

'Spiritual' DJF seeks something Judaism must learn to provide

THE RABBI'S TURN RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

A friend of mine from another city, one whom I take to be a fairly astute observer of Jewish life, called me last week. He'd been reading the personal ads in his local Jewish newspaper again (of course, just to keep a hand on the pulse of Jewish life out there). But this time he'd found something truly worth sharing.

There it was, the typical ad for a "DJF, age 30-something," but then adding the self-definition: "Spiritual (not religious)." He wanted to talk about this anonymous young woman and what she might mean by all that. Rightly, I thought, she had hit on something that was true of a very large part of American Jewry. I'll bet she gets lots of calls.

But in order to understand this young woman and "where she is coming from," we need a bit of background. It is now over a hundred years since vast numbers of Jews began to walk away from our traditions.

By the turn of the 20th century, perhaps half of Jewry was no longer observant of the old ways, no longer felt itself nourished by the wellsprings of faith that had so long characterized our people. By mid-century, that number was up to perhaps 80 percent, only a fifth of Jewry living out patterns that one could really call traditional observance to any serious extent, including traditionalists of both the strict and "neo" varieties.

No matter how we rabbis feel about it, most Jews no longer see themselves as "religious" in the way our people used to define that term.

There were two great reasons for the abandonment of tradition on the part of Jews. One was simply the pressure of assimilation. Once we were accepted as citizens and equals in the Western world, we felt both an inner and an outer pressure to be like everyone else. Economics had something to do with it, to be sure, but more important was a desire both to "pass" and to break out of the constrictions of the old ghetto or shtetl life.

Jews became hungry consumers of world culture and world literature, citizens of the world and advocates for every worthwhile cause. Combined with assimilation was a strong move toward *secularization* that swept through the Western world in the past two centuries and affected the urbanized and educated Jewish population even more than it did others.

Large numbers of Jews stopped believing in their parents'

conceptions of a loving Father God who ruled the world, in the rewards of the afterlife and all the rest. They turned in their Messianic faith for belief in the new redemptive visions of socialism, communism and secular Jewish-Zionist identity. Jews were in the vanguard of all the progressive — and sometimes not so progressive — social movements of our century.

But now Jews are in the vanguard of another sort of movement. Over the past 20 years, there has been a tremendous rebirth of interest in what is now called spirituality in our culture. This has manifest itself in widespread interest in various oriental religions, in a growth of commitment to meditation, religious experimentation and yoga, as well as various so-called occult phenomena.

This interest runs the whole gamut from the most serious and profound to the trivial and flighty. Like everything else in our culture, it has been terribly commercialized and adulterated for mass consumption. But that does not diminish the very serious and significant core of people whose lives have been transformed by this search for spiritual expression.

At that core, whether attracted to Indian yoga or Tibetan Buddhism, to transcendental meditation or to Zen, there is a highly disproportionate number of Jews.

So our "DJF" is proclaiming herself to be one of these. But just what is it that she means by "spiritual (not religious)"? Who are these people and what do they stand for?

By "spiritual" I think she means that she sees herself as an inward and reflective person. She is interested in quality-of-life issues. She has had moments where she senses a peaceful presence, something that binds her both to nature and to other people. She seeks out that presence, a sense of inner quiet that joins her to all of her fellow creatures.

She has probably tried some sort of spiritual practice; she may or may not be comfortable with such words as "God" or "prayer"; "life-spirit" and "meditation" are certainly more comfortable for her. She is probably a vegetarian, or at least has tried it out for a while.

And what does she mean by "not religious"? Of course she means in the first place that she is not Jewishly observant. She does not keep Shabbat or kashrut, does not live by the Jewish calendar, does not attend synagogue.

But her supposed irreligiosity may have a deeper sense to it as well. She may think that she does not "believe in God." The descriptions of Judaism's God that she heard as a child would certainly feel alien to her. Perhaps this is partly because she sees herself as a feminist, but perhaps also because they seem to have rather little to do with "spirituality" as she has come to understand it.

Here we have the full-scale tragedy of Jewish life. Jews in large numbers are in search for meaning. They are looking for a way to express their own spiritual selves. Having achieved a great deal in the material realm, they discover a hunger for something more profound, for a deeper sense of self, even for truth. And Judaism has not succeeded in reaching them.

How do we convince this young woman and her many thousands of friends that ours is one of the most profound spiritual disciplines the world has to offer? How do we show her that Shabbat is a form of deep relaxation for the soul, that kashrut is a discipline to express a holy way of living, one that combines love for life and ethical sensitivity with a system of daily reminders that we are ever in the presence of the all-permeating One?

How do we redeem our sense of God from antiquated and often alienating metaphors, allowing today's seekers to know that their search for spirituality is fully in the tradition of Moses' trek up the mountain? Unless we find a way to do this, we will continue to lose thousands of our best, brightest and most spiritually sensitive Jews to our tradition.

We will have to face the fact that "spiritual (not religious)" will also soon mean "spiritual (not Jewish)." ■

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