

Somewhere between Spirituality and Religion

By: Rabbi Yanki Tauber

Most of us in these spiritual 00's profess a "spiritual side", a "religious self" or however else we might refer to that part of ourselves that's in touch with Something Higher. So the question is not really do we have it, but what exactly is it. Is it a self-improvement thing, like a woodworking class or a therapy session? Is it a duty, like obeying the law of the land and going to work in the morning? Or is it simply who you are?

The Talmud, addressing this question more than 1500 years ago, put it in these terms: what do you call the place that G-d occupies in your life -- a mountain, a field, or a house?

It was something else to each of the three founding fathers of the Jewish people. There is a place -- the Temple Mount in Jerusalem -- which the Torah regards as the focal point of G-d's presence in our world. When Abraham was there, it's called "the mountain of G-d's revelation." To Isaac, the place was a "field". Jacob spent a night there and proclaimed it "the house of G-d."

The Kabbalists sum up the lives of the three Patriarchs this way: Abraham was the embodiment of love, Isaac personified awe, and Jacob was the essence of truth.

The problem with love is that it can go too far, bearing down on the boundary between self and other to the extent that it becomes smothering and decadent. Abraham was the perfection of love, but his son, Ishmael, was an example of love run amok. The problem with humility, commitment and self-discipline is that it can congeal into cruelty -- Esau is an example of Isaacness corrupted.

Truth, on the other hand, is what it is; not because it is reaching for something or recoiling from something. Truth is love that respects boundaries; truth is commitment tempered with compassion. Truth is not a mountain, a distended piece of earth trying to be heaven; nor is it a field, flattening itself to the ground to submit to the plow and spade. Truth is a home: a place that shelters life, facilitates its needs, enables it to be itself.

Of course, the home cannot exist without the mountain and the field. Truth without passion is dead; truth without commitment is ungrounded. To become ourselves, we must climb our mountains and work our fields. But we must remember that life truly lived is not to achieve or to submit, but to inhabit our achievements and commitments. Or as the Midrash expresses it: to make the world a home for G-d.

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9 November | 6 Kislev

Vayetzei

Shabbat Begins: 4:01 pm

Shabbat Ends: 5:04 pm