Some Call It God

BY SIDNEY H. SCHWARZ

For the past three years I have taught a course at the local Jewish Community Center on "Exploring Jewish Spirituality." Typical courses get ten to twenty registrants; this course has attracted sixty to seventy. About half are affiliated with synagogues. When I ask, "how many of you would say that your synagogue experience has been spiritually satisfying," very few hands remain in the air. When I ask how many of you have explored other religious/spiritual disciplines, over half raise their hands. Some were part of the pool of synagogue members; most were not.

The synagogue world, the primary vehicle delivering Judaism to Jews in America, has failed in its mission to teach our heritage in a way that is spiritually compelling. Likewise, large numbers of Jews have taken to exploring a myriad of other religious/spiritual paths. Both the findings of the National Jewish Population Study (1990) and a more recent sociological study on American religious mores[1] bear this out. Since millions of dollars are currently being spent on outreach to marginally affiliated and unaffiliated Jews, it would seem logical to spend some energy in discovering how *batey tefilah,* houses of Jewish prayer, can become more inviting places to Jews who are seeking a spiritual dimension to their lives.

The problem of spiritually dead synagogues knows no denominational boundaries. All rabbis and prayer leaders must better understand what Jews are looking for within a religious institution to meet their spiritual hunger. I dare say that if only 10% of the money that Jews currently spend at ashrams, Buddhist retreats, mass therapy experiences and in psycho-spiritual counseling, were spent in the synagogue orbit, we would see a renaissance of Jewish religious life in America that would stagger the imagination.

Allow me to make some suggestions to take us down that road.

God Talk-God Babble

When I ask my spirituality classes if they believe in God, about half raise their hands, albeit tentatively. This is a good start because part of what I later teach them is that this is not only a bad question, it is the wrong question. When however, I ask them how many

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have had profound and life affirming spiritual experiences, virtually all of the hands shoot up. Only after I ask this somewhat ambiguous question do we begin to explore what we mean by the term "spiritual." Answers vary, but they fall along a clear line: a sense of oneness, a relationship to something greater than oneself, an ability to transcend the everyday, a sense of inner self and inner peace, and a feeling of being part of some universal consciousness. And all this from people who are not sure that they believe in God!

Is anyone speaking a language that these Jews can relate to?

Our Reconstructionist theological legacy here is very rich indeed. From Mordecai Kaplan's transnaturalism to Harold Schulweis' predicate theology to Arthur Green's neo-hasidism, Reconstructionism can stake claim to some of the most creative theological thinking of this century. Each of these three theological positions moves us beyond an overtly supernatural and hierarchical vision of God to one that is increasingly humanistic and horizontal. They allow us to take our experiences of life and see them in transcendent dimensions. When I read the New Age and Eastern religious texts that seem to capture the imagination of so many Jews, I tell the people who share them with me how beautiful are the insights of these books and traditions, and then I guide them to parallels in the Jewish tradition.

We are losing Jews because the theological models that are being put forth continue to be largely literalist and fundamentalist, despite Reconstructionists' having rejected these models over seventy years ago. Today there is an explosion of books and courses about God in the Jewish community. But I still don't see rabbis and synagogues translating this sophisticated thinking about God to the places where it matters most—the congregational school and religious worship. I am convinced that Reconstructionism is uniquely prepared to bring such a sophisticated theological message to Jews who hunger for one.

Too many rabbis respond to the current upsurge of interest in God and spirituality by simply using the G-word more frequently from the pulpit. I am afraid that this comes across to most Jews as merely God-babble. We turn-off when we cannot relate to the God that is being invoked. Rabbis must connect the G-word to the very real experiences of Jews. Since we rabbis mean different things when we use the G-word in different contexts, we must explicate our code. I cannot now use the G-word without an explanation that sounds apologetic. But I gladly accept this fate because, in my experience, it has meant that people don't automatically turn off when I use the term "God". Instead, they are brought to a far better question than "do I believe in God?" They ask themselves, "what experience in my life can I associate with what our ancestors called "God"?

Kol Haneshamah, the new Reconstructionist liturgical series, is a pioneering work in this regard. By utilizing different attributes for God each time a Hebrew name for God is translated, worshippers can have their understanding broadened by the infinite number of ways we can see a transcendent power manifested in our lives and in our worlds.

Liturgy: From Prison to Gateway

What rabbis say or don't say is only one part of the problem. We all know too well our problem with our liturgy. We can't live with it, and we can't live without it. On the one hand, the language is so hierarchical, supernaturalist and male-oriented that it at least confirms, if not creates, the fundamentalist assumptions about God that turn off so many Jews. On the other hand, to jettison the better part of that inherited liturgy is to rob our generation and future generations of Jews of a critical link to our past. We are, after all, perpetuating a tradition with a three thousand year-old history. Even Mordecai Kaplan, in his editing of the first series of Reconstructionist liturgy, could not bring himself to alter the basic *barukh ata Adonay* formula, even though we could make the case that retaining it undermined much of what he wanted to convey theologically.

For most Jews, therefore, the Jewish liturgy is a prison. It is constricting. It suffocates. It is boring. English translations, when they are good ones, help a bit. Alternative versions of prayers help much more. When we are able to express the essence of a traditional prayer in a way that relates to the real experience of people, then suddenly the prayer becomes not only a link to our past, but also a gateway to express and make more meaningful something that has been lived. The richness and beauty of the traditional liturgy sits behind a locked door. We must provide the key.

Some examples. In the *ahavah rabah* prayer, we express the hope that, "we will one day be brought in peace from the four corners of the earth and be able to live in dignity in the land of Israel." I use this passage to talk about how prayers can, in fact, be realized. A prayer that has been said for centuries now becomes a prophecy anticipating the miraculous arrival of Jews from Russia, Ethiopia, and the former Yugolovia to the land of Israel. Who cannot marvel at the poignancy of such a prayer? Who would not to recite it today as a celebration of a dream, at least partially fulfilled?

Many congregations are involved in social action work. It is the way that Jews and others do "God's work" in this world. But the experience can be made more spiritual by connecting it with prayer. Envision bringing a group of congregants to a homeless shelter where they are engaged in the act of preparing meals, bringing clothing, offering medical assistance and providing companionship. Picture the group taking a few minutes before they leave to recite from the *amidah*: "You sustain the living with loving kindness, in great mercy you allow the (spiritually) dead to come alive; You support the fallen, heal the sick, free the captives and remain faithful to those who sleep in the dust." Suddenly a good deed becomes a *mitzvah* and a piece of traditional liturgy becomes a gateway to a world of ethical activity. The people who recite such a prayer *in situ*, will never see that prayer the same way again. Everytime it is recited, it will remind them of that particular experience, and give them an incentive to find other ways to do such *mitzvot* again.

A third example. I sometimes use the morning prayer *modeh ani* to explore how we can express gratitude for the singular gift of life. Meant to be recited immediately upon arising from sleep, the prayer reminds us that for our ancestors, sleep was a form of semi-death. When we awake, we express gratitude that the "breath of life" or our "unique soul/life force" has come back into our bodies. For those who have stood over the bed of a comatose patient, it is easy to understand that we have not changed much from our ancestors who authored this prayer. We still fear death, and are constantly reminded of the thin line that separates us from life's end. The *modeh ani* prayer helps us to appreciate the great blessing of being alive, conscious, able to laugh and cry and love.

All of the above examples utilize traditional prayers. To the extent that one wants to work with contemporary prayers or alternative versions of the classical liturgy, the process that I describe here becomes even easier, although one loses some of the power that inheres in prayers that are ancient. The use of prayers as gateways to expressions of spirituality does not presuppose any particular God belief, and certainly not a fundamentalist view of God.

Taking the time to open up the liturgy requires a willingness not to take liturgy for granted. Most synagogues are populated by two kinds of Jews: those for whom the traditional liturgy has always worked and has had meaning, and those who are waiting for the *kiddush* to pay their respects to the *bar/bat mitzvah* family. The first group of Jews would be enriched by the kinds of explanations described above. The second, much larger group of Jews have not come expecting any message. You might connect with them, but your chances are slim, because people need to be asking certain questions, before they will be interested in your answers.

If, however, you do not assume that the service will automatically work for that first group of those who attend, and you are willing to structure a service that presents prayers as gateways, seekers will come. It means that you won't be able to *davven* every prayer all the time. It means allowing worshippers to ask questions in the midst of a service. It means bringing in texts and examples from prayer books that have not been approved by the ritual committee. So be it. This is not religious worship as it is delivered in synagogues across America, but it can be very spiritually exciting.

To break out of the prison of liturgy, we must move beyond the words in the prayer book. Literalism is the enemy of the spiritual experience. We come to know God when we tune into the subtle but eternal truths of life: righteousness, kindness, birth, death, the inventor's genius, the tenor's perfect note, the majestic order of the galaxy and the intricate perfection of the human body. The "reality" of these aspects of life does not get affirmed in the physical realm; their "reality" exists in the spiritual realm. To "see" and appreciate these parts of life, one must acquire the third eye, which Hindus paint on their foreheads. To allow the prayerbook to speak to that level of our consciousness, we must learn to read the words of prayer with an eye for poetry and metaphor.

Playing Shamash

The impact of the Havurah movement on American Judaism is well documented. Its ability to get Jews to accept ownership for their own Judaism and to create, celebrate and learn with little or no professional guidance stands as an important lesson to the established Jewish community. But it is remarkable how little most rabbis and synagogues have learned from the Havurah phenomenon. Most rabbis acknowledge the value of *ḥavurot*, but see themselves inhabiting a totally different world. It is true that synagogue institutions do some things better than *ḥavurot*, but most synagogues would benefit from a healthy dose of havurah-style egalitarianism that allows for many voices to be heard within a synagogue. This calls for the rabbi to become like the shamash on the *ḥanukkiah*—lighting other candles so as to enable them to add their own light to the illumine the darkness.

I have long been an advocate for laypeople having a substantial voice within a synagogue. This is as necessary in defining worship as in congregational decision-making. It is an essential tenet of Reconstructionism that Judaism is shaped by the Jewish people. If we sincerely believe this, then we have to hear what Jews are saying. Using a sermon-dialogue approach to Torah study on Shabbat is one way to encourage congregants to see that their insights into Torah are as important to share as the rabbi's. We now need to go much further than this in helping congregants recognize their own spiritual voices.

As part of the practicum of my course on Jewish spirituality, the class is divided into dyads. I ask them to share a spiritual experience with their partner (often someone whom they hardly know). I tell students they can bring in a poem, a piece of music on tape, an object or artwork that has spiritual meaning for them. They spend about fifteen minutes sharing their spiritual "treasure" with their partner and then they have the opportunity to share with the entire group.

One person shares a poem that she has had in her wallet for twenty-five years. Another spontaneously performs a dance that she composed for a class of retarded adults. One person brings in a four-foot tall, brass *menorah*. She found it at a yard sale and had to buy it, because, to her mind, it deserved an honored place in a Jewish home, not be left in some pile of junk in a backyard. Though she was born Jewish, she had no Jewish education and was a member of an ethical culture society. But from the day she bought the menorah, she set upon a mission to make her home a fitting Jewish abode for the menorah. Her taking the course was part of that journey.

I was not prepared for the power of this exercise. Nor was I the only one to sense the magic of those shared thoughts and experiences. Members of my synagogue who were in the class stayed late after we ended, and urged me to find some way to allow what happened in the class to take place in the context of our regular morning service. So we started a program at which, each week, a different member of the congregation chooses a prayer that she or he finds particularly meaningful. I ask them to share a life experience that makes that prayer come alive. By sharing that insight with the congregation, we begin to "open up" more and more liturgy to Jews for whom the Hebrew Siddur is mostly a closed book.

We also use life cycle occassions to allow members to share something personal with the congregation. Since ours is a young congregation, our most frequent life-cycle event is a covenant ceremony for newborns. After the parents receive an *aliyah*, they deliver a brief statement explaining who the child is being named after. So much of the power of religion and life cycle ritual is invested in the memories that we invoke of family members who are deceased. Through the "name legacy," not only do parents strengthen their connections to parents and grandparents, but they articulate the qualities that they then commit themselves to impart to their new children. When week after week I see tears well up in the eyes of congregants of all ages, I know that we are striking spiritual chords of great significance.

"Good and Welfare"

Towards the end of our service, at the same time that I encourage visitors to stand up and introduce themselves, so that our members can reach out to them at *kiddush*, I invite members to share "good and welfare." People get up and share good news and bad. We hear of people getting new jobs and getting laid off; of engagements, which lead to spontaneous applause, and of graduations. It is part of the work of building community, of making people feel comfortable sharing their lives with the rest of the congregation. Such sharing is often "rewarded" many times over by expressions of *mazal tov*, or the tendering of help.

Similarly, when we invite anyone who wants a prayer of healing for themselves or a loved one to come forward between the Torah reading and the *haftarah*, each has the opportunity to state the name of the person who is in their prayers. I have all those who assemble link arms during the chanting of Debbie Friedman's *Misheberakh* prayer. I know that after the service, this public display of pain and prayerful hope is supported by the loving approach of dozens of members who would otherwise remain unaware of the situation.

However insightful or inspiring a rabbi may be, if s/he structures a service so that only his/her voice is heard, the service will never reach its spiritual potential. People have locked up inside them the most profound spiritual experiences and insights, which can inspire just as much as a rabbi's words do. The rabbi's challenge is to provide a forum for the expression of such insights. Only when the leader holds back some of him or herself (read "ego") can other people blossom.[2]

There is no little danger that a service opened up for all manner of spiritual expression can drift very far from the *qeva*, or regular format that would make it recognizable as a Jewish service. I am well aware of the danger of emotional exhibitionism and of some individuals seeking to dominate those parts of the service that allow for participation. There need to be limits and the rabbi should exercise such limits. But I think the far greater danger lies in religious worship that is exactly the same week after week, all *qeva* and no *kavanah*. Most worship that goes on in all stripes of synagogues across America continues to be top-down. Such worship obscures the light that is waiting to pour forth from the Jews who come to sense God's presence. If, as I believe, experiences of the spiritual realm come in an infinite number of varieties, the synagogue must invite different voices to express how that happens. Jews must share the rich gifts of their souls, their *neshomes*, with one another

As it now stands, most Jews experience their most spiritual moments outside the walls of the synagogue and outside the confines of Judaism. Tens of thousands of Jews are engaged in a serious search for places to support and nurture their quest for religious and spiritual truth. Reconstructionism has a theological language and religious style that is singulary equipped to meet this need. If we learn how to connect our language and style with Jewish seekers, we might find ourselves leading many Jews back to what some people call God. ♦

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1. Wade C. Roof, et. al., *A Generation of Seekers: Baby Boomers and the Quest for Spiritual Style* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993).

2. On this topic, see Eugene Borowitz, "TZIMTZUM: A Mystic Model for Contemporary Leadership," *Religious Education* 69 (1974), 687-700.