

R142

Spirituality

רוחניות

Arthur Green

Spirituality as an essential value of the Jewish tradition is a striving for the presence of God and the fashioning of a life of holiness appropriate to such striving. As such, the spiritual life that stands at the center of Judaism is the shared goal of biblical priest and prophet, of Pharisee and Essene sectarian, of Hellenistic contemplative and law-centered rabbi, of philosopher, halakhist, kabbalist, and *hasid*. Among these there are vast differences of opinion as to precisely how life in the presence of God is to be defined and achieved, but all would assent to the importance of this value. Postbiblical Judaism has striven to cultivate in ordinary human affairs the quality of holiness that was originally associated with sacred space and time, the temple precincts, and the holy days. The notion of the entire people of Israel as a "kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:6) is essential to the Pharisaic transformation of biblical religion and stands at the center of any Jewish religious self-definition.

The definition of spirituality proposed here does not coincide with *ruhaniyyut*, the Hebrew equivalent of the term *spirituality*. This Hebrew term, not found in the Bible or in early rabbinic speech, is an artifice of the medi-

eval translators, first created to express philosophical and scientific concepts that were Hellenic in origin and taken over only afterward by kabbalists and pietists to describe a religious ideal that by then was a thorough amalgam of the spiritual legacies of Israel and Greece. Spirituality in the Western sense, inevitably opposed in some degree to "corporeality" or "worldliness" (all apologetics to the contrary notwithstanding), is unknown to the religious worldview of ancient Israel and is a latecomer, though an important one, among the elements that comprise the religious legacy of medieval and later Jewry.

2743
 The appreciation and cultivation of those ways of living, including inward states, in which the divine presence is most to be felt takes many forms in the history of Judaism. The rabbinic admonition that *ruah ha-kodesh* (the holy spirit) is the culmination of a long series of moral and religious virtues becomes standard fare in the Jewish moral curriculum. Such influential later moralistic works as Hayyim Vital's *Sha'arei Kedushah* (Gates of Holiness) or Moses Hayyim Luzzatto's *Mesillat Yesharim* (Path of the Upright) begin their instruction with such "outer" virtues as patience, modesty, discipline, and the conquest of anger, only afterward moving toward those more esoteric aspects of training that lead to the evocation of God's presence. Many a Jewish moralist has deprecated the search for "religious experience" altogether, claiming that such a quest is in itself only a subtle form of pride, inappropriate to the true goals of holy living. While both spiritual and material blessings are frequently promised as a reward for faithfulness, the higher path has always been seen as that which "serves not in order to receive reward" (M. Avot 1:3). For some authors, even the reward of "gaz[ing] upon the beauty of the Lord" (Ps. 27:4) itself is seen as a reproachful goal.

The style of Jewish spiritual life has always found its common expression in the deed, meaning specifically the commandments of the Torah as amplified by the classical halakhah. The formulations of mystical or pietistic spirituality often grow out of the halakhic institutions themselves, as in the relationship between sanctifying the act of eating and the dietary laws of *kashrut* or "building a palace in time" (cf. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath*) and the institution of the Sabbath. In these cases the halakhah is the soil in which the spiritual expressions take root. In modern times, all attempts to build a spiritual life on the foundations of Judaism have had to contend with the issue of halakhah. A certain unfortunate polarization may be seen in such attempts, in which those committed to halakhah lose their spiritual focus in the great struggle to preserve the forms of traditional Jewish piety while the nonhalakhic (the primary example here is the kibbutz movement) drift toward secularism. The possibility of a heterodox or nonhalakhic Jew-

ish spirituality, such as is powerfully evoked by the writings of Martin Buber, is only in our generation beginning to move toward realization.

While all of the commandments are capable of spiritual interpretation, it is especially around the act of prayer that Jewish spiritual teachings have tended to cluster. Some teachings offer interpretations of the prescribed liturgy or instructions for prayer as contemplation, turning the essentially public and communal act of group worship into a meditative exercise in which the individual, even in the midst of a congregation, is alone with God. Others have added the practice of *hitbodedut*, solitary concentration on the presence of God, as a separate discipline. Spiritual masters of various ages, including kabbalists such as Abraham Abulafia and Hayyim Vital, and such Hasidic masters as Nahman of Bratslav and the leaders of the *Habad* school, have each offered their own instructions for the meditative art. It should be noted, however, that rationalist as well as kabbalist versions of Judaism contain a commitment to the spiritual life. Maimonides' description of the love of God as "a great and exceeding love, so strong that one's soul shall be knit up with the love of God and one should be continually enraptured by it, like a love-sick individual, whose mind is at no time free from his passion" (MT Teshuvah 10:3), as well as the beatific vision with which he concludes his *Guide of the Perplexed*, bear ample witness to the fact that Jewish philosophy bears within it a contemplative ideal fully as intense as that of the kabbalists.

The love and fear of God, as well as the proper balance between the two, comprise the emotional groundwork of Jewish spiritual strivings. Each of these has several aspects, as articulated by Jewish moralists, and the subtle gradations within them fill many a treatise on the spiritual life. Love of God may range from a lowly love of divine reward for doing good to a lofty and pure basking in God's presence or to an utterly unselfish sense of fulfillment in following his will. A sense of deep longing for utter absorption within divinity, including an annihilation of the separate self, is also frequently to be found in the teachings of Jewish mystics. The fear of God includes both fear of wrath and punishment, at the lowest end of the spectrum (said by some to be an entirely improper motivation for religious behavior), and a trembling and awestruck sense of divine grandeur, the emotion most associated with the thunderous presence of God at Sinai, surely the greatest single paradigm in the tradition for later religious experience. The psalmist's "rejoice with trembling" (Ps. 2:11) might be said to be especially characteristic of Jewish piety; the awesome and overwhelming presence of God is occasion for exaltation rather than terror. Awe and intimacy tend to go hand in hand in the life of Jewish piety: the object of worship may indeed be the

king of kings, majestic emperor of the universe, but the worshiper is that king's beloved child or faithful servant, one whose plea the king will never spurn. A sense of being "at home" in the king's palace, including an ability at times to argue with him and challenge what seems to be divine injustice, is an ancient part of Israel's spiritual legacy.

Acceptance of the love of God bears with it a willingness to suffer for the sake of that love. *Kabbalat yissurim be-ahavah*, the acceptance of suffering in love, is a long-standing virtue in the world of Jewish spirituality. The challenge to divine justice is usually taken up for the sake of others; for one's own life, a joyous resignation to God's will is seen as the proper attitude. This was especially the case in those ages when suffering and martyrdom for God's sake were a common experience among Jews, but is applied in all ages to the universally known pains of illness, death, and loss. Israel serves as God's witness in the world; its testimony is significant only because it has known suffering as well as goodness at his hand. The witness of those who have known such pain is tortured, and in modern times even ambivalent, but the affirmation that emerges from it is profound and not easily contradicted.

R744 The love of God also calls forth a love of God's creation, and specifically a love of all humans, who are created in his image. There is also a special sense of love and mutual responsibility among Jews, *ahavat yisra'el*. At its best this specific love, like that within an extended family, is expansive rather than exclusive. The love of God's creatures calls for a sense of responsibility in the realm of human affairs, compassion for the oppressed and the poor, and a willingness to serve as peacemaker within the human community. Judaism's commitment to the reality of this world, rooted in the demands of Israel's ancient prophets, does not allow for a spirituality of an entirely otherworldly character. The only true test of one's love of God is one's ability to share in the love of God's creatures. Only in human community are the virtues learned in spiritual training made real. The careful balancing of worldliness—including the commitment to halakhic responsibility—and inwardness is perhaps the most clearly distinguishing mark of Jewish spirituality. The fact that Jewry has no special class of "religious" to devote themselves wholly to spiritual pursuits, but rather demands both the life of holiness and the responsibilities of family and worldly sustenance from all its folk, lends reality to this sense of balance. The ultimate spiritual and parental models here are Abraham and Sarah, showing the love of God to others and bringing them "under the wings of the *Shekhinah*" (divine Presence) and thereby enriching their own lives with God as well.

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