

“Spiritual Lipitor”

Rosh Hashanah 5769/2008

Rabbi Jeremy Barras

Some time ago, a rabbi and a soap manufacturer went for a walk. Suddenly the manufacturer turned to his companion and said, “Of what good is religion? After thousands of years of preaching truth, honesty and goodness, there is still trouble, misery and dishonesty in this world. Judaism has failed.”

Soon they reached a crowded street in their neighborhood where the girls and boys were playing. “Look,” said the rabbi, pointing to a dirty child; “just look at the boy. He is about the dirtiest youngster I have ever seen. You say that soap keeps people clean, but you can almost peel the dirt off that boy. Soap is surely a failure.”

The manufacturer protested, saying, “This is not fair. You can not expect the boy to be clean if he does not use the soap.”

“This is my point,” answered the rabbi. “So it is with Judaism. It is not effective unless used.”

Inside each one of us there is a soul that has the capacity to create, accept and interpret divine sparks whose sole purpose is to provide meaning for our lives. These sparks are our conscience, through which the promptings of the Divine Will flow toward us. And regardless of how many sins we all come here to repent for during these High Holy Days, the soul within each one of us is entirely pure. As we read in the morning liturgy, “My G-d, the soul You placed within me is pure. You created it, You fashioned it, You breathed it into me.” What is impure though is the sludge and plaque that builds up around our souls and prevents any form of divinity to flow in and out of the soul. Through neglect, we allow a build up of foreign and unhealthy substances that impede the igniting sparks within our souls. This causes us to practice our religion in a superficial manner, leaving us with a façade without substance. In other words, just because we are Jews by dint of our birth does not entitle us to reap the benefits of our religion without concerted effort. Being Jewish does not automatically confer spiritual substance to our lives.

Our souls, like our bodies, demand constant attention, and any neglect will result in poor health. For example, some of us do not floss enough - others forget to take their vitamins - and others like me, hate vegetables. And each one of us will hear about it from one doctor or another. Our souls as well cannot maintain good health without proper care. And while each of us has different ways to thwart our souls' well being, there are a few methods that appear to be the most common.

Perhaps the most ubiquitous offense occurs as a result of our avowed weakness to our vanity, our sense of insecurity, and our sense of greed. These are our most base natures. Through the press, TV, magazines, and the internet, we are bombarded with sights and sounds that appeal to our self-importance and arouse our envy. “Do this and become a man of distinction,” says one voice. “Use me and become a social charmer,” says another,

“Try me and you will make the big payoff.” These are the sirens ringing from all sides. In our daily lives we are constantly subjected to the thunder and lightning, the earthquake and storm of influence and suggestion that stir our senses and awaken our elemental passions.

How do we get away from these powerful enticements to enter into another world of being, another dimension of living? How do we open our souls so that those divine sparks may enter? Think about the story of the Elijah the prophet. At one point we learn that when he fled from the consuming wrath of Ahab and Jezebel after he destroyed all of their foreign gods, he hid in a cave in the desert. At that point, G-d told him to ascend the mountain to meet the Lord who promised to pass by. And then what happened as Elijah waited for G-d to pass him by? A great and mighty wind came up so terrible it leveled hills and shattered rocks, but G-d was not in the wind. After the wind, an earthquake came, but G-d was not in the earthquake. Nor was he in the fire that came after the earthquake. But after the fire, came a still small voice, and G-d was in that voice. To hear that still small voice like Elijah we need to shut out the deafening sounds and blinding sights and make a heroic effort of will to surrender to that heavenly voice.

Those who are at risk of heart disease know that there are several factors that could eventually lead to a heart attack. These include lack of exercise, smoking, poor diet and genetics. In the same vein, we all must jump multiple hurdles if we are going to maintain pure souls. The next obstacle manifests in the human tendency to rationalize, to cover our frailties and follies, our sins and our shame, with the cloak of an idealized image of our selves. Jewish tradition puts it very bluntly. G-d cannot enter the heart of an arrogant man, nor can He penetrate the soul of the vain and the conceited. As the Psalms teach us, “G-d is near to those who are broken in heart. He will rescue those who are crushed in spirit.” By implication, the Psalmist teaches us that G-d is not near to those who act in a conceited, boastful fashion since these are traits that act to extinguish the sparks within us and divert us from holiness.

The 18th century French writer Guy de Maupassant, in one of his short stories, reveals the danger of this trait so clearly and cogently:

A disconsolate lover went to the cemetery to cry his heart out over his beloved who had died so young, so quickly, so tragically. Unwilling to leave when all the others did, he hid in a clump of bushes until nightfall. With no one around to observe him, he made ready to return to the graveside of his lamented beloved. As he was about to leave he suddenly noticed that the slab of marble that he had been sitting on began to move. The dead person and naked skeleton arose from the grave and pushed the stone back into place. On the stone appeared the words, “here lies Jacques Olivant who died at the age of 51. He loved his family, was kind and honorable and died in the grace of the Lord.

After taking a closer look at the inscription the dead man picked up a small sharply pointed stone and began to scrape off the letters. Having effaced the inscription, he looked through the holes where his eyes used to be at the place where the words had once been engraved. Then with the tip of his finger he wrote, “Here lies Jacques Olivant who

died at the age of 51. He hastened his father's death by his unkindness as he wanted to inherit his fortune. He tortured his wife, tormented his children, deceived his neighbors, robbed everyone he could and died wretched. Having finished writing the dead man sat motionless, looked at his work, pushed aside the marble slab and reentered the grave. The slab slid back to its original place. What the man witnessed in that cemetery was a dead man whose self love had been purged, and who could no longer allow his lies, or the shame that his family had refused to admit, deceive others.

When we cover up our own shortcomings and follies with untruths and deception, we again act to thwart the divinity within our souls. We delude ourselves into thinking that social status with its attendant rewards of fancy cars, designer clothing, and country club memberships is of, and in itself, a reflection of the substance of our lives, the goodness of our souls. In reality, it is humility, acts of charity, and performance of good deeds that enable us to confer meaning to our lives. As the Talmud teaches, "Those who raise themselves up, G-d lowers, and those who lower themselves, G-d raises up."

On Yom Kippur we will be asked to sum up before G-d the assets we have acquired over the past year. Will we be among those who claim as their assets – an increase in tzedakah, in learning, in social action, in devout worship – or will the truth be that our most precious assets over the past year are not mentioned in the Torah, but rather in the catalogues of Prada, Mercedes, and Tiffany's?

Unlike Jaques Olivant, let us not wait until it is too late to start telling the truth about ourselves.

Unfortunately there is one difficulty that makes it so hard to even recognize the areas in our own lives that need improvement. This obstacle is our inability to see our own faults and to blame everyone but ourselves for our own failures. Of course, any one of us could find faults in our friends and contemporaries from across a crowded room much easier than we can find faults with ourselves while looking directly into a mirror. There is a Yiddish proverb that says, "If you're out to beat a dog, you're sure to find a stick. On the other hand, if you're out to befriend a dog, you're sure to discover its desirable traits." Since we are likely to find what we are looking for when we are being honest with ourselves, we might as well make a concerted effort to find those faults we need to improve.

It once happened that a famous preacher was making a local stop and his arrival was publicized throughout town. The preacher was well known for his penetratingly powerful sermons that made every individual feel that he was speaking directly to them. Everyone in town knew of the preacher's talents and his appearance quickly sold out. When the time finally began for him to begin, the crowd waited with great anticipation hoping to learn how his inspired words could improve their lives. Eventually he completed his sermon and received a thunderous ovation. As he began to walk off of the stage he was met by one woman who approached him and said, "Your sermon was truly wonderful," as she shook his hand. "'Wonderful sermon,'" she repeated. "Everything you said applies to someone I know."

For some reason it is just so much easier to judge others. Perhaps it makes it easier to deal with our own insufficiencies when we focus on the weaknesses of others rather than our own. Rabbi Israel Salanter, the great 19th century moralist of Eastern European Jewry, once wrote, “Every human being is endowed by his maker with two eyes. With one he is expected to look at his neighbor, fastening his gaze on his virtues, his excellence, his desirable qualities. With the other eye he is to turn inward to see his own weaknesses, his own imperfections, and his shortcomings in order to correct them.” But unfortunately, instead of heeding this sage advice, we have become spiritually cross-eyed.

A rabbi used to tell the story of a blacksmith who apprenticed to a master. He worked hard to perfect his craft. In time he took over the trade, but his customers dwindled away and he could not understand why. So he went to the rabbi and asked why he thought his clients were no longer seeking his services.

The rabbi told him, “My child, you have learned your trade well. You can forge the metal, place the anvil, strike a smart blow with the hammer. But, alas, you have not learned to kindle the spark.”

Superficiality is no substitute for passion - appearance is not to be confused for substance. In our lives there must be an animating spark, something that moves us beyond the mundane, something that encourages us to transcend ourselves. To create something that is alive, something that is warm, you need a spark.

As we enter this New Year of 5766, may each one of us discover those divine voices that speak to us from the heavens. May we meditate carefully on how we derive meaning from our lives as we strive to fulfill our roles in this world; “V’nih-heyeh v’tze-etze-einu v’tze-eh-tz-ay amcha beit Yisrael, culanu yodei shemchah, v’lomdei Torahtcha lishmah – May we and our offspring and the offspring of your people, the House of Israel, - all of us – know Your name and learn the ways of Your Torah.

Kein Yehi Ratzon.
May it be G-d’s will.
Amen.