

"MAN AS INHERITANCE"

The Jewish Concept of Religion

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It is interesting to note that the Prophet Zechariah, whose message we read the first day of Sukkot, declares that ^{at} the end of days, the Lord will demand of the nations of the world that they observe the festival of Sukkot. What a seemingly dissonant note in the sublime vision of the Messianic era! Beat your swords into ploughshares, practice universal peace, brotherhood, and justice -- and build a sukkah!

Even more astonishing is the further development of this theme in the Talmud (Avodah Zarah 3a). On the great Day of Judgment, the Sages tell us, G-d will demand an accounting of the umot ha-olam, the nations of the world. They will argue, tenah lanu me'rosh ve'naasenah, give us the Torah now and we shall observe it. G-d will dismiss this request, asking where they were until now. Had they not had over 3,000 years to learn Torah and practice its precepts? Ef al pi ken, mitzvah kalah yesh li ve'sukkah shemah, lekhu va'asu otah, nevertheless, I have a mitzvah that is easy to perform, quite inexpensive, and that is the building and dwelling in the sukkah -- go ahead and observe it. Immediately each of them will build himself a sukkah on his roof. But then Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu makdir alehem ohamah bi'tekufat tammuz, ve'khol echad ve'echad meva'et be'sukkato ve'yotzei, G-d will cause a hot summer sun to blaze upon them, and because of the discomfort they will contemptuously reject the sukkah and retire to the cool convenience of their own parlors. Truly a remarkable vision of things to come!

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The late Rav Kook, of blessed memory, saw in this rather strange Aggadah the fundamental difference between Jew and non-Jew in their whole grasp of religion, in the very structure and form of religion. There is no doubt, he maintains, that if G-d would ask of the amot ha-olam to stand erect, or kneel, in prayer for 24 hours, and subject them to the same burning midday sun, that they would not move. Their piety and religious integrity would inspire them to resist all discomforts for the sake of their genuinely held beliefs. For the non-Jewish mind can understand and approve the expression of the spirit in terms of worship, prayer, a service. The proper, rational, natural form of religious devotion is the prayerful mood of hushed reverence in the atmosphere of the cathedral. What the Gentile cannot accept, however, is the Jewish expression of religion in terms of mitzvot maasiyot, in the regimen of practical observances. How can eating and drinking and sleeping in a weak-walled booth, unprotected from the elements, with pieces of sekhakh falling into your food -- how can this be equated with true religion?

Religion, to the Gentile, is largely a psychological phenomenon: the experience of conversation, the feelings of sacredness, what Rudolf Otto calls the awareness of the "numinous." To the Jew, however, religion is expressed by objective deeds more than by subjective moods, by a practical program of holiness that transcends the narrow confines of the synagogue and that permeates all of life. And the sukkah is an excellent example of this essential Jewish attitude.

The non-Jewish world has rarely understood or sympathized with our concept of an observance-centered religion. The Christians therefore twisted the word "Pharisaism" into an epithet of derision and scorn. Secularists, contemplating our Shabbat and Kashruth and Taharat Ha-mishpachah, decided that we were practicing a hide-bound traditionalism, that we were irrationally compulsive, that we suffered from a mass psychological aberration with our

taboos in some cases harking back to the primitive notions of the cave man.

Little did they or do they understand that our mitzvot maasiyot, far from being a collective meshugaat, are the means towards true spiritual eminence, that only through such observances can a people in its entirety aspire to become a kehillah kedoshah, a saintly community. In the Jewish sukkah you may risk a few pieces of sekhakh falling down, but there is also the opportunity for many souls to rise up.

A great non-Jew, one of the few who understood us properly, defined the differences in a very concise manner. John Macmurray, in his A Clue to History, says that whereas other peoples have a religion, Jews are the only ones who were and are religious, for their religion is not confined to a few holy times and holy places, but is a synthesis of all and covers all aspects of existence, both individual and collective. This indeed is the achievement of mitzvot maasiyot such as the sukkah: it provides that not only do we have a religion, but that we be religious in every expression of life and personality.

If we have a religion, then religion is a part of existence and G-d, too, plays a role in life. If we are religious, then religion is all of existence, and G-d is not only another actor, but the producer and director of the drama: the Borei and the Mekayem of all that is.

If we have a religion, then we ultimately begin to think that we discovered G-d, and therefore our prayer degenerates into the presentation ^{to} of Him of a list of needs which we ask Him to satisfy for us as our Cosmic Servant. If, however, we are religious, then we recognize that it is G-d Who discovered us -- an matzati be-midbar -- and then we become His servants, not only through the formal act of acknowledgement in prayer but throughout all of life in the form of the practical mitzvot.

If we only have religion, then it is important to us what we think of G-d. But if we are religious, then far more important to us is what G-d thinks of us.

He who has a religion may write theology books to ascertain what man believes about G-d. He who is religious reads the Torah to learn what G-d believes about man.

The Torah reading for this morning tells of the epilogue to the story of the national disaster of the worship of the Golden Calf. I believe that a most significant aspect of this historic sin, aside from the essential act of idolatry, was the transformation from a Jewish to a non-Jewish concept of religion, from a people who were religious to a people who now merely have a religion. It was immediately after the Children of Israel fashioned the Golden Calf that we read, va-yashkimu mi-macharat va-yaalu olot va-yagishu shelamin, bright and early the next morning they brought sacrifices to the Calf, worshipped it, prayed -- and were done with their religious duties! For, abruptly thereafter, va-yeshav ha-am le'echol ve'shato, the people sat down to eat and drink. Their religion was finished, the cult was practiced, now they were free from it and could enjoy the profane pleasures of life without interference. They forgot what Moses had taught them -- that religion is all of life, that the world of the spirit is affected even by what and how you eat, by how much you drink, by the blessing before you indulge and the bentchin afterwards. They forgot this, and no wonder that in the same breath, as it were, the Torah informs us that va-yakumu ha-am le'tzachek, the people arose to make sport -- which our Rabbis correctly interpret as meaning the indulgence in idolatry, sexual immorality, and bloodshed. For if religion has no bearing on such mundane matters as diet, as kashruth and sukkah, then it has no bearing on morality and the value of life.

How well we can therefore understand the prayer of Moses after this act of treachery. We read it this morning, and recited it numerous times during the High Holidays: after pleading ve'salachta la-avonenu u-le'chatotenu, forgive us our sins and our transgressions, Moses adds one significant word: u-nechaltanu. What does that mean? A few commentators (Yonatahn ben Uziel, and Rashi in another version) translate: "and give us an inheritance." But most commentators, and they represent the genuine Jewish spirit, say with ^SRashi: ve'titnenu lekha nachalah, make us Thy inheritance, we want to become your nachalah, your very own possession. How aptly the Torah captures the Jewish philosophy of religion in one word! We do not have a religion because we have a G-d; we are religious because G-d has us, because we are His inheritance!

If u-nechaltanu, then it is not enough merely to worship, no matter how sincerely, at certain times and in certain places. It is our duty to carry out His will everywhere and at all times, by means of the practical commandments -- of which sukkah is an example par excellence -- and thus sublimate all of life to the highest levels of spiritual exaltedness.

When Jews reject what the sukkah stands for and adopt the non-Jewish approach, then they can at most have a religion, and write books boasting that the Jews gave G-d to the world. When they are genuinely Jewish, and regard themselves as a divine nachalah, they will so live that G-d will be able to boast that He gave the Jews to the world. When we assimilate the gentile forms of religion, then religion as such becomes a part of culture, even an aspect of Jewish nationalism. But when we are truly religious in the Jewish sense, both culture and nationalism are part of Torah. At most, he who has a religion will, like the Philosophers, try to grasp G-d. He who is Jewishly religious will, like the Prophets, feel grasped by G-d. Dr. Yisrael Eldad put it this way: the philosophers, as the word itself indicates, are "lovers of wisdom." The Prophets, however, were wise in the ways of love.

What should u-nechaltanu mean to us? What are the consequences of considering yourself an inheritance of the Lord?

He who is a nachalah of G-d will always act in a manner calculated not to embarrass G-d or those who bear His image -- all our fellow-men. He will eat and drink like a human, not like an animal or a pagan. He will give primacy to Torah above all else. He will give generously and charitably, because he recognizes that all he has truly belongs to G-d. Nay, more than that: he will give happily and without complaining and grumbling because he acknowledges that not only what he has but also what he is stems from G-d: u-nechalatanu. This is the teaching of Torah: al yera levevekha be'titekha. The Jew who considers himself nachalah will perform the mitzvot with joy, not in a begrudging way, for he is thus expressing his whole purpose in life.

Let us conclude our remarks in the same way Solomon concluded his Kohelleth which we read this morning:

Sof davar ha-kol nishma: the end of the matter, after all is said and done, is this: et ha-Elokim yera, fear G-d; like all other religions, Judaism partakes of the universal expression of religion in the reverence of the synagogue, the awe of the divine Presence, the prayerful attitude and stance. But more than that: et mitzvotav shemor -- observe His commandments. It is not enough to have a religion; you must be religious, by observing the mitzvot maasiyot such as sukkah and pesach, tefillin and tsitzit, kashrut and shabbat.

Then, and only then, when Torah will, through the mitzvot, have permeated all of life, when we will have acted as a true nachalah of the Almighty, will we appreciate ki geh kol ha-adam, that this is all of man. When we will have consecrated all that makes us adam, human, will we indeed be completely human, children of G-d created in His image. Then we shall return to Him "with all thy heart and all thy soul and all thy might."