

HOLY REALITY CHECK

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Somehow it is fashionable in the current day Jewish world to associate holiness and spirituality with the mystic, the supernatural, the irrational, the unknown and the not understandable. The plethora of books being written and published about Kabbalah, most of them of dubious content and scholarship, is one manifestation of this current trend. Another example of this trend is the ascent of "holy men" who dispense blessings or amulets, and their popularity amongst the masses. With all due respect to those involved in this spiritual quest, I find the definition of holiness as expressed in the Torah reading of this week, to be incompatible with these mystical forays. The Torah defines holiness in concrete, easily understood, human terms. The definition of holiness in Jewish life is always expressed in terms of self-discipline. Self-discipline, control of behavior, speech and actions are the ingredients of holiness as the Torah sees it. Now, I will admit that this is unexciting holiness. It is much more glamorous to receive a blessing from a holy man at three AM in the morning, or to engage in meditation, transcendental or otherwise, or to dance in the aisle during a prayer service or create a more spiritual prayer service than the tired, old-fashioned traditional fashion of prayer, than to refrain from slander, sexual promiscuity or dishonest monetary behavior.

It is obvious to all that people love "spooks." Life is so uncertain and things occur so unexpectedly and unpredictably that there is no complete rational answer for our problems. Yet, the Torah demanded of us a certain sense of rationality in our lives, behavior and beliefs. The famous axiom of Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon that one must investigate the Torah and Judaism to the limit of one's rational powers and only then begin to rely upon faith has been sorely neglected in our modern Jewish world. And even when faith is one's own only answer to life's difficulties, it not to be confused with irrational spirituality and the pursuit of holiness through non-Torah means. The study of kabbalah was always meant to be limited and secret and not public, popular and superficial. Everyone is into spirituality these days. But the Torah has only long lost lists of do's and don'ts of behavior, of commandments and moral principles as guideposts on its road to holiness. As the Talmud itself states in commenting upon the words of the prophet Yirmiyahu, who said: "They (the people of Israel) have forsaken Me (God)," "Would that they forsake Me (in their futile pursuit of theology, philosophy or spirituality) and simply observe the commandments of My Torah!" God Himself states: "Forsake Me!" do not pursue illusory spirituality, do not fall prey to supernaturalism, to unreality, to false messianism, to the ecstasy of chants and guitars, to all of the false mirages that have caused so much damage to our people in our past history. Holiness, spirituality, comes from Torah observance, from the self-restraint that was always been part of the nature of the Jew but that

in our time has become passe' and outmoded.

The Torah places a great emphasis on honesty. Honesty in money matters is at the top of the list of the Torah's requirements for holiness. Current forms of spirituality do not deal with this hard practical matter. Unfortunately, we are currently witness to Jews here in Israel and in the United States who were found guilty of severe monetary crimes. The fact that the monies they stole were used to help Torah institutions survive and even prosper, should in no way mitigate their behavior. In fact, in my opinion, it makes the dishonesty even more culpable. Stealing for Torah places spirituality above the halacha, it assumes that man knows better than God what is right and good and what is not. It demeans Torah and everything that Torah stands for. One of the great problems of the pursuit of spirituality in our time is the arrogance of "holy" people in substituting their judgment and opinion for the explicit decisions of the Torah. The Torah reading of this week is very plain in its meaning and instructions as to the achievement of holiness. It needs no spiritual inflation or interpretation. It only requires obedience, discipline, patience, optimism and an abiding sense of reality and of the real world in which we all live. We are bidden to be a "holy nation." A holy nation must have a program of behavior, not of ecstatic feelings and feel-good faith. A careful reading of this week's Torah reading leads me to this unavoidable conclusion.

Shabat Shalom.
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