

Toldot 5771

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We were talking about attendance at services a few nights ago at the ritual committee meeting. I heard about the history of attempts to get people to come to services: starting services earlier, starting services later, shortening services, providing extended kiddushes or full breakfasts, calling board members to attend, scheduling hosts for onegs, more English and on and on. Then one member of the committee piped up and said, “It’s a continuing battle, rabbi. They just don’t care.” During this past year in my training as a chaplain, we used to have the same discussion about patients. We were instructed to pop into patients’ rooms unannounced, usually depending on the severity of the illness, and we would try to engage them in a conversation about how they were doing spiritually or emotionally. Was there anything weighing heavy on their heart? How were they managing the experience of being in the hospital? Sometimes the patient did not welcome the invitation and our conversation turned to a description of their family life or their diagnosis or fishing. Now chaplains can be friendly visitors who can listen and offer a prayer but the healing part of chaplaincy happens when we delve into matters of spirit with a patient. When I was turned down by a patient or (as it is in Minnesota) just talked about fishing, I felt like I wasn’t doing my job or the patient was spiritually deficient. “Deficient?” my colleagues would say. No human creature is deficient of spirituality.

I agree but the evidence is all around us from surveys that religion is in decline and secularism is on the rise. In Europe, especially, it has become fashionable to live one’s life without church affiliation. Only 40 percent of Dutch citizens belong to a particular church. Only 6 percent of Danes, 7 percent of Swedes, and 9 percent of Norwegians attend church at least monthly. That is a lot of empty churches. The percent of the population in the United Kingdom in 1900 which had attended Sunday school as children was 55 percent; in 2000 it was down to 4 percent. Americans, on the other hand, say they believe in God (95%), 70% belong to churches and depending on which poll you follow, regular attendance at church is either

40% or 20%. Among American Jews, 40% belong to synagogues; regular synagogue attendance is 16%. Jews think like Americans but behave religiously as though they live in Amsterdam. On the plus side, I am sure you heard the latest Harris poll that ranked Jews highest next to atheists and agnostics in terms of religious knowledge. Out of 32 questions, the average Jew got 20.5 right, if that means anything. And among Jewish teenagers, we are finding that fewer and fewer believe in God especially among Reform and Conservative.

Now we cannot use synagogue attendance or even belief in God as a litmus test of one's spirituality because I agree with my chaplain colleagues that people are created with spiritual sensibilities and they express themselves in different ways. That is what I love about chaplaincy. You cannot measure someone's spirituality by church attendance. Their curiosity in understanding their role in the world is a better indicator of their particular level of spirituality.

It is a conversation that exists between the lines in this week's parasha. Esau and Jacob are an unusual set of twins. They are sort of like the Goofus and Gallant of Highlights magazine. Esau comes in from his daily hunt and Jacob, who is described as a homebody who studies all the time, is cooking a pot of lentils. The text twice describes Esau as "ayaif" -- tired, exhausted and worn out. The Kli Yakar makes a brilliant observation. Why was Esau so exhausted? Hunting and being in field was something he did on a daily basis. Why couldn't he just by pass Jacob and go home and ask his mother to give him something to eat? The Kli Yakar says that Jacob observed that on that particular day Esau was spiritually dead. Here was a man who went to work, came home, went to work, came home, over and over and so Jacob was reasonably curious about the state of Esau's spiritual health and the lentil stew was a flag to get his attention and engage him in conversation. And within that conversation was a test: would Esau be willing to trade his birthright for a bowl of lentils? It was also no accident that Jacob cooked a bowl of lentils for such is the food you give to a mourner when he is grieving the dead. Was Esau a dead man?

The answer is "yes" on two accounts, according to the Kli Yakar. The first was the value of the birthright in Esau's eyes. Now in those days, before the

Torah was given, there was no law of double inheritance going to the first born. The only right of the first born was spiritual in the expectation that he would bring offerings to God and act as the priest of the family. The second is Esau's confession of his own spiritual interests. "I am going to die," he says, "so what use is the birthright to me?" In other words, I don't believe in God or the hereafter. It is one life, start to finish, and then you are done. And maybe that is why they called him "Done" -- a hairy man of the wild, self-sufficient, and as the Torah describes him that day "gulping" down the stew to fulfill his desire and "spurning" things spiritual, namely the only thing that connected him to spirituality, the honor of first born children and their standing with God. Esau didn't want to yearn for anything more than what he was given. Esau was spiritually dead.

One recalls the spiritual rivalry between another set of twins, Cain and Abel. Cain is the first born who is expected to pride himself in his offering to God. Instead he treats God like some mafiaso that needs to "paid off" and dumps a sack of food on the ground. Abel, on the other hand, in a one-ups-manship of Cain, brings the "bechorot," the firstlings of the flock and does his best for God recognizing the special connection he has with his Creator. This is what God expects. To yearn. To go to a higher rung of spiritual existence. Esau has something of Cain inside of him and, as he grows older, his impulsivity and anger and self-centeredness grows more and more. Yet we are told that Esau is the one that Isaac prefers and Rebecca prefers Jacob. In a strange sense, Esau is the spiritual opposite of Isaac, a man who is also a homebody, who exists in a profound prayer life, and yearns to continue the legacy of his father. Jacob is also the shadow of Rebecca in that Rebecca comes from the stock of idolaters who care nothing about other-worldliness, and who lie and cheat and manipulate others into doing their will. Like a clever hunter in the field, Rebecca has much more in common with Esau.

Perhaps that is why Rebecca herself struggles spiritually. As she experiences terrible pains of pregnancy at the beginning of the parasha, she asks "Im Ken Lamah Zeh Anochi?" -- the most existential question ever asked in the Torah, "If this is so, why do I exist?" "How did I get into this situation? Why was I put here? I was brought from Paddan Aram to be with

Isaac so that I could give birth to a holy child. What kind of wild child is this? And of course, we have to remember that Rebecca did not know that she was carrying twins. The internal physical struggle is indicative of Rebecca's spiritual struggle. A struggle between twins, according to the midrash, that seems to occur when she walked passed a pagan temple or alternatively the house of study. "What kind of faithless child will emerge from my body? The holy seed inside of me has been deformed by my unholy character of my womb. Why didn't the family turn to a regular Canaanite woman? Wouldn't she have had the same results? First I cannot bear children at all with this man and now this. What is the point of my existence with this family?" Rebecca sees the deficiency within herself as she strives to be in sync with this family of God. And when the hairy beast emerges, her disdain for that kind of living is embodied in her son. He is "done," a self-sufficient man and needs nothing more.

Such is the description of the modern secular person with all his computers and cars and air travel and conveniences. What use is religion if I have everything to make myself comfortable? But there lurks within each of us a spiritual spark, a hunger that is not related to creature comforts alone. It emerges when we ask ourselves the question "lamah zeh anochi" in moments of crisis, illness but also at reflective moments, at simchas and growing old. That spiritual spark is a feature that Jacob did not see in his brother. He saw him as spiritually dead but he reached out to him. In the reaching out, Jacob became curious about who Esau was. He wanted to see the merit in him, this man who crossed his threshold everyday, tired and famished from his working life. The most generous thing we can say about Esau is that he was "tired" and "tired" is not dead. There are times in our life when we are tired and exhausted and want to give it all away for the brief intoxication of comfort – away from all the busy-ness of work or the existence that bears down on our spirit. Instead of saying that people are spiritually deficient, we need to say that they are spiritually compromised. They have the capacity but they are tired, not in the mood, or afraid of asking the important questions. Inside each person is a little person who asks these questions and they come with through tears and stories and moments of melancholy. We need to continue to care about them even if they do not care about themselves. We need to become curious about them

and reach out beyond the synagogue in their living rooms, hospital rooms, on the street, and even in cyberspace. Never give up, Rabbi Nahman of Breslov, advised us, to be Jewish is to go above and beyond.