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Valley Interveiw Rabbi Sees Danger in the `Black Hole' of Lost Spirituality; [Valley Edition]

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Abstract (Summary)

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Full Text (1239 words)

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Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis, senior rabbi at Encino's Valley Beth Shalom since 1970, talks about the continuing importance of spiritual beliefs.

Schulweis is the author of "For Those Who Can't Believe, Overcoming the Obstacles to Faith" (HarperCollins), which is now in its third printing since its release in September.

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Question: Have you learned much about the U.S. religious climate from responses of readers to your recent book?

Answer: There has been a terrible neglect of the spiritual and intellectual aspects of religion. From speaking to audiences both inside and outside synagogues, I find that people have deep, unresolved questions which they prematurely buried in their youth. That has created a theological black hole, a vacuum, that is very dangerous.

Q. Why dangerous?

A. It is dangerous because if humans do not possess intelligent and sane theology, they are going to be filled with street theology, which is exactly what happens in our understanding of sexuality when sex education is eliminated in schools. A great insight of G. K. Chesterton comes to mind: When a person ceases believing in something, it is not that he now believes in nothing, but that he believes in anything. In other words, people are so desperate to find something that they are open to charlatans and hucksterism.

Q. Are you thinking of some sectarian groups that have been in the news lately?

A. When you have nothing in your own tradition that allows you to say, "Sir, you are not God," you can have tragedies associated with groups such as the (Order of the Solar Temple) in France and Aum Supreme Truth in Japan. The deepest danger here is the sacrifice of moral intelligence, the surrender to a charismatic personality. I

think that responsible and sane spirituality must come from the church and the synagogue. We can agree with a verse from Ecclesiastes to the effect that there is no righteous person who has done good and who has not sinned.

Q. Does this relate at all to the Passover story?

A. Yes. In the whole Haggada, the narration of the Exodus, there is no mention of Moses even though he is clearly the hero in this Bible story. No mention is made of him because of tremendous apprehension that he be looked upon as a god. This is carried through in the tradition to the point where one of the last verses about Moses (Deuteronomy 34:6) says no one knows his burial place. This was so because the people would worship at his sepulcher if they knew where it was located.

Q. Your book, however, was written for people with obstacles to faith, right?

A. Yes, this is the other extreme, the one I find most true-that people simply have dismissed the entire enterprise of religion and spirituality. They have become absolutely mute on these matters. This silence is a symptom of their feeling that established religion is irrelevant and incredulous.

In the Passover narrative during the Seder, or ritual meal, there are three sons who ask questions: a wise son, a wicked son and a simple son. A fourth son, who doesn't know how to ask a question, is not foolish; he doesn't ask anything because he has given up any expectation that wisdom or reality exists in this tradition.

Q. What then do you make of best-seller books on spiritual themes and many courses offered on personal spirituality?

A. I think that there is a genuine critique against religion, which many people see as a starched tuxedo shirt-publicly impressive but stiff and privately unwearable. They contrast that with spirituality, which they see as a free-floating chemise-without the restrictive tie, the studs and the ivory buttons. Spirituality is a demand for the expressive, the spontaneous, an attention to the internal as opposed to what they find in the synagogue and, I suppose, in the church as well. They feel that traditional religion gives pro forma answers to questions about the inner life.

The emphasis in our society is on autonomy, individuality and a society which is open or pluralistic. People are less and less born into a faith. In Judaism, we are dealing with not a chosen people but a choosing people. You have to choose among Jewishnesses: What kind of Judaism is compatible with my spirit? That's new. My grandfather or father never had that. We have become a religion determined less by descent but more by assent.

Q. Why do you think this holds true now for Jews as much as it does for Christians?

A. Jews have lived with external pressures on them, notably anti-Semitism. A contemporary Jewish theologian, Emil Fackenheim, said that if you are not loyal to Judaism, you will give Hitler a posthumous victory. That is not working for most people. If Fackenheim is right, to be a Jew is to spite Hitler. Today, I don't think that fear, grief or guilt can sustain that idea. The Holocaust is gradually exhausting itself as a motivating force to keep Jews Jewish. Anti-Semitism is no longer a driving force. I don't think that (ex-Ku Klux Klan figure) David Duke or (Nation of Islam leader) Louis Farrakhan frighten us enough to be Jewish.

Q. Hasn't Judaism traditionally focused on collective, community concerns?

A. Yes. The prayer book is written entirely with references to we, us and our. It's always first person plural, but the individual is thinking I and me. You can't pray without this concern for I and me. And it is wrong to dismiss it simply as self-centeredness; it is real and has to be addressed.

At the same time, what's new in Jewish life is the notion of "Do not tell me what I can do for Judaism; you tell me what Judaism can do for me." Sadly, the spiritual journey has turned into privatism. This is a kind of narcissism that is removed from commitment to the group, to society and to community. The poor, some say, are getting what they deserve. I find this is widespread-a new-old rationalization of hardness of heart and benign neglect. In my tradition, this is poison. This represents a spiritual selfishness and runs counter to our understanding of holiness. There is no communion without community.

Q. Doesn't this mean that there is a certain ambivalence about a sane faith-freedom to think and challenge but obligations as well?

A. Life is ambivalent. The very force that can heal can also hurt. The wine you can get drunk on, you also use for the kiddish, the prayer over wine that is recited on the Sabbath and on festivals.

[Illustration]

PHOTO: Rabbi Harold Schulweis looks at the relevance of religion in his book. / JOEL P. LUGAVERE / Los Angeles Times

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