

Rosh Hashanah 2014

“Spiritual but not Religious”

When people hear that I’m a rabbi, I often get this apologetic response: “you know, I only go to synagogue once in a while. I’m not a religious person but I do consider myself spiritual.” Spiritual but not religious. It’s a growing group across America - a group that shares a desire to connect to something transcendent but has chosen not to affiliate with any religious community, not Jewish, not Christian, not Muslim. Instead, they express their spirituality in practices such as meditation or yoga or in communion with music, or immersion in nature.

Several books have come out this year examining the growth of the “spiritual but not religious.” In one such book, authored by Lillian Daniel - a Minister with a congregation in Chicago, she expresses her exasperation with the spiritual but not religious. Reverend Daniel doesn’t mince words and her tone isn’t exactly kind when she writes:

“On airplanes I dread the conversation with the person who finds out I am a minister and wants to use the flight time to explain to me that she is ‘spiritual but not religious.’ Such a person will always share this as if it’s some kind of daring insight, unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo. Before you know it, he’s telling me that he finds God in nature - in the trees on a long hike, in the sunsets and in walks on the beach.”

How true that is.....I mean finding God in sunsets and in walks on the beach. Some of you might know that in the summer I spend time on the Cape and there is nothing I like more than walks on the Brewster flats and sunsets on the beach. Even when the no-see-ums are biting - those tiny little creatures that fly around at exactly the time when the sun is going down, sunsets at the beach are magical.

And there are many other such places; places that help us slow down, tune out distractions and focus on the moment at hand. A journalist who used to be a white water guide at the Grand Canyon writes in a recent NY Times article that at the end of each two week journey along the Colorado River, someone will always come up to him and declare that the Grand Canyon is “America’s cathedral - a church without a roof.”

Maybe the experience of going down the Colorado river makes them feel small in relation to the sheer size of the Canyon. Perhaps it makes their mortality palpable as they consider their own life span in relation to the seemingly endless time it took to shape and form the Canyon. Or maybe they sense a oneness with nature and for a brief moment feel connected to something bigger than themselves.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro, a congregational rabbi and award winning author, decries the bad reputation that the “spiritual but not religious” are getting. For starters, he doesn’t like the way in which we identify this group. He prefers using terminology that conveys what they *are* rather than what they *are not*.

So, he prefers the term “seekers without borders” - a take off on “doctors without borders” a group that provides much needed medical care in crisis situations around the world. Another term he suggests, based on the way in which we think about political affiliation, is “spiritually independent.”

“Seekers without borders,” “spiritually independent” - I like these terms and I also believe that they describe those who would comfortably find a home in many liberal Jewish communities. That would certainly be true here, at Ohabei Shalom.

As Jews we have a deeply rooted tradition of debating the big questions in life as well as their smaller practical implications. We are encouraged to engage with the conversation that has been passed down to us and to re-interpret it for our time and place. As liberal Jews, when we walk through the doors of the synagogue, we are *expected* to be “spiritually independent” – to bring our intellect, our doubts and our questions - these are all welcome. And as liberal Jews we welcome the wisdom of other traditions –*we seek beyond our borders*, recognizing that we, alone, do not have a monopoly on Truth.

As my teacher Rabbi Art Green, likes to say:

“If only Jews had the ability of Christians to speak of God’s love!

The silence and patience of the Buddhists!

The body-soul integration of the yogis!”

We have much to learn and so we welcome the wisdom that other traditions have to offer.

For example, many Jewish communities -our own included, have developed a deep appreciation for contemplative practices like meditation. Influenced by Eastern traditions, we have brought practices which, until recently remained in the background of our own tradition, to the forefront.

The problem with saying that one is “spiritual but not religious” is that it assumes that it’s *either one or the other but not both*. Why does it have to be an either or proposition? Why can’t we be both spiritual *and* religious?

In fact, I’d like to share with you some of the ways in which being spiritual *and* religious plays out in our community.

Think about the psalms we sing when we come together on Shabbat. They are all about the beauty and majesty of nature: Together we sing (psalm 92): “How great are Your works, how very subtle your designs: *Ma gadlu ma’asecha adonai; me’od amku machshevotcha*. These words open us to the wonder that is nature and the music helps us bypass the intellect as it penetrates our very being. The music - so central to the worship experience in our community, travels to the deeper reaches of the soul and there, leaves a lasting imprint. For many of us, music is at the core of our spiritual experience in prayer.

This year in particular spirituality is at the forefront of our work at Ohabei Shalom. In fact, we are calling this year “*the year of living consciously*.” Ohabei Shalom was among twenty-three congregations nationwide to receive a grant to help us integrate the spiritual practice of Mussar and Mindfulness as a path towards living more consciously. Mussar, a Jewish spiritual practice dating to the 19th century and centered in Lithuania, has spread in the past years from Orthodox to liberal communities. In large part this is due to the work of Alan Morinis who has written books such as *Everyday Holiness*, which make the teachings and practices of the Mussar masters relevant to 21st century Jews.

Mussar strives not only to make us *think* differently but more importantly, it strives to make us *act* differently. Through various practices, like journaling, we bring awareness to the character traits we need to work on to become the *mensch*s we aspire to be. According to Mussar teachers, each of us has our own unique set of character traits that we need to work on. For some it might be patience for others it might be loving-kindness.

But our “soul curriculum,” which is how Mussar teachers speak about the character traits we need to work on, can only be pursued in the context of community. The reason for this is that the spiritual work we do is focused on *precisely* those character traits that challenge our interactions. And we know we have succeeded when we respond differently to situations that test us.

There is a Charles Shultz quote from the Peanuts character that I don’t tire of retelling - you know the one that says: “I love mankind it’s people I can’t stand.” Mussar is about how we engage with real life people; people like the person singing out of tune right next to us in shul or the person at the restaurant with a screaming baby who doesn’t seem to realize it’s driving everyone crazy.

A funny story, very loosely related to Rosh Hashanah, gives us a picture of what that challenging person might look like. We’ll call him Yossi.

So, Yossi keeps bugging his friend by asking all day long - “What time is it?” Finally, tired of all these interruptions, his friend complains: “Why don’t you get a watch like the rest of us.”

“Why do I need a watch? There is always someone around to ask.”

But his friend insists: “And what do you do in the middle of the night, when you are alone and need to know what time it is?”

“That’s easy”, says Yossi- “I blow my shofar.”

“You what?”

"I blow my shofar. Whenever I wake up and need to know what time it is, I open the window and blow my shofar very loudly. And literally within a few seconds, I hear someone yell ' Are you crazy it's 2:30 in the morning!"

Being spiritual *and* religious challenges us to see the divine, not only in the quiet and beauty of nature but in the faces of those around us, including that person singing out of tune or that other person oblivious to his baby's screams at the restaurant. (Yossi, however, might be a bit of a stretch!)

Being spiritual *and* religious demands that we immerse ourselves in the ordinary realms of life, in the messy world of people and relationships. Judaism is not about escaping from the world; it's not about leading a monastic life. Rather, it identifies noisy and complicated every day life as the *ideal* place to work at spiritual growth.

Being spiritual *and* religious challenges us to see ourselves not only as individuals with our own unique relationship to the Divine but as a people. Remember what Ruth said to her mother-in-law when she insisted on following her back to Canaan? She said: "your people shall be my people, your God shall be my God." She attached herself first to "peoplehood" and then to "God." Being part of a religious community helps us keep our Jewish homeland and our Jewish brothers and sisters throughout the world at the forefront of our consciousness.

Being spiritual *and* religious challenges us to see the divine in the face of pain and death - to care for those among us struggling with illness and to come together to bury our dead and comfort those left behind.

Being spiritual *and* religious challenges us to see the divine in the beauty that surrounds us and to respond to evil and suffering with righteous indignation: to respond to issues like hunger, gun control or pay equity - issues our community has focused on during this past year. It challenges us to organize and to leverage our efforts as a community so that together we can make a difference.

My hope in the coming year is that we continue building such a community - a community that engages our hearts *and* minds; that brings us together to work on ourselves *and* on making this world a better place.

Shanah tova u'metukah