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The Soul of a Rabbi's Work

Bradley Shavit Artson

A wonderful story is told in the Talmud about a remarkable insight that emerges from a tragedy. Rav Joseph is comatose and has been unable to speak for some time. His father, Rav Yehoshua Ben Levi, stands by him as his son finally regains consciousness. Being a rabbi, he doesn't start by saying, "How are you feeling? Or, "Good to have you back." Rav Yehoshua asks Rav Joseph a question of theology. "What did you see my, son?" While you were unconscious, what vision of the World to Come did you see?

"I saw an inverted world," the son says. "There the most prominent here are lowly, and the most lowly are elevated."

"My son," says Rav Yehoshua, "you have seen a clear world. How are we, the rabbis, there?"

The son responds, "Just as we are here, so are we there."

What a remarkable story! The next world is the world of clarity and ours is a world topsy-turvy and upside down. Whatever is esteemed in this world is known to be trivial in that world. And that is the world of clarity! Even more striking than the dichotomy of the things that are ill-valued here yet are precious in *olam haba* is the statement that the status of individual rabbis is exactly the same in the next world as it is in this one. Rabbis alone are unchanged, whether in this world or the next.

This talmudic passage teaches two important truths. This world is in many ways misguided. In this world, we often chase after the trivial and the insignificant. In this world, we elevate that which ought best to be ignored. Those traits that are truly glorious we belittle. Those individuals who are truly great are generally the ones who never make the morning edition of the *Times*, and those who do routinely make the headlines of the paper are not necessarily great.

The job of rabbis is to be sure that the values to which we hold allegiance and the conduct of the Jewish people adheres to the way of the next world, not of this one. Those things which motivate rabbis to arise in the morning

and devote their energy and time are not the ephemera of this misguided and upside world, but rather, in Rav Yehoshua Ben Levi's words, those of the clear world, the one that is yet to be. So then it becomes all the more important to ask: what indeed is that center? What is that essence to which rabbis devote themselves and to which their deeds ought to give expression?

What is the center—religious, ethical, and intellectual—that will stand with us now in this world and be a witness for us in the world to come?

Ours is a world in which all mind their own business, and avidly pursue their own narrow self-interests. Especially in an age of withdrawal, it is incumbent upon the rabbis to say “no retreat.” In a world in which everyone is taking care of number one, looking out for themselves, in a society in which greed has become an organizing principle, it is up to the rabbis to insist that what is truly important is found not only within the synagogue, but outside in the town square. Now more than ever, we must assert that a religion that attends only to what is inside is a perversion and no religion at all. The Talmud in Massekhet Shabbat says, “There are Torah scholars who are occupied with the upbuilding of the world all their days.”

Today's rabbis are called to be those sages, to recognize that a life of Torah must pass in the service of *tikkun olam*. Only when the wisdom of Torah flows out into the way we craft a world, in the way we engage each other, and in the way we learn to care for and about each other, only then can the wisdom of Torah flow through us to others. As the Mishnah reminds us, the greatest of the commandments is *talmud torah* (study), because all the other mitzvot—deeds of action—derive from it. The centrality of study is dependent on applying what we learn to how we live.

We live in a world in need of a full-bodied Judaism, a Judaism that insists on ritual profundity and moral rigor, a religion that doesn't cower and wait, but boldly leads, one that reminds others and ourselves that this is a murky world in need of light and clarity. That laser beam of light, that ray of revelation is ours to live and to give.

We live in an age focused on building institutions and blind to the notion of building people. How much time do rabbis spend pondering budgets, planning for adequate rooms, facilities, and space? In tending to those important buildings that house our people, we can too easily forget that the point of the buildings is the people inside.

We live in an age that looks for empirically verifiable measures of success and so we value those things that we can count and those things that we can weigh. But a Judaism worth its salt is one that asserts the opposite: it is precisely those things that cannot be measured, nor seen by the eye, nor heard by the ear that rise to the realm of ultimate reality. We forget that the institutions are not the structures, but the participants.

To this day, I recall the charge my childhood rabbi addressed to me on the day I became a bar mitzvah. My family had just taken me on a trip to Greece because I was enthused about ancient Greek history. Rabbi Asher said to me that people travel to Greece to look at ruined buildings because what

the Greeks built were buildings. We Jews built people. Consequently, he said, Greek civilization has left us only with ruins, whereas Jewish civilization is still alive and vital. It is precisely that Jewish commitment to building and investing *in people* that has allowed our civilization to remain and to thrive while those around us crumbled.

We find that truth in the Bible, too. When King Solomon dedicated the new Temple in Jerusalem, the single greatest building in the history of our people, God said, "The heaven is my throne and the earth my footstool. Where could you build a house for me? What place could serve as my abode? All this was made by my hand and thus came into being—declared Adonai. Yet to such a one I look: to the poor and broken-hearted who is concerned about my word." God's focus is not the magnificent building, but those people who would most readily be overlooked or ignored. It is our task to remind the world that we are building institutions only in order to shelter our people.

We live in an age in which many are rushing to close their wagons, to exclude the undesirables, to assure for themselves an astringent purity so that "we" don't have to have "them" mingle with (and corrupt) "us." To make sure that we are pure, we raise our standards even higher, shutting out an increasing number of seeking individuals. While some would attempt to shore up holiness by excluding those poor unfortunates who don't rise to the desired standard, the Talmud proposes a different model. Massekhet Yoma describes one of the rooms in the courtyard of the Temple: the *lishkat ha-m'tzarim*, the room that was used specifically for lepers, the most impure and rejected people in all of ancient Israel. These are the people, after all, who must walk through the streets, veiled, and shouting "impure, impure."

What a paradox! The biblical ritual of the *metzora* (the leper) requires that after the *metzora* has initiated a period of purification, he/she must bring a sacrifice to the Temple. The offering is to be slaughtered, the blood collected, and then the blood is to be placed on the earlobes, the thumb and the toe. But here's the catch: the blood of the sacrificial offering that is to be sprinkled on the Altar has the status of *kadosh* (holy), and an offering with the status of *kadosh* may not be removed from the precinct of the Temple. A *metzora*, however, until that blood is sprinkled on him, remains at the height of impurity and cannot enter the Temple precinct (where the purifying blood must be kept)! The *metzora* can't become pure without contact with the sacrificial blood. But he can't come into contact with that blood unless he is already pure!

What has rabbinic tradition provided for those most rejected, impure individuals? According to the Talmud, the lepers are given a special room inside the Temple precincts! Indeed, they are the only group so privileged. The lesson here is clear: Even a site as holy as the Temple is not a dwelling for God unless all of our brothers and sisters have a place within. Today's rabbis, too, must stand for a Judaism that is open to all who would be with us, to all who would stand inside the sacred precincts despite what some might label

impure, despite that the Torah itself declare them impure. Only a *beit ha-mikdash* that has such a room is a holy place. And only in such a building can we encounter the Holy One. In a world in which so many are scrambling to be purer than everyone else, it is our essential task to build a Judaism that is still the big tent—that has room for the right and the left, that has room for the typical and the special needs, the gay and the straight, male and female.

In an age which confuses ignorance for spirituality, it is our task to assert that the ignoramus cannot be truly pious and to ground spirituality in learning. This is an age that talks about spirituality as though all of it were a mere feeling. Feelings come and go, but the insights of our tradition are truths embodied in the *levush* (the garment) of words. It is only when those profundities are wrapped in words that they can be transmitted—one person to the next, one generation to the next. How marvelous the insight of the prophet Ezekiel, “It was in my mouth as honey for sweetness.” Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the world could know a study so beautiful that it tasted like honey? If all could recognize the joy with which we open holy books and inaugurate a conversation that connects the generations one to another?

Another wonderful passage appears in the Talmud in which a rabbinic scholar addresses his soul: “Rejoice my soul, rejoice my soul. It is for you that I have read. It is for you that I have studied.” It is not enough that we read and study; we must do so for the sake of our soul. If we reduce Torah into merely an academic book, if we mine the tradition merely for interesting facts or scintillating theory, then we are not engaged in *talmud torah* at all. Jewish study must use the mind for the sake of the soul. The balance rabbis must teach is that our souls will atrophy without rigorous study. Ours has to be the steady belief that the trendy spirituality of ignorance and passion ultimately will fail both the test of time and the trials that life inevitably brings. Only a spirituality rooted in God and Torah will be able to endure, even as it has nurtured our people through good times and bad.

We live in an age in which people look to each other for how they may use other people. Near the top of the list of people to use is the rabbi. How many times have I heard a rabbi praised because she was always available whenever a congregant needed her? How many times have people encountered their rabbi—with children in a park, or at a playground, or in a gym—and proceeded to impose a discussion, regardless of the fact that the rabbi was clearly occupied with something else?

Many rabbis contribute to that problem, I believe, because they often fail to distinguish between their identities and their careers. Rabbis are notorious for making a life of their jobs. How important, then, for rabbis to teach our people that their lives are bigger than their work by sometimes saying, “I can’t talk to you now. I am with my family. Please call me tomorrow at my study.” But the courage required for a rabbi to suggest non-availability to people who are also his/her employers is part of *the rabbi’s* ongoing struggle to assert personal humanity and to remind laity (and rabbis) that even clergy have the right to private time. Perhaps the greatest personal challenge to rab-

bis is to be able to control their own need to be needed, to remind themselves that the best service they can provide their congregants is occasionally to allow them to fend for themselves. Rabbis have to remind them (and themselves) that—the synagogue dynamic notwithstanding—the laity are really adults and rabbis are not their parents.

And then, *aharon aharon haviv*, the last is always the most important: It is essential to remember for whom a rabbi really works. I was teaching a group of senior rabbinical students who wanted to know how they should conduct their interview weekends. Should they act like they're already working for the synagogue and they are in charge, or should they act like they are just visiting for a weekend? The answer bears repeating: a rabbi *never* works for a synagogue. A rabbi works for God.

"Ana avda de-kudsha brikh hu. I am a servant of the Holy One." That servitude may be expressed inside a synagogue, or inside a hospital, or inside a school or simply by how we live. At all times, however, the boss remains the same. The service of that boss may well assume different forms in different places and stages of life. Having been a congregational rabbi for a decade and now serving in an institutional setting, I can't tell you the number of people who have asked me in the last several months if I am happier now that I have left the rabbinate. The calling of the rabbinate cannot be reduced to contracts or a mode of employment. That is merely the form that a particular rabbinate takes. The rabbinate is a willingness to be the *eved* of God. A rabbi must focus on that fundamental commitment at all times and places.

Isaiah asks the question that I think we all need to ask, "Who of us can dwell with the devouring fire? Who of us can dwell with the never-dying flame?" Ours is a tradition that scorches and illuminates. Ours is a tradition that has a bite in it and often requires saying no. It is the rabbis' privilege to do so out of love, to do so recognizing that they are the vessels through whom holiness can enter the world. Rabbis are the ones who can allow our people to see the holiness that they already embody. If our rabbis remember those truths, if they stay true to who they are and to whom God calls them to be, then we also can answer as did Rav Yehoshua. We also can make this a truer world, a world of greater light.

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson is the dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, and the author of the forthcoming Dear Rabbi: Jewish Answers to Life's Questions (Torah Aura).