

MAN AND HIS NEEDS

A team of Yale University researchers recently conducted a survey of third generation American Jews in suburban Minneapolis. The survey has ~~recently~~ been published in a book called "Children of the Gilded Ghetto." This survey study yielded paradoxical results. The conclusions were hopeful, yet depressing. Thus, 89% of the population studied was affiliated with synagogues, but only 5% selected the synagogue they worship in on the basis of conviction. So too, 90% thought that religious education was important for their children, but the overwhelming majority decided to give their children no more than Sunday school education. In the words of one man who was interviewed, "I don't want my child to get too much religious training, just enough to know what religion it is they are not observing."

How can we account for this high rate of affiliation and low quality of conviction? How can we explain this phenomenon of belongingness without meaningfulness?

From among a number of observations made by the authors, this one statement strikes home: "Judaism has become a commodity serving both the psyche of individual Jews, and the survival of the Jewish community."

No wonder the picture is so dim, no wonder there is so much shallowness! For our third generation Jews have been misled into a profound misunderstanding of the whole nature of religion in a most fundamental way. The fallacy lies in the new concept of religion: it is conceived of as a commodity, as if religion was made to serve man, to fill a need of man - and that is its justification: as long as religion fills a need, it is acceptable. Man has a need to establish his identity; religion fills the need. Men have a need for social solidarity; religion gives it to them. We all seek a way of being American in <sup>the</sup> social structure of our times; Judaism provides it for us. We seek consolation in times of grief, companionship in times of solitude, assurance in times of doubt; religion is here to serve us.

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Our children need a sense of confidence; we teach them religion in order to give them that. As Jews specifically, we need something to serve us as a bridge between American Jewry and Israel Jewry, something to assure our own survival; and so we have Torah and Judaism to ~~serve~~ <sup>for these</sup> our purposes.

This is a modern heresy, one which does not deny single aspects of our faith but, rather, turns religion on its head, upside down. This anthropocentrism has appeared often in history under many disguises. But Judaism has always opposed it, for in our view of the world, G-d is always <sup>at the center</sup> ~~our defender~~, man at the periphery. When G-d is displaced from his <sup>centrality</sup> ~~tranquility~~, and man instead becomes <sup>the</sup> ~~a~~ measure of all things, then we have not true religion but the idol<sup>a</sup> ~~try~~ <sup>life</sup> of man. This is, indeed, a childish and immature way of approaching <sup>the</sup> universe and <sup>life</sup> ~~light~~. Like spoiled children, we imagine as if all existence came about in order to serve us.

The result of this erroneous conception of religion is a violation of the whole body of tradition; for if religion comes only to fill my need, and since my needs change from time to time, then religion too must be changed and modified in order to keep pace with man's changing desires. But then something interesting happened<sup>s</sup>: the religion that I accepted because it fill<sup>ed</sup> ~~a~~ my need, ~~now~~ disappointments me sorely! Religion no longer is an anchor of stability; in fact, it no longer tells me the truth - for if something was true yesterday, why is it not true today or tomorrow? So religion no longer satisfied<sup>s</sup> ~~me~~ at all. If I accept religion only because of what it can do for me, I discover that it can do very little for me. Let us rephrase that, in the fashion of our time, as a "law": "The more religion is directed to the satisfaction of man's need<sup>s</sup>, the less does it succeed in satisfying them."

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And then there is another set of results that issues from this misconception of religion. The synagogue is no longer regarded as an institution where man serves G-d, but a service organization where G-d becomes the excuse for serving man. It is no longer the "services" which are the center of the synagogue's life, but "activities" - feverish, but secular, ~~and~~ divorced from any religious contact. <sup>The</sup> Rabbi is no longer a teacher who instructs Jews <sup>in</sup> ~~and~~ Torah, but a functionary who fulfills the role of a need-satisfier. And membership in a synagogue is no longer a matter of spiritual <sup>of</sup> conviction, but <sup>A</sup> social convenience, status, and prestige.

Traditional Judaism, therefore, must reject the whole philosophy which <sup>conceives of</sup> feeds religion as the service of man and a way of filling certain special needs of his. Of course, there is no doubt that religion does fill specific needs; <sup>it</sup> gives man solace, a feeling of peace and tranquility, a sense of hope, a promise for the future, a feeling of confidence, and companionship for his loneliness. But these are only side-products, not the purpose for which we consciously accept religion. A good parent may provide his children with driving lessons, thus filling a need - but that is not the purpose of being a parent. A good president or general or <sup>or</sup> principle may inspire confidence in his charges by providing them with a "father image" - but this is not the purpose of a president or general or <sup>or</sup> principle. In the same way, religion may still serve a need, but its true purpose far transcends this service. As Prof. Heschel put it, a truly Jewish approach is to ask, not what do I want of G-d, but what does G-d want of me; not what do I want to get out of life, but what should life get out of me.

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In our <sup>2a</sup>Sidrah we read an interesting dialogue, "And Moses spoke before the Lord, saying: Behold, the children of Israel have not listened unto me; how then shall Pharaoh hear me, va'ani aral sefatayim - and I am of unclean lips?"

In response to this, we read, the next verse, "and the Lord spoke unto Moses and unto Aaron, and gave them a charge unto the children of Israel, and unto Pharaoh King of Egypt to bring the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 6:12,13).

That second verse is unclear. Wherever the Torah mentions that the Lord spoke to Moses or anyone else, the gist of the message is recorded. Here we are merely told that G-d spoke, but we are not informed what G-d said. The Rabbis fill this gap as follows: amar lahem, heyu yod'im she'sarvanim ve'tarchanim he'em, ela al menat she'tekablu alekhem she'yihyu mekalelim et'hem ve'soklim etkhem ba'avanim (Sifri). "G-d told them, I want you to know that the children of Israel are an obstinate people and a troubling people, and therefore you now are given leadership of this people only on condition that you know that the results may very well be that instead of being grateful to you, they will curse you and stone you."

This is an interesting insight into the risks and dangers of leadership. But what does this have to do with the complaint and the question of Moses?

On the basis of our theme, I believe we can appreciate the nature of this dialogue according to the Rabbi. Moses was an aral sefatayim - a stutterer and a stammerer. He was <sup>self-</sup>so conscious of his speech impediment, of his obvious blemish.

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Now, if G-d and Torah, if religion and revelation have as their purpose only filling man's need, then Moses, at that time, needed one of two things: either blessed and anonymity, where he can live out his days in obscure happiness as a Prince of the House of Pharaoh - or else, a good speech therapist. That is why Moses complained: va'ani aral sefatayim - "and I am of unclean lips." What I need most, G-d ~~is what~~ Moses probably thought, <sup>is</sup> to be let alone, not to be instructed to speak ~~both~~ to large masses of my people and to the King of Egypt.

But G-d's answer was clear enough. Religion was not made to serve you, Moses, but the reverse: you will have to serve it, serve G-d, serve your people. You will have to be exposed to all the embarrassment of stuttering in the royal court, and of seeing the snickering courtiers ridiculing you from the sidelines. You will have to bring your own sensitivity as a sacrifice, because there is a mission that is big

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satisfying  
than your personal needs, <sup>something</sup> that transcends your wants and desires. In fact, when you speak to Israel, remember this - for they too will expect you to appease and comfort them. They too will accept that your function will be to fill their needs, to assuage their feelings, pamper to their prejudices, confirm their bias. You will have to educate them to the fact that a people of G-d must serve G-d, and not the other way around. It is a dangerous mission - you may yet find them cursing and stoning you because you will not stoop to becoming a mere functionary who fills needs!

Certainly, then, the modern conception of religion as a need<sup>^</sup>-filler is erroneous. Man, at Mount Sinai, needed graven images in order to better be able to visualize G-d - but G-d said lo taaseh lekha kol pessel. Man wanted flesh, and G-d gave spirit. In fact, our Rabbis<sup>^</sup> tell us that G-d had to force the children of Israel to accept the Torah. He raised Mount Sinai above their heads like a barrel and said to them, if you accept the Torah, good and well; but if you refuse, this shall be your burial place - v'im lav, sham tehe kevuratkhem. The prophet<sup>^</sup> did not fill the needs of the Jews - if that had been their function, Isaiah would not have been killed, Jeremiah would not have been jailed, Elijah would not have been persecuted.

The function of religion, synagogue, rabbis<sup>^</sup>, teachers of Torah, with regard to the needs of the people, lies in a completely different direction. I would say they are two in number.

First, religion tells man that although he has many needs, above all he needs to be needed. Torah tells the Jew that G-d needs him, so to speak, for his purposes. Each of us is here because G-d wants him or her for his design: to help the ill<sup>^</sup> to care for the aged and infirmed, to teach Torah, to build school<sup>^</sup>, to spread hope and confidence, to inspire others to be able to smile. Often we complain that we seek G-d and cannot find him. Maybe it is because he seeks us and, so often,

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we are unavailable to him.

The second aspect of religion with regard to need, is to teach man what he really needs. Torah tells man that all too often what he thinks he needs, he really doesn't; and what he thinks he doesn't, he really does. Philo, in his book On the Unchangeability of G-d, tells of a wise man who noticed a caravan carrying all kinds of precious stones and good things. His comment was, "see how many things there are of which I have no need!"

What do most people think they need? - More leisure, more luxury, more trinkets, more stylish clothing, better furnishings, fancier cars, more complicated appliances, greater status. How many people feel that they truly need: piety, greatness, excellence, wisdom, a passion for the right and a compassion for the wronged?

Yet this is precisely what religion teaches us. In the Shemoneh Esreh we present our needs to G-d - not our needs as we imagine them, but <sup>as they</sup> really are! Thus, we need prosperity and ~~thus~~ ask for birkhat ha-shanim; we need and ask for healing - refa'enu; we need and ask for G-d's assistance in our moments of personal anguish and crisis: <sup>re'eh-na</sup> refa'enu. But the Siddur <sup>also</sup> teaches us that we have needs of which we might never have thought otherwise: chokhmah, t<sup>e</sup>shuvah, selichah, mishpat, tzaddikim, shekhinah le'tziyon - wisdom, repentance, forgiveness, justice, saints and scholars, the return of the Divine Presence <sup>to Zion</sup> ~~desired~~! So religion teaches us what to ask for, what to request, what to want - what to need!

Let us conclude with a short prayer - <sup>short also</sup> ~~all~~ in a <sup>formal</sup> technical sense. We are taught by our ~~Rabbis~~ of the Mishnah (Berakhot 28b): Ha-holekh bi'mekom sakkanah mitpallel tefillah ketzarah. "He who goes in a place of danger need not pray the entire service, but it is sufficient if he offers a short prayer." What is this prayer that one may offer in times of danger? We read in the Talmud (Ber. 29b):

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Acherim omrom: Tzorkhei amkha Yisrael Merubim, ve'daatan ketzarah, yehi ratzon  
mi-lefanekha ha-Shem Elokenu she'titen le'khol echad ve'echad kedei parnasato  
u-le'khol ge'riyah u-geviyah kdei machsorah ve'ha-tov be'enekha asch. (This last  
phrase appears in the text of Alfasi, Maimonides, and R-Asher), Barukh atta ha-Shem  
shome'a tefillah. "Others say: 'the needs of <sup>Thy</sup> ~~your~~ people Israel are many, and their  
intellect is inadequate; may it be <sup>Thy</sup> will, O Lord our G-d, that <sup>Thou</sup> ~~you~~ give to each  
one according to his needs, and to everybody what he is lacking, and what is good  
in <sup>Thine</sup> ~~thy~~ eyes do Thou do; blessed art Thou, O Lord, who hears our prayer."

When we find ourselves in time of trouble, distress, crisis, then we realize that  
perhaps we have been forgetting our purpose in life and misunderstanding the Torah  
and Judaism; At such a time, we appreciate that religion is not meant to serve us  
and fill our needs, for indeed we do not even know what we really need. And so  
at a time of Sakkanah we pray: O G-d, <sup>your</sup> people Israel have many needs, some  
real and some imagine<sup>d</sup>, some proper and some improper, some worthy and some un-  
worthy. Daataim Ketzarah - their intellect is inadequate, their minds are too  
weak / to be able to distinguish between the right and the wrong needs. Therefore,  
Almighty <sup>G-d</sup> ~~there~~, give us what <sup>you</sup> know we need. Grant us enough to get along on,  
and above that minimum "do what is good in <sup>Thine</sup> eyes" - give us more than enough  
of what is truly "good" for us, spiritually and materially, for body and soul. For  
how often do we err in deciding what is really "good" for us!

Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who hears our prayers; and, knowing the difference  
between the proper and the improper requests, give ear only to our true needs, while  
graciously and lovingly ignoring our petition for the fulfillment of the wrong  
needs.