

Observance and Spirituality

BY RABBI SHELOMOH DANZIGER

One of the issues addressed at the Orthodox Union's Centennial Forum, "Orthodoxy at a Crossroads," held last November was "the dearth of spirituality in our communities." We read in periodicals, including those of the Union, of the universally acknowledged problem of talking during *tefillah*. In my view, the two phenomena are interrelated.

Observance of the *mitzvos* is not synonymous with spirituality. We meet people daily who are scrupulously observant, but not necessarily spiritual, at least not according to my definition. To me, spirituality is defined as a state of mind in which we experience a sense of relating to God as our Master, a sense of being in His Presence, a sense of living in His house. To the spiritual Jew, each *mitzvah*, each *tefillah*, each hour spent in "learning" Torah fosters spirituality in the sense just defined. It is *His* commandment, positive or negative, that we are performing or observing, *His* Torah that we are learning, *Him* Whom we are addressing in our prayers. The *mitzvos* are no longer religious *observances*. They become religious *experiences*. This is Jewish spirituality.

The sense of being in His Presence is not an idea of pietistic extremism. The idea is presented (by Rama) in the very first paragraph of the *Shulchan Aruch*. However, we ought to heed Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's caution that our sense of Divine nearness should be a "sober" sense, experienced "in the earthly sphere to which He has appointed us," and in relation to "our earthly management of life." Otherwise, it can indeed become a form of extremism.

We are not likely to solve the problem of talking during *tefillah* by applying external remedies. We have to address the underlying cause of this phenomenon. It is the lack of spirituality. For too many, *tefillah* is an external *mitzvah*-act (which can be boring), rather than an inner *experience* (which is absorbing). Look around you when *Alenu* is being said even in the most committed environment. Observe the faces, the posture, the often meaningless, restless motion, the tone of voice, the rapidity of utterance, accompanied by the folding of *talleisim*. You will notice one underlying mood. Casualness! Even fervid declamation is not the *tefillah* of spirituality.

Spiritual *tefillah* is inner, meditative supplication, expressed in quiet utterance, not a cacophony of competing *chazanim*. *Kavanah* means "directing" —

directing one's words to God, to Whom we are speaking conversationally, not in a formalized sing-song chant. The more real the sense of actually conversing with God, the more real the sense of actually standing before Him in prayer, the greater the *kavanah*. This often results in a sublime emotion. But it is an inner, spiritual emotion, not emotional frenzy. In any case, people who are experiencing this kind of spirituality will not likely interrupt their experience with idle chatter.

How do we achieve this spirituality? It is not easy, and even when achieved, may not be long sustained. But when experienced even once, we are drawn to it again and again, and say along with the Psalmist: "But as for me, it is the nearness of God that to me is good."

We can begin by thinking of the ineffable, revered Name of God, as it is written in four letters. This should evoke the awesome concept of God as the Eternally Existent Absolute Being, Who transcends and is unlike all that He has created out of nothing — "*she'amar vehayah ha-olam*" (see *Zevachim* 46b, where the ineffable Name is so interpreted). At the same time, the way the Name is pronounced by us should evoke the thought that He relates to us as a loving Master through His providential acts, from which we are never removed. In this way, we will get some notion of what is meant by "Hashem," i.e., "the Name," i.e., "God," Whom we are serving, in Whose Presence we stand and walk about, and in Whose house we live our lives.

Let us try to turn our Torah, our *mitzvos* and our *tefillos* from mere observances into spiritual *experiences*. §

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