelings with a therapist helps us feel empathy for a friend in need.

What would it mean for us to take our work in this sanctuary more seriously? We could hardly *do* more—our services are not short! But it’s not about what happens on the bimah; the work can only be done individually, internally, and no one can do it *for* you. Prayer is known by ten different names. Prayer is a cry, a shout, a moan, a joyous song, a plea, distress, a call, falling, intervention, and supplication (R. Yochanan in Dev. Rabba Va’etchanan 2:1). Now, those are all spiritual activities. What would it take for us to feel our words and motions in this sanctuary in those ways? So often the words of the liturgy, the antics of our neighbors, our own thoughts and bodily needs distract us. But prayer is meant not only to call our attention to the power of words. It is also meant to take us beyond words. Words may awaken us to wonder, awe, gratitude, or need. Words may pull us into conscience and responsibility. They may be springboards to a more transcendent space. We can allow ourselves to *be* in those transcendent moments, until words rush back in and we return to our conscious minds.

Let's consider a concrete example: reciting the *Shema*. For most of us the first religious words we learned were "*Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.*" Usually we translate them something like "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." But there is another way to hear those words which I learned from Chasidut. "*Shema, Yisrael*" is meant to address *you* as an individual Jew—a Yisrael. "Listen, Jewish person," it says. Listen to this: *Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad*. Literally that means My Lord is our God, my Lord is One. We can hear those words as an ineffable call saying: You have your own unique sense of the Divine, your own spiritual experience. What you experience as a connection to something greater than you—that's your Adonai. And your own transcendence is part of a unity. "Listen, Jewish person. That juicy feeling you have is our one, unified Divine reality, *Eloheinu*—Our one God, one essence, permeating everything, everywhere. The repetitive pattern of our recitation—Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad—becomes a contemplative practice. If we open ourselves to it and take that sense of unity with us out of this sanctuary, I'm willing to bet that we will be more moved by the first tree, dog, star, or human being we see out there. If so, then we have used a religious experience to build ourselves spiritually in a world starving for that critical tenderness and truth.

There will be lots and lots of religion happening here over these 25 hours. The invitation of this day is to open to the transcendence we have covered over with accretions of stuff—thoughts and words and lack of trust that we *could* be more "hyperlinked" than we let ourselves believe. The process of teshuvah on this day is the process of removing those barriers, so that our finite interactions will manifest our spiritual attunement and we work to co-create the world our hearts know is possible.

As it turns out, religion is extremely helpful in maximizing that intention. The words of our prayers, inadequate as they may be, orient us to the particulars of who we are as individuals, calling us into accountability for the choices we make. Our prayers and rituals on this day offer opportunities that beholding a sunset, hearing a symphony, or riding a wave cannot, because we need to be clear and specific about who we are and who we intend to be, and that requires words. We engage in this private work together, sharing words and rituals that take us out of our own egos and lend witnessing and courage to one another.

As Jews we understand that we have more spiritual work to do than simply to be in tune with the Universe individually. Standing together as a covenantal community and naming that work, specifically, is a core spiritual practice which also happens to be deeply religious. What we do in here is meant to move us to make a tangible difference in the world out there.

Naturally, some of us feel more drawn by the spiritual parts of ourselves than others, and some of us warm to religious ritual more easily than others. Just as the two overlap within each person, so, too, do we overlap and intermingled with one another as a קהילה קדושה, a sacred community. May our work on this Yom Kippur help us to see ourselves more clearly. May we restore our commitments and know before Whom we stand, and may we feel and be moved by how much we need each other.