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The New Spirituality: Is it Selfish?

-- A CLAL Roundtable

Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg has ridiculed the new spirituality—including a popular interest in Kabbalah and the teachings of the Dalai Lama—as a "fad" that is "self-centered," as distinguished from Jewish values that "impel us to make life more bearable for others." Political scientist Charles Liebman describes spirituality as a "privatized religion....Its emphases are interpersonal rather than collective." We asked CLAL faculty to talk about spirituality, and the conflicts, if any, between personal spiritual fulfillment and the collective Jewish experience.

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David Nelson:

Two very brief responses:

1) When I hear critiques such as those of Hertzberg and Liebman I wonder

what might be at stake under the surface. In this particular case, I wonder if there is an element of "ownership-anxiety" in this debate. What I mean is that some religious institutions, and those who are deeply affiliated with or loyal to them, sometimes criticize any religious experience or movement which they do not own. In the case of the "New Jewish Spirituality" a large part of the point is that it is not owned by any of the "traditional" institutions of American Jewish life. It is in the "pro-sumerist" tradition of other do-it-yourself social phenomena.

My most cynical side wonders: If the institutions of American Jewry -- synagogue movements, seminaries, rabbinical associations, and so on -- could co-opt the new spirituality, would Hertzberg, Liebman and other observer-representatives of the "mainstream" find it less objectionable?

2) Some critics raise the issue of the danger in Jewish "new spirituality" coming too close to various other forms (Christianity, New Age, etc.) A quick reminder: We have never been culturally or religiously isolated. Our most daring and creative moves have often reflected developments in the larger world around us. Is that a danger? Absolutely, but it's one that is crucial to our ability to overcome inertia and make important moves in our developing our communal identity-narrative.

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Daniel Brenner:

Is it any surprise that in a generation which is bombarded by the cult of celebrity status, and the next new-new thing, that thousands of people yearn for a connection to something deeper than an investment strategy?

It is unfortunate that Liebman and Hertzberg, and others who lament the new "selfishness" of American Jews, misdiagnose the nature of the problem.

The return to the "self" is not a symptom of greed or narcissism, but a result of a wave of multi-culturalism of the mid-1990s, in which my generation was taught "write what you know," "speak from your own voice," and "use 'I' language."

The battle cry of my college years was that the only way to overcome the inherited racism and sexism of our culture is to erase the assimilationist impulse -- to own up to who you are, culturally, ethnically and religiously. So we spoke the "I" language instead of the "we" language of our parents' failed revolution. And the reality is that we changed American culture for the better. History will mark our generation as the one in which the rich cultural diversity

we contain was finally acknowledged and celebrated. They will record the boom in African-American, Latino, and yes, even Jewish culture as part of this era.

So it is no shock to me that when we turn to spiritual matters that we value personal experience above all else.

Now, however, the pendulum is beginning to swing the other way. To paraphrase Tom Wolfe in a recent New York Observer interview, "I'm not interested in reading another novel which speaks of the author's personal experience, so I set out to write what I do not know."

Wolfe is dead-on: In the post-multi-cultural world, there is a longing to search out a truth that is not rooted in personal experience, but is part of the world's bigger picture.

So how would such a swing affect the Jewish world? I sense that the next craze among young Jews will be the study of philosophy, Talmud, and ethics. The craze has already begun, from what my friends at Hillels around the country tell me. There is a search for a wider language of connection that transcends any one person or era.

So, will the Liebman and Hertzbergs of the world call Jewish learning a move away from community responsibility and toward a selfish expression of Judaism?

Study doesn't always lead to action, after all, and it certainly doesn't fall into the category of social justice. Study for its own sake is, in fact, downright selfish. Or as a doctor who I met in a Jerusalem yeshiva said, "I'm taking a year off for me."

So will they trash study? I doubt it. And that is why their attack on spirituality is so shallow. The bottom line is this--the practitioners of personal Judaism aren't necessarily sit-on-a-pillow-and-close-your-eyes kind of people. They like to sit in chairs and read books. What the critics don't get is that their attack on spirituality, and the antagonistic culture it creates, is the impetus for thousands to turn away from the Jewish community. I'll even say it more bluntly: The way that they have chosen to degrade the genuine spiritual searches of many Jews of my generation is reductive and self-serving.

That said, those critics who claim that Jews have leaned too far to spirituality do have a valid point. For Jewish life to thrive, we need all three of the traditional pillars: Torah (study), avodah (spirituality) and g'milut hasidim

(action). But deciding which pillar will need to be highlighted for which group in which era is not for these critics to decide. At least not in a way which forgets that the world stands on a very delicate balance.

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Andrew Silow-Carroll:

How anyone can distinguish which religious acts are a priori "selfish" or "selfless" is beyond me. One person meditates for hours, leading her to a connection with her better self that prompts her to perform an act of lovingkindness. Another writes big checks for his synagogue and community federation and is personally responsible, in his private and business life, for the unhappiness of multitudes. Or take it the other way: the yoga master who ignores real suffering, or the activist who wouldn't set foot in an ashram or synagogue but can't rest knowing there is tikkun olam waiting to be performed. (Besides, is the warm glow that comes from serving others completely "outer-directed"? Call it feeling commanded, or serving God, or sacrificing for the community, and you still have an individual self fulfilling its own needs.)

That being said, CLAL's lessons in cultural inventory have given me a new appreciation for what my parents' generation achieved in the suburbs (my synagogue growing up was actually called The Suburban Temple). Edifice complex it may have been, the very antithesis of spirituality, but it represented a commitment to community that I envy.

I look at my own, proudly "spiritual" generation, and bemoan the lack of commitment -- and yes, the narcissism -- that keeps us from building adequate institutions of our own. (I'm not blameless in this regard.) I've belonged to one too many havurot that are never going to get out of the rented church basements, or the parasitic satellite chapels of larger, old-style synagogues. For all their lack of spirituality, my parents had a sense of community that has kept them synagogue members long after the kids have been schooled, bar mitzvahed and married. My "spiritual" peers too often and unfortunately approach religious life like the good consumers that they are -- come for a product or service, and move on when their needs change.

That's not to say that synagogues shouldn't be adapting to this new consumerist customer. Or that there aren't many boomers and Xers starting to get involved in bricks and mortar. It's just that we boomers probably need a little more humility in the face of what our parents managed to build. And the Hertzbergs and Liebmans need to appreciate that every act -- from gazing at a navel to launching a capital campaign to building a state -- contains the seeds of both personal, spiritual fulfillment and communal self-sacrifice.

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Is the present renewed interest in Jewish mysticism and spirituality selfish, faddish or interpersonal at the expense of a collective sensibility?

I think that we can agree that it isn't faddish in the way that hula-hoops were or interpersonal in the way that psychotherapy is. And surely it isn't selfish in the way that inconvenient abortions are. Perhaps what critics like Arthur Hertzberg and others are asking is: Is the present renewed interest in Jewish mysticism and spirituality going to amount to anything over time?

To approach this question let's consider Hasidism, an earlier spiritual/mystical movement in Jewish life.

First, we need to remember that Hasidism, like all social/religious movements, was not a monolithic phenomenon. It was made up of differing groups and social institutions. It changed over time. The Hasidism of 1900 was not merely a repeat of the Hasidism of 1800. When we speak about Hasidism lasting, therefore, we are thinking of Hasidism as a collection of differing groups that changed over time.

Did Hasidism last? Some features of Hasidism lasted, some fell away. In the area of liturgy, turning somersaults during prayer -- a practice of some early Hasidim -- didn't make it, but a revised siddur [prayerbook] did. Hasidism's serious inclination to Lurianic mysticism and active mystical meditation during prayer endured but only for a limited number of adepts.

How about Hasidic social organization? With two notable exceptions, there are still very active Hasidic groups organized around a single living rebbe. Eventually, much of Hasidism as a social/cultural/religious phenomenon found a lasting place either through transforming itself or transforming existing parts of Jewish life. Although many thought and even hoped that Hasidism was a fad, its influence endures.

Did Hasidism undermine Jewish communal life? Given that the established communities and their organizations often deplored Hasidism, fought it and excommunicated its adherents, it must, in some sense, have been experienced as a threat to the community. Certainly, the organization of the Eastern European Jewish world was never the same. On the other hand, Hasidism did build lasting alternative forms of Jewish communal life. In fact, many Hasidic communities survived World War II and rebuilt in North America

under much changed social conditions. So while it might initially have seemed that Hasidism was dangerous to a collective sensibility, in fact, it was a powerful community-building force.

Was Hasidism selfish/self-absorbed? At the outset, part of it very likely was self-absorbed. Research suggests that early Hasidic courts attracted many adolescents mired in bad arranged marriages. But it attracted many others as well. And over time, as Hasidic communities emerged, Hasidic life was far from selfish. If anything, the inherited traditions of Jewish spirituality created a sensibility that favored self-limitation in order to find a place for all members of the group.

There are at least three morals from the story of Hasidism:

1. Avoid a rush to judgment. It is unlikely that a powerful social-spiritual force will quickly fade away.
2. Expect that, over time, new social energies will be released and make a positive contribution. To do this, you do not need to be sure of how they will make this contribution.
3. Seek to understand and use the new possibilities created by an emerging social-spiritual force. Rarely, do existing institutional arrangements have the last word on creating and expressing spirituality.

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