



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Eikev

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

August 19, 2011

Eikev

Religion vs. Spirituality



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"*

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ABSTRACT

Religion is yet again in the news, the issue sparked this time by several Republican presidential hopefuls who define themselves as religious. The matter came to a head when the Governor of Texas, Rick Perry, prior to his anticipated presidential bid, gathered tens of thousands of evangelical Christians in a sports stadium for a prayer rally. As Governor Perry read passages from the Bible, thousands of people stood or knelt on the concrete floor, weeping and shouting, "Amen!"

And as the pundits weighed in, criticizing and analyzing, a dominant opinion seemed to be that this was crossing the line separating church and state, and above all, that this was "way too much religion." Americans don't want it to be that overt. Americans prefer something softer, something less religious, something more spiritual.

This sermon analyzes the difference between being religious and being spiritual and asks: Is this split a true one?

Why is it that so many religious people are not in the least spiritual and vice versa? Indeed, most see the "religious" as dogmatic (and even obnoxious) - everything that is antithetical to being spiritually refined. Conversely, many people feel that they can achieve spirituality - defined by an ethereal, transcendent experience - just by being "free spirits." Religion, the argument goes, is about conformity and group-think; spirituality is about individuality and personal expression.

Which one is it? Can one be religious and unrefined? Can one be refined without a religious discipline?

This is the challenge of our times, the challenge facing the so-called battle between science and religion, church and state – finding a place for faith in a modern, secular, scientific world.

This sermon posits that we need to revisit our entire definition of the words “religious” and “spiritual,” which may be ill-conceived in the first place. Indeed, the dissonance between mechanical ritual and soulful living compels us to re-examine the very meaning of Torah and Mitzvot, and the true nature of Judaism.

RELIGION VS. SPIRITUALITY

1. Praying to God (Humor)

A barrel-maker of Kiev, who had a wry sense of humor, did not believe in asking God for too much. Thus, he prayed:

“Dear Lord, all I’m asking from You is bread to eat and clothes to wear. Nothing more. The *schnapps*, I’ll make myself.”

You laugh, but ...

2. Religion in the News

Prayer has been in the news lately.

Two weeks ago, the Governor of Texas, Rick Perry, made a big splash when, prior to his anticipated presidential bid, he gathered tens of thousands of evangelical Christians in a sports stadium and addressed God over the loud speaker:

["You are our only hope, and we stand before you today in awe of your power and in gratitude for your blessings, and humility for our sins. Father, our heart breaks for America. We see discord at home. We see fear in the marketplace. We see anger in the halls of government, and as a nation we have forgotten who made us, who protects us, who blesses us, and for that we cry out for your forgiveness."]

Then, as Governor Perry read passages from the Bible, thousands of people stood or knelt on the concrete floor in front of the stage, weeping and shouting, "Amen!"¹

3. Hooray or Oy Vey

I would bet that reading about it, many of us did not say *hooray* but *oy vey*.

But, however we felt about it, we all have to admit it was in-your-face religion. This was not an example of New Age spirituality, nor was it a low-key meditation retreat. And as the pundits weighed in, criticizing and analyzing, the dominant liberal opinion seemed to be that this was crossing the line separating church and state, and above all, that this was "way *too much* religion." Americans don't want it to be that overt. Americans prefer something softer, something less religious, something more *spiritual*.

¹ *New York Times*, "Perry Leads Prayer Rally for Nation in Crisis," Aug. 6, 2011.

4. Religious or Spiritual?

It is true that Americans do not see religion and spirituality as synonymous. Recent public polls indicate that many more Americans categorize themselves as spiritual rather than as religious.

The obvious difference is due to the popular view that religion is about ritual, which does not necessarily have a spiritual component – it's "ritual" without the "spi" preceding it. A person can be fiercely committed to performing religious rituals to the tee, without feeling any inner spirituality. Critics will even point out that many "religious" people are actually rigid and dogmatic (and even obnoxious) – everything that is antithetical to being spiritually refined. Religion, the argument goes, is about conformity and group-think; spirituality is about individuality and personal expression.

Conversely, many people feel that they can aspire to spirituality – defined by an ethereal, transcendent experience – just by being "free spirits."

Of course, many people clearly see themselves as both spiritual and religious, but there still remains a strong enough dichotomy between religiosity and spirituality to get our attention. Indeed, the empirical reality seems to be that the more religiously orthodox (or fundamentalist) someone is, the less spiritual they are, and vice versa.

5. A True Split?

So my question is this: Is this split a true one?

It appears to be, if we go by the contemporary meaning of religion and spirituality. If indeed religion is driven by ceremony and ritual, then it need not be spiritual to thrive. It just needs committed individuals dedicated to following – and educating their children to live by – the strictures of their particular religious discipline.

(As a matter of fact, there are quite a number of people who practice religion this way, and they will be the first to insist that they are anything but spiritual. They can even be highly materialistic, though some would say that the discipline of religious behavior is necessary to counter the narcissism of material life.)

On the other end of the spectrum stands spirituality – where we find many “free spirits” actually shunning what they see as “the shackles” of any strict form or ritual.

6. Bizarre Phenomenon

This may also explain a bizarre phenomenon, which I shall call “religious atheism” and its diametric opposite, “atheistic faith.”

There are people who call themselves religious but who observe their religion by rote. They were brought up in a religious discipline, but they either don’t think about it too much, or (when push comes to shove) they don’t believe what they practice. I even know a number of so-called religious people who actually despise their own tradition. They mindlessly follow it, out of guilt, programming, fear or plain conformity, but if they had it their way, they would have chosen not to be born into it.

And so, they are utterly baffled by individuals who *choose* the religious path. As one so-called religious fellow incredulously asked a colleague of mine who turned observant later in life: “Why?! You were living the life of a free person, free of religious obligations, why in heavens name would you choose to constrain your life by taking on religious commitments?”

Then there are those individuals, at the other end of the scale, that are deeply spiritual – sensitive and introspective, refined people who are committed to work on improving their personalities and relationships. Yet they do not consider themselves to be religious or believers. Some even call themselves agnostics or even atheists.

7. Inverted Reality

What are we to make of this inverted reality?

No wonder so many of us remain skeptical about religion and some of us even treat it with disdain. No surprise that extremism spouts from both ends of the aisle – religious radicals decry the profanity of the faithless, and fanatical secularists mock the faithful. (We have seen a lot of that on the back of Gov. Perry's rally.)

Take the words of Nobel Laureate Herbert A. Hauptman, who unabashedly declared that belief in God is not only incompatible with good science, but “is damaging to the well-being of the human race.” And Richard Dawkins called religion a “disease.”

The conclusion we can draw from this incongruity is that perhaps we need to revisit our entire definition of the words “religious” and “spiritual.” Furthermore, as we shall see, these words may be ill-conceived in the first place. Indeed, the dissonance between mechanical ritual and soulful living compels us to re-examine the very meaning of Torah and Mitzvot, the true nature of Judaism.

8. Not in the Torah

Nowhere in the Torah, for instance, do you have references to the word “religion” or for that matter to “spirituality.” The Torah speaks in matter of fact terms. It states that God created heaven and earth, shaped the human being in the Divine Image and charged man and woman with the mission to “serve and protect” – to refine and elevate the universe through a comprehensive system of guidelines/commandments.

There is no commandment to “be religious” or to “be spiritual.” Expressions like “sanctify yourself” and “be holy” abound. “Serve God,” “stand in awe,” “be aware,” “know,” “act,” “love,” “emulate the Divine,” “walk in His ways,”² “be compassionate just as I am compassionate,” these are the principles that the Torah is comprised of.

²See, for example, this week's Torah reading – Deuteronomy 8:6.

9. Critical Question

Why? Because the core issue really comes down to one critical question: What is the true, inherent nature of the human being? What is the meaning of a soul?

If each of us is created in the Divine Image, then any word, “religious” or even “spiritual,” is a distorted adjective. Divine Image is not an adjective but a noun – not what we do but who we are. Our state of being. Being spiritual and religious is part and parcel – and actually the quintessence – of being human.

Which is why I was always troubled by the word “religious.” It always smacked of some unnatural prop that is added to being human. As if there are normal people and there are “religious” people.

10. An Oxymoron

In fact, I’d suggest that the phrase “religious person” is an unacceptable oxymoron. For if “religious” is a superimposed adjective, describing a certain type of individual, like saying a “happy person” or “yellow apple,” then who needs it? And why should we be in the least interested in an unnatural, appendage that just places demands on us? At best, the choice remains optional.

However, if our natural, inherent state is divine – because we were created in the Divine Image – then being religious or spiritual is not really a choice, just like being human is not a choice. Yes, we have the choice to act humanly or not, but that choice is basically whether we choose to be ourselves or defy our own nature.

What then are we to do with words like “religion” and “spirituality?”

These words – like all descriptive words – are superimposed adjectives that describe a type of person, a choice, an option.

And therein lies its undoing.

11. Many Adjectives

When selecting a school, a career or a place to vacation, or choosing from man-made menus, we have many different adjectives to choose from. Being surrounded and inundated by so many such options, we unfortunately apply the same attitude to the spiritual/religious realm.

However, the religious/spiritual journey is not an artificial add-on. It is the search for truth – for reality. And reality is not a superimposed state. Being real is not an action but a state of being. It is not an adjective or a verb but a noun.

So though there are people whose religion is a superimposed series of rituals (hence, their puzzlement at someone freely embracing those very same rituals), their behavior does not accurately depict the spiritual/religious experience.

Equally, the rejection of religion by many progressive thinkers is due to their perception that religion is a superimposed state.

Karl Marx wrote, “The more man puts into God, the less he retains within himself,” for he saw religion and God as *outside* forces, alien to man’s individual sense of self.

Put another way, in the cynical exchange of another Jewish luminary, Woody Allen:

A freethinking skeptic dismissingly asks her devout grandfather, “Grandpa, if you had to choose between God and the truth, which would you pick?” Without missing a beat the grandfather answers: “God.”

12. Nature of Judaism

There is another way. And to discover it, let us now revisit the very nature of Judaism – the meaning and purpose of the Torah and its commandments.

If Torah and its mitzvot were nothing more than superimposed laws – not inherent to human nature, but rules that help us co-exist, say like red lights and green lights that allow traffic to flow – then following these commandments would require nothing more than mechanical rituals, devoid of any spirit and soulfulness. No different than stopping at a red light or paying taxes, which does not necessitate any inner refinement.

In truth, however, Torah is the blueprint with which God created life. Torah, in effect, is life's operator's manual, instructing us how best to work the machine called "life." And its mitzvot are not merely commandments, for the word mitzvah means connection,³ and Jewish law derived from the Torah, *Halacha*, also means movement/growth.

Each mitzvah connects us with our soul and with our divine mission; it is an instrument that aligns our outer existence with its spiritual roots, and channels spiritual energy into our lives and into the world, allowing us to express and actualize our essential and inherent natures.

As we read this week in the Torah: "You must safeguard and keep the entire mandate that I am prescribing to you today. You will then survive, flourish, and come to occupy the land that God swore to your fathers."⁴

Why is safeguarding the Torah's laws a sure way to "survive" and "flourish"? If mitzvot were simple rituals then there would be no connection between performing them and our survival. But if we understand that by following Torah laws we are really living up to our true selves, then it is quite obvious why safeguarding this mandate will allow us to live healthy, flourishing lives.

³ It comes from the root of *tzavta v'chibur*.

⁴ Deuteronomy 8:1.

13. Return to Reality

Time to return not to religion, not to spirituality, but to *reality* – one that has not been hijacked by so-called religious people, nor one that has been discarded by so-called non-religious people.

Spirituality is not a ride on the cloud and religion is not a ritual act – both together are an expression of our inherent state of being. True faith dictates that, for our Divine Image to emerge and be actualized, we need a fusion of spirit and deed. We need disciplines that are not dead rituals, but dynamic tools saturated with soulfulness and inner vitality – like the strings of a musical instrument.

When we look at the Torah carefully, we see that it is not talking about some superimposed search; it's talking about the quintessential search for our own true self. The commands of God are not mechanical rituals, but vibrant instruments meant to help us connect to our inner self – to our soul.

For we each have a soul created in the Divine Image, and that soul is the essence of our being. Every aspect of life is driven by its inner energy. As we read this week in the Torah: “Not by bread alone does man live, but by the word of God.”⁵

14. What's the Conclusion?

So what's the conclusion? Are religion and spirituality one and the same or not?

It depends on how you define these terms. If they both describe the human discovery of self then they are synonymous.

In other words, spirituality is not just for the mystically-oriented, just as living a divinely-inspired life is not just for theologians. Spirituality is not only for the so-called “spiritual types.” It is the journey of *every* soul on earth, and it is experienced through the *mitzvot* – soulful rituals.

⁵Deuteronomy 8:3.

15. Challenge of Our Times

The challenge of our times – the challenge facing the so-called battle between science and religion, church and state – is finding a place for faith in a modern, secular, scientific world.

As long as ritual and spiritual are divorced from one another, the battles will continue to rage. The secular world will (perhaps rightfully) reject blind faith and vacuous ritual that does not work toward human refinement; and the religious world will shut out, in its insular fear, the free-spiritedness of open-minded inquiry. As long as religion is perceived as a superimposed “religious” journey for the initiated, why would the uninitiated embrace it?

But merging the two – the way it was always meant to be – with religion and spirituality joining as one (like a body and soul) in search for reality can appeal to all people, regardless of background.

Above all, the path to truth and reality has always been through the vehicle called bittul – humility, modesty and selflessness. That is a prerequisite for all people searching for truth, be they scientists or laymen, religious or secular.

I submit that we rename this quest for transcendence we have all embarked on. Instead of calling it the religious journey, or the spiritual odyssey, or the ethereal voyage, let us call it the search for REALITY.

Yes, just plain reality.

The polls should add a new question to their survey. They should ask their audiences to choose from the following options:

I aspire to be:

- a) Religious.
- b) Spiritual.
- c) Secular.
- d) Real.
- e) Don't know.

That would sure put things in stark context. Because reality is one or the other: It's either real or it's not.

Amen.