



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Shemini

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

April 20, 2012

Shemini

**Does Judaism Annihilate
Individuality?**



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

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ABSTRACT

Is there room for individuality in Judaism, or does religion demand conformity? How many people have turned away from their heritage because they felt their souls were asphyxiated by religious pressures?

And how many of us who are sticking with it feel that we are not just good enough Jews? We all know that we could do more ... and there are so many others who are quick to remind us just how much more *they* are doing and how much more we ought to do. We have the sense that if we only conformed more to the rules and behaved like those who keep each mitzvah to the letter, we'd be the Jews that we were meant to be. On the other hand, we also have a sense that if we did just that, we'd somehow disappear as individuals.

But is it all or nothing at all? Is it truly the question of total conformity which demands an abandonment of individuality? Is there a way to be a committed and passionate Jew while retaining your unique voice?

This is one of the most important questions of our times, for it goes to the heart of one of today's greatest distortions – which has become the source of endless anxiety and divisiveness.

How often, of late, has the debate cropped up between religious advocates ardently dictating certain standards and equally passionate opponents advocating personal freedoms? Whether it is abortion, the right to die, or other expressions of choice, it seems like an irresolvable dispute.

Nadav and Avihu faced this very dilemma in this week's Torah portion with tragic consequences. The lesson we learn from them, the message of Sefirat Ha'Omer, the beautiful story of the nightingale without wings and the women in a New Age bookstore on the West Coast who lost her religion – all teach us (the pitfalls of religious conformity and) how your individuality is a critical component in being a Jew.

DOES JUDAISM ANNIHILATE INDIVIDUALITY?

Conformity Vs. Independence: Discovering Your Wings

1. The Good and the Rest of Us (Humor)

One day God was looking down at earth and saw all of the rascally behavior that was going on. So He called one of His angels and sent the angel to earth for a time.

When the angel returned, he told God, "Yes, it is bad on earth – 95% are misbehaving and only 5% are not."

God thought for a moment and said, "Could it be as bad as that? Maybe I had better send down a second angel to get another opinion."

So God called another angel and sent him to earth for a time, too.

When the second angel returned he went to God and said, "Yes, it's true. The earth is in decline – 95% are misbehaving, and only 5% are being good."

God was not pleased. So He decided to email the 5% who were good because He wanted to encourage them, give them a little something to help them keep going.

Do you know what the email said?

No?

Okay, just wondering. I didn't get one either...

2. Are We Perfect Jews?

Which brings me to the question – how many of us feel we are perfect Jews? I would suspect that not one of us in this room.

We all know that we could do more ... and there are so many others who are quick to remind us just how much more *they* are doing and how much more we *ought* to do. We have a sense that if we only conformed more to the rules and behaved like those who keep each mitzvah to the letter, we'd be the Jews that we were meant to be. On the other hand, we also have a sense that if we did just that, we'd somehow disappear as individuals.

But is it all or nothing at all? Is it truly the question of total conformity which demands an abandonment of individuality?

3. Greatest Distortion

This is, in my opinion, one of the most important questions of our times, for it goes to the heart of one of today's greatest distortions – which has become the source of endless anxiety and divisiveness.

How often, of late, has the debate cropped up between religious advocates ardently dictating certain standards and equally passionate opponents advocating personal freedoms? Whether it is abortion, the right to die, or other expressions of choice, it seems like an irresolvable dispute.

And how many people have turned away from their heritage because they felt their souls were asphyxiated by the demands of religious conformity. (And I use the word “asphyxiated” intentionally.)

The dilemma is obvious:

Religion dictates the rigid commitment to an absolute system of laws and guidelines, while individuality is the free expression of a unique personality, independent of any system’s orders. Religion demands conformity, and conformity is the antithesis of individuality.

This, at least, is the perception of most people, including many who have embraced a religious lifestyle. They justify suppressing individuality in the name of religion, because – or so they argue – left on their own, people will gravitate toward anarchy and chaos. The benefits of religious discipline outweigh the virtues of independent expression, and therefore justify its suppression.

4. Major Flaw

The major flaw in this argument is this:

Faith dictates that the same God who gave us humans guidelines also created us as individuals – each one of us with our own unique personality, mindset and disposition.

From the beginning of time no two people ever existed that were alike! Indeed, the Mishna states: “Why was the human created as an individual? To teach us [the great individual responsibility] that each person must say ‘the entire universe was created for me.’”¹

Yes, some obstinate religionists may argue that our inherent individuality can be seen as the “enemy,” no different than the “evil inclination.” According to their thinking, God gave us individuality as a challenging voice that must be suppressed, lest we risk undermining the “system.”

¹ Mishne, Sanhedrin 37a..

I don't believe we need to spend time refuting this argument. Suffice it to say that according to this "thinking" no single innovation, no unique contribution, no unique melody would ever have been played in history had people suppressed their individuality in the name of religious conformity!

Can we really say that God created so many different people just in order that they all shed their differences and become the clones of others?! Is such a thing even possible?

5. The First Experience of Religious Dissonance

Nadav and Avihu were faced with this dilemma in this week's Torah portion, resulting in tragic consequences.

This can be considered the first documented challenge of balancing religious passion and individuality. And one that teaches us much about the dangers of religious commitment overwhelming our persons, and how we are to navigate in our spiritual journey.

This week's chapter describes a defining event in history: For the first time ever the Divine presence finds a home in the material universe – in the Mishkan, the holy Sanctuary. "Built me a Sanctuary and I will rest among you."² As the verse states: On this first momentous "opening" day of the Mishkan, "God's glory was revealed to all the people. Fire came forth from before God and consumed the burnt offering."³

You can imagine what kind of powerful reaction this must have caused amongst the people who witnessed this unprecedented revelation. What happened next? "When the people saw this, they raised their voices in praise and threw themselves on their faces" in complete awe.

²Exodus 25:8.

³Leviticus 9:23-24.

Then, in a moment of utter spiritual ecstasy, “Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan, placed fire on it and then incense. They offered before God a strange fire, which He had not instructed them. Fire came forth from God and it consumed them, and they died before God.”⁴

Aaron’s sons had a religious awakening, and in their sheer hunger and bliss, they were driven to enter the Holy of Holies, and got consumed by the very fire they were trying to contain.

What did they do wrong? They moved too fast and did so at their own volition, unprepared. The fire was Divine, but it was “strange” to them. They were not ready to contain it.

Though Nadav and Avihu were on a level loftier than any of us will ever attain, the lesson to us all is very clear:

True faith is a powerful force. Like a fire it has the power to warm and illuminate, but also the power to consume and destroy. When edging close to the fire great care has to be taken to ensure that you are able to take the heat and contain the light.

Do not lose yourself in the process of becoming Divine. You have to own your choices. Faith ought not be a “strange fire,” which is alien to you; it needs to be integrated into your being. If not, its intensity can burn you.

Does this then mean that we should not embrace Judaism until it is totally integrated? Absolutely not! An equally polarizing approach is to be so cautious of the fire that we never make a move.

Balance is the key: Knowing how to move forward at your own pace, in a way that doesn’t overwhelm and consume you. One mitzvah at a time. “Mitzvah goreres mitzvah,” our sages wisely tell us. One mitzvah brings along another.

⁴Ibid 10:1-2.

6. The Path to Reconciliation

So how do we reconcile our individuality with the seemingly inflexible discipline of religion?

Let me suggest that whenever addressing any touchy issue such as this one, it is critical to first dispel the myths that cloud the essence of the matter. Then we can look at the issue itself with new eyes and perhaps discover its original intent.

When discussing religion we must distinguish between man-made established systems that may or may not reflect the true meaning of faith, and the true meaning of religion.

I submit that most (if not all) opposition to religious ideas is based on the way *people* and their institutions have projected these ideas.

The same is true regarding the issue of conformity and individuality in religion. Despite the myths and stereotypes, Judaism is fiercely individualistic. Just look at how Jews argue about virtually everything. Everyone knows the joke: Three Jews in a room, three opinions, if not four. If their individual voices were suppressed for generations, Jews would not be so diverse and opinionated.

7. A Telling Story

Let me tell you here a story related to me by a colleague of mine.

This rabbi was invited to speak at a New Age bookstore on the West Coast, and after his talk a middle-aged woman approached him and told him this sad story:

She confided that she had grown up in an ultra-Orthodox community in Brooklyn and given a rigid and dogmatic education. Her questions about God and Judaism were answered by her parents and teachers with: “Be a *gut Yiddishe meidele* [girl] like your *Bobe und Elter-bobe* [grandmother and great grandmother], and stop thinking so much.” She was silenced again and again, not allowing her any expression.

She felt that her soul was “asphyxiated,” as she put it: “I felt deeply Jewish. And I was hungering for some answers, for some spiritual nourishment. Instead I was being invalidated and silenced. I was dying inside. I was just not made to be a conformist.”

Her journey took her away from home, away from Judaism – which, she was sure was not a *spiritual* path but a *dogmatic* path – and into experimentation with Eastern religions. At the time of her encounter with my colleague, she was a practicing Buddhist.

She felt sad about her choice, but she also felt she had no choice.

8. The Nightingale Without Wings

My colleague empathized with her.

After all, we all can – can we not?

Who can say what anyone of us would have done if we felt our soul had been asphyxiated.

But I hope, all of us sitting here, know that this woman had been taught only half of Judaism. She was taught the strict laws and disciplines of the tradition – the body of Torah – but not its soul.

What do I mean by that?

Let me explain by means of this parable.

At the beginning of creation, a nightingale came to complain before God.

“I thank you for my beautiful voice,” she said, “I love to sing into the night. However my voice also attracts predators. A hungry animal looking for a nice meal is drawn to my voice. Therefore, I cannot sing in peace. I know that seeing me, a little bird perched on a branch, they will pursue me for their next meal. Please God, give me a defense with which I can protect myself from predators.”

God offered her a beak. The nightingale examined it and declined it, saying: “Please God. I’m a beautiful bird. A nose like that would deface an elegant bird like me.”

God then offered her claws. And again, the nightingale rejected the offer: “Such ugly long nails – so unbecoming.”

Finally God offered her a set of wings. The bird looked at the two wings and exclaimed: “Master of the Universe. You created us all with profound wisdom and design. Therefore, I don’t understand this. I have enough body weight to carry with me when I need to escape predators. You’re now giving me two more pieces of flesh that just add more body weight and will make it more difficult for me to escape!”

God replied: “No, little bird. With these wings you’ll be able to fly and soar far away from your enemies.”

9. The Point

So here is the point:

The Zohar says that Torah and mitzvot have both a body and a soul. The body is the mechanics of the mitzvah (what to do, how to do it); the soul is the inner spirit and meaning behind each mitzvah, and how it impacts our personal lives.

The mitzvot, the laws of the Torah, are commitments that clearly add more “body weight” and responsibility to a person’s life. Judaism, after all, regulates every aspect of life: how to love, how to eat, how to work, how to wake up, how to sleep, how to even cut your nails... It’s easier and lighter to live a life without this heavy responsibility.

But, if you only see the “body” of the mitzvot, then they can appear as “dead weight.” However when you learn to access their true purpose (their soul) you discover that they are “wings” to fly with – wings that lift and carry you to places you could never reach on your own.

There is no bird in the world (even one wanting to lose weight...) that would prefer to be wingless. It’s sad to see a grounded bird that cannot fly. But what’s even sadder is a bird that has wings and doesn’t know how to use them.

Unfortunately, an oppressive home and a dogmatic education can clip our wings, or conceal the fact that we have them. All we feel then is a lot of body weight.

But once we recognize the “wings” of the mitzvot, then they don’t feel like body weight at all; quite the contrary: they lift us and allow us to soar above and beyond.

The mitzvot are not merely commandments, they are means to transcendence. They connect us to our own essence, with our calling, with our destiny, with our source in God.

10. Optional Conclusion (Or Continue to #11)

What my colleague suggested to the woman who confided in him her sad story was this:

If you want to be a true free spirit – and express your deepest individuality – return to your roots and teach young people to find in their tradition what you were deprived of.

Teach them the soul of Torah; teach them how to fly on its wings.

This is a task incumbent on us all. Amen.

11. Integration

And therein lies the eloquent integration of religious discipline and individuality.

If the Torah’s mitzvot were superimposed guidelines, then they would contradict our unique personalities, and the only way to embrace them would be to conform and suppress our individual selves.

However, as connections to the source, mitzvot actually uncover the true inherent nature of our being. They are wings that allow our souls to soar to the greatest heights.

A good example of this is the discipline of music:

Anyone who wishes to play or compose music must “conform” to an absolute, immutable system. But no musician would call it “conforming” for every musician sees it as “freeing.” By submitting to this framework, the musician is able to uncover the true power of music and create melodies that touch the deepest place in another heart, and transport himself and the listener to unprecedented heights.

Imagine, then, a musical discipline whose laws are dictated by the Inventor and Creator of life – by the One who has intimate knowledge of life’s every strength and every vulnerability, of its every potential and its every sensitivity.

Yes, the Torah presents spiritual paragons and ethical models for us to live up to. We are taught to emulate Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. But this is not in order that we squash our personalities and unique talents.

On the contrary. This is so that we can be inspired by these great people to use our individuality to express our deepest faculties.

12. The Big Myth

The big myth is that Judaism is about conformity.

In fact, the earliest roots of Judaism are all about rebellion against the status quo. The first Jew – and father of all nations – was the first revolutionary. Abraham shattered the idols in his father’s home and rebelled against the entire standard of living of his times.

Abraham instilled that revolutionary spirit into his children. They would not bow to idols. They would not do as others around them did. Throughout history, they stood out for their revolutionary attitude – refusing to conform to the norm of the land, and setting a visionary course to a brighter future.

13. Fear and Insecurity

I believe that the reason so many religious institutions gravitate toward suppression rather than encourage the unique voice is out of fear and insecurity. It seems easier to keep people in line by suppressing individual expression.

Other reasons are ignorance and lack of confidence. Many are more aware of the body of Torah than its soul. Lacking the confidence in the soul's ability to soar, they tend to put on "blinders" and retreat toward the comfort of conformity.

Those of us who know that this is wrong must stand up and in the spirit of Abraham revive our educational system. We must teach our children that traditional disciplines are musical notes ... that they are wings that allow us to fly and express our deepest selves.

Obviously there is a need to channel our individuality into a productive force, and not allow it to run amuck with no direction. But that is the challenge not of individuality, but of subjectivity. We must not allow our subjective selves to cloud our ethical judgment.

However, subjectivity should not be confused with individuality -- our Divine uniqueness that give us our indispensable mission in this universe.

What my colleague suggested to the woman who confided in him her sad story was this:

If you want to be a true free spirit - and express your deepest individuality - return to your roots and teach young people to find in their tradition what you were deprived of.

Teach them the soul of Torah; teach them how to fly on its wings.

This is a task incumbent on us all. [Amen]

14. The Delicate Dance (Optional)

The outcome of the Nadav and Avihu story is not that no one shall ever enter the holy sanctuary; rather, God lays out an entire set of rules, a process, how one is to enter the holy place and remain intact.

This delicate dance is especially acute for sensitive souls, who sense the power of the fire. Aaron's sons were the most spiritual of them all, as Moses makes it abundantly clear that their demise was a result of their greatness. It was their deep love and passion for the Divine that caused them to enter the Temple unprepared (as the Ohr haChaim explains). As Moses told Aaron that his sons experience fulfilled God's words, "I will be sanctified among those close to Me, and I will thus be glorified."

Deep souls hungry for spirituality and cognizant of its intimate power have to be especially careful when faced with a Divine experience.

Too often religion is presented in a didactic and dogmatic way. Peer and social pressure is applied demanding conformity. And you – the individual – are lost in the process. While there is value in inspiring someone with faith and there is a notion of joining a community, and not standing on a side (*"al tifrosh min hatzibbur"*), at the same time, however, the power of community is only possible once and after an individual has found his distinct place and unique voice, then he can join and actually help create a community, to which he is loyal. But the group is not meant to stunt or annihilate the individual, rather to enhance him. First, we must cultivate self-confidence, and then allow the individual to make and own his choices.

As important as a community may be, as welcoming as a religious group may be – what is even more important is that the individual entering the community be allowed and encouraged at his or her own pace. To ensure that newfound spiritual truth be integrated into his or her being.

This is true even in the purest form of religious experience. How much more so when it is being presented by flawed human beings, who themselves are hardly role models and paragons of spiritual refinement.

Too often, certain teachers and guides and mentors see their role as one of prodding along, directing, even babysitting for a person who is just being initiated into Judaism. Even if their intentions are right, it is vital to gauge the needs of the individual, not the needs of the teacher, lest you end up burning the person who is not yet ready for such spiritual enlightenment.

How much more so when the teacher is far from perfect and may not be the best representative of the message. Then, it is of critical importance, that the teacher qualify his role and humbly acknowledge how he and all of us are in the same boat, and are available to help each other.

So while it's true that children need to be directed in the path of faith, and we all, even adults, are in need of the support and guidance of teachers and mentors, yet, the ultimate goal is not to create dependencies but independence. Because after all is said and done, the path of faith is not about the teacher, nor is it about the community; it is about God and His personal relationship with each one of us. The spiritual path is not a superimposed one but one that allows and facilitates the true human personality to emerge – the Divine Image in which each of us individually was created.

The ultimate role of a teacher, a mentor and a Rabbi is to inspire, motivate and empower each of us in that direction. If an adult is unable to own his faith there is something seriously wrong.

Bureaucracy more than religion is the root of the attitude that religion is an elitist country club, with a few “gifted” authorities – blessed with being born religious and having received a solid education, achieved scholar status and authority – bestowing their benevolence on others and allow them into the inner club. Either we believe that all people were created equally in the Divine Image or we don't. Religion is not an end in itself; it is not about a set of rituals and traditions. It is about allowing the soul free, and actualizing the potential within each one of us.

The spiritual journey is not about self-indulgence. Neither is it about scoring points. It is the sacred journey of discovering your life mission. It is a Divine journey about releasing your soul, and transforming your corner of the universe into a home for God. So though we need the support from communities and structure, yet above all it is a fiercely personal journey – that has little to do with other people's expectations and pressures.

This is the profound and yet simple lesson each one of us today can glean from Nadav and Avihu: Own your faith; make it yours; integrate it. Don't allow it to be strange to you. Or else...

Once it becomes yours then you will be less vulnerable to the predators, to the community and to the pressures around us. The fire, especially in the hands of those that don't always appreciate it, can be a force that annihilates personalities and ends up being used as yet another weapon of control.

It is up to each of us to understand that we are adults and that we assume responsibility for our choices, with the full and complete ability to live up to them.

Each of us needs to *own* our Judaism; where you can express your faith with your beautiful and unique voice.

Don't be afraid of yourself. Don't be afraid of those that want you to conform. The story of history is that the masses have always tried to intimidate the spirited few. It was our great father Abraham that pioneered the path of individuality. Defying the mainstream he forged a path toward God.

Today too we need you to be our Abraham. You, who have been burned by the fire, teach us how to walk slowly, but proudly.

It is vital that we create a network, a healthy and powerful synergy of like-minded individuals, who are on the spiritual journey and have yet to find their place. We must create grass-root connections (if not communities). So much good can grow out of that.

15. Counting the Omer

The best way to teach others is by our own personal example. And to set such an example, we must constantly be working on ourselves, improving ourselves, refining ourselves.

To fulfill the Torah's commandments better – we should not necessarily do more or be more strict. If we are lax, that might be a course that we should follow, but there is more to it. Our Torah observance needs to be saturated with sanctity and sensitivity, so that our observance permeates our beings and personalities and transforms our behavioral mechanisms.

The Prophet Isaiah put it bluntly when he said in the name of God:

“These people come near to Me with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are removed from Me. Their reverence for Me consists of rules learned by rote from men.”⁵

Religion today is often associated with dogma, anger, condescension, judgmentalism, insensitivity and even arrogance – anything but deep empathy and warmth. How is that possible? How can a person devoted to God not be the most refined person on earth?

The answer lies in the profound dissonance that is possible in our dark universe, where the Divine reality is shrouded in layers upon layers of coarse materialism.

To counter this sad state of affairs, we were given the mitzvah of Counting the Omer and refining our characters just at the high point as we were leaving Egypt – to teach all generations that the religious high must be drawn into our personal behaviors ... that a Divine experience is not complete and will not hold unless it refines our attitudes, sensitizes our senses and simply makes us better, more giving, more loving human beings.

“And you shall count for yourselves (*U'sefartem lochem*)...” the command states.

⁵ Isaiah 29:13.

U'sefartem (from the word *safir*, the lustrous sapphire stone) also means "you shall shine." And the additional word *lochem* ("for yourselves") emphasizes that this consists not merely of counting, but of internal work.

We need to internalize and integrate the experience, by refining our personalities to the point that we *shine for ourselves* – we emanate a glow and an aura from within that only comes from the refined beauty of a transformed psyche.

Freedom – even the great Exodus led by God – is not complete until we integrate the experience into our personal lives. Passover gave us the Divine gift of freedom, taking us out of all our constraints and fears. That was step one. But that alone doesn't mean that we are free from *within*. True freedom is possible only when we free ourselves from our own emotional subjectivity and trappings, through the thorough process of introspection and character growth in the 49 days of the Omer.

Each day we count, we reflect, refine and illuminate another aspect of our emotional personality.

Then and only then do we become ready to absorb the 50th day – the Sinai experience, an even greater transcendent dimension, when we receive the Divine blueprint and power to fuse matter and spirit.

We don't count the 50th day, but we cannot reach it unless we first count and refine our 49 (7x7) personality features.

What a fascinating way to look at the post-holiday period. Usually one would think that after a long and beautiful holiday we return to our regular routines and move on. Omer tells us that, as Passover ends, we don't just gorge ourselves on pizza and pasta and reenter our quotidian lives. We now have the great responsibility and the glorious opportunity to demonstrate our ability to shine – to shine from within – and illuminate our environment with distinction and dignity.

Each of us is an individual, with unique strengths and resources. You each have your unique voice, waiting to be released. Judaism's structures, its mechanics, offer us wings to allow us to soar to great heights. May we all learn to recognize these wings and use them to the fullest. To integrate our individuality with our faith, and know that we can reach the sky and beyond.

Access your wings. Help your children access their wings. Live a glorious and majestic life. Don't remain grounded. Fly. Soar.

Amen.