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ASBI Congregation
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Two Roads Diverged in a Yellow Wood

I hope you noticed that I was away last Shabbat. I certainly noticed. I spent Shabbat in New York City so that I could attend a wedding Saturday night. The wedding was lovely and a lot of fun. Shabbat was relaxing, although I missed our community and especially my family. I did appreciate the chance to attend shul as a regular civilian. That is a rare experience for me and I tried to make the most of it by bringing along a “shul book” to read in shul during some of the slow moments, in between *aliyot* etc. Shul was once a major opportunity in my life for reading and I looked forward to the chance to once again get some reading done at shul.

The book that I had with me is called *Kedushat Aviv* and is a collection of essays by my late teacher Rav Aharon Lichtenstein on the topic of “*kedushah*” or holiness as it manifests itself in Halakhah. I dove into one of the essays which explores the recitation of *kiddush* on Shabbat and holidays and the role that *kiddush* plays in marking sacred nature of Shabbat or even creating the sacred nature of Shabbat. The essay explores the difference between *kiddush* on Shabbat and *kiddush* on *Yom Tov* and between *kiddush* at night and *kiddush* during the day and then explores each of these within the legal conceptions developed by several Talmudic and medieval scholars.

As I was making progress in this essay, going deeper and deeper into the conceptual analysis, the man sitting next to me handed me a book that *he* was reading and pointed at a paragraph and said, “read this.” The book was a famous collection of Hassidic insights into the Torah portion called *Sefat Emet* that was written one hundred and fifty years ago by the Gerer Rebbe. I read a short, declarative sentence that was imaginative and brilliant in its interpretation of Biblical verses but that which lacked the systematic and rigorous method of Rav Lichtenstein’s essay.

I stood with a book in each hand and I felt as though I was experiencing a broad spectrum of Jewish spirituality at that moment, exemplified by the books in each of my hands. Two roads diverged in a yellow wood. Which path to take and what difference does it make?

Rav Lichtenstein was the son in law and intellectual heir to Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, himself the grandson and scion of the Soloveitchik rabbinic dynasty. Insofar as Talmudic scholarship has been the core of Jewish religious and intellectual life for many centuries, the method of conceptual Talmud study developed by Rabbi Soloveitchik’s grandfather, Rabbi Chaim of Brisk, is often considered to be the most refined and rarified form of Talmud scholarship. This “Brisker” method of Torah study that the Soloveitchik dynasty taught and spread, and that Rav Lichtenstein in turn taught to his students, centers the relationship between humanity and God in our engagement with God’s Will as it is expressed in the Torah.

Weak and mortal human beings cannot encounter God directly and we cannot speak of any metaphysical realities with any certainty or precision. But we can study God’s word and we can discover new insights into God’s word and we can then categorize and define and sort and systematize halakhah and in this way we imbue our existence on earth with Divine wisdom as we mold the world to conform to the comprehensive blueprint provided by halakhah.

This morning’s Torah portion introduces the idea of a sacred space, the *mishkan* and *mikdash*. What does it mean for a space to be holy? Rav Lichtenstein and the Brisker approach would answer that if one wants to understand “sanctity” as that concept exists in Judaism then one has to collect and analyze *halakhah* - real objective data points, otherwise one is engaging in mere speculation. It is irresponsible to offer theories without data. The second half of Rav Lichtenstein’s book examines each facet and degree of the sanctity of places. The *kedushah* of the Land of Israel, the *kedushah* of Jerusalem, the *kedushah* of the various chambers

and courtyards of the *beit hamikdash* each need to be delineated. What are the *nafka minah*'s, what are the practical implications of each location's *kedushah*? What portion of that *kedushah* is generated by human action, for example when Jerusalem's boundaries are expanded, and what portion is granted by God?

For contrast, I turned this week to another book of essays on the Torah portion, *Netivot Shalom*, a 20th century Hassidic commentary and looked to see how its author, the Rebbe of Slonim, treats the sanctity of the *mishkan* and *mikdash*. The contrast is significant. *Netivot Shalom* sees the *mishkan* and its furnishings as they are described in our Torah portion as reflecting a higher metaphysical reality. Another world exists on a plane of existence that is above and beyond our capacity see and understand. Our own human bodies and the *mishkan* itself are a representation and reflection or echo of that higher metaphysical reality. The sacred function of the *mishkan*, from this perspective, is not exemplified by the laws governing its use, but by an inherent metaphysical reality that - by definition - we cannot fully understand.

There are two paths to bridge the gulf between humanity and God. There is the world of *halakhab* and Torah scholarship that gives human beings an opportunity to engage with God's will, to serve God with our minds, and to recreate the world in the image of Halakhah. And there is the path of mysticism in which the gap between humanity and God is overcome by our ability to recognize the Divine that exists already within us. We are created in God's image as a reflection of a Divine reality that we cannot see. The chasm is bridged by cultivating our own self-awareness.

The Ramban, the great Medieval Torah scholar who was both a mystic and arguably the most sensitive and subtle reader of plain-sense *peshat* interpretations of the Torah explains that the *mishkan* was meant to perpetuate the experience of standing at Sinai. Just as Sinai was surrounded by barriers to entry and only certain people could come forward to approach the mountain, and only Moshe could ascend to the summit, so too the *mishkan* was surrounded by barriers to entry and only certain people, such as *kohanim*, could enter into certain precincts of the *mishkan* and only the high priest, the *kohen gadol* could enter the innermost part.. Just as God communicated to Moshe from the top of Sinai, so too God communicated to Moshe from the midst of the *mishkan*, from the space between the *keruvim*.

For those in the tradition of Brisk like Rav Lichtenstein, the most important element of Sinai, that was perpetuated in the *mishkan*, was the revelation of the Torah itself. For the mystical tradition, the most important element was the encounter itself between humanity and God and the relationship that was formed, which has value independent of the content of the actual Torah that was revealed.

Fortunately, we can have recourse to both modes of religious engagement. I once was asked to write a "spiritual autobiography" in one sentence. I wrote, "A Yekke by heritage, a Litvak by training, David enjoys singing with the Hassidim." We can take advantage of the rigor and systematic analysis of the Lithuanian Talmudists. And we can cultivate a personal encounter with God that is animated by the spiritual insights of the Hassidic masters.

I am in need of both approaches this morning.

In a few minutes I am going to visit the 3-5 year old children who are finishing their Shabbat morning group in the JCC. We are going to talk about Purim and we will all sing "*MisheNichnas Adar Marbim b'Simcha*" - the Hebrew month of Adar has arrived and the Talmud tells us this is a time of increasing joy. We will talk about Purim, about the evil plot that was foiled with God's hidden help at the last minute, and about how heroes and heroines were able to save innocent victims. We will sing out in recognition that this is a happy time on the Jewish calendar.

But I feel sadness this week. We were reminded in Parkland Florida that evil plots can be carried out. Good people cannot prevent innocent victims from being harmed, and even behind the scenes we cannot find the hand of God guiding crises to a peaceful resolution. As the happy month of Adar began on Wednesday night and Thursday I felt increasing sadness and not happiness.

These two modes of Jewish religious life can each offer a solution to my dilemma. The halakhah focused mode of Jewish religious life reminds us that certain times of year have legal identities that must be prioritized over and beyond my own subjective feelings. A mourner, for example in the midst of *shivah*, showers and wears clean clothing and joins the congregation in shul on Shabbat. Adar is a happy month and expressing that happiness is more important than my subjective emotions. Our children, therefore, deserve a joy filled Adar even though the world is not filled with joy because the halakhah always assumes that the world is not filled with joy but that joy must dominate certain days or seasons.

Alternatively, the mystical tradition within Judaism teaches that there is a metaphysical reality that hovers over existence. Sacred days and special seasons of the year have an identity not because of any law but because of a deeper and transcendent identity. Our children deserve to be happy during Adar, not because things are always good during Adar - that has never been true and it isn't true this week, but we have the opportunity to escape from the events that surround us and attach ourselves to a higher and more true reality. That reality animates our Adar rejoicing.

For us adults, however, I want to encourage all of us to take advantage of whichever Jewish religious mode and language speaks most to us and to feel free to combine them both. We can rejoice this month as rigorous students of halakhah and also as mystics who have connected to a higher plane of existence. As we read about the mishkan we can appreciate it as a structure from which God's law and God's will were made known to the Jewish people, and also as a structure that represents the very secrets of the universe itself and the direct relationship between human beings and our Creator.

But let us also ensure that our religious virtuosity and spiritual sensitivity always retains an ethical goal. If we can escape our sadness this Purim season, let us then redouble our efforts as neighbors and as citizens to reduce the need for future mourning. If, during the coming weeks of Torah portions, we can study and appreciate how the Torah defines and delineates sacred spaces, let us redouble our efforts to preserving the sanctity of our neighborhoods and our schools. If we can see ourselves as capable of engaging with God's will through Torah study, or embracing the Divine element within each one of us, let us redouble our efforts to making sure that every human being, each one of our neighbors anywhere on this planet, can live a life of dignity and safety as befits one fashioned in the image of God.