

## RABBI'S MESSAGE

### Spiritual, Religious or Both?

It's no secret attendance at synagogues on High Holidays is higher than any other time of the year. Jews who are disconnected from synagogues are more likely to come on Rosh Hashana or Yom Kippur. Yet statistics reveal that Jews who connect with Judaism just once a year are more likely to celebrate Passover or Hanukkah at home than go to synagogue. Regardless of the label – Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, or other – the fastest growing group of Jews is the unaffiliated.

Often, I meet people who identify as “spiritual but not religious.” They may follow that with “I believe in God, but I don't like organized religion.” When I hear that, I'm tempted to show them a picture of my office desk and show them how “disorganized” a religious leader can be!

“Organized religion” can seem complicated and troublesome. I even heard a synagogue president (not from my synagogue) say “Now I know why the Torah never calls our people as ‘the GROWNUPS’ of Israel.” Torah chronicles how we complained in the wilderness searching for the Promised Land, and it seems we haven't stopped complaining. This year, on Erev Tish B'Av this year (commemorating the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem), a rabbi posted on Facebook that modern synagogues are no longer “relevant, appropriate or helpful,” and are becoming (in his opinion) outdated the same way that ancient Temple rituals became outdated. He suggests that today's synagogue lacks spiritual inspiration needed to invigorate present and future generations. Another rabbi responded to the post, excited to open a dialogue that can be “an example in our democratic and technological era of what a Rabbinical exchange in Talmudic times could have looked like!”

Having a rabbinic conversation from California to Argentina to Texas is reminiscent of the conversations Talmudic rabbis had over the generations. Technology gives us the opportunity to connect more globally, but the connections are diluted by distance. During COVID, countless worshippers watched computer screens rather than gathering. Some got used to it. Others found ways of connecting to communities despite the stumbling blocks of distance. But nothing beats being together, sharing a snack, pondering a concept and disputing a philosophical idea.

Today's rabbis are wondering how we can inspire modern Jews looking for spirituality but not always finding at *shul*. For those who feel disconnected from the spiritual, it can begin with friendship. Pirke Avot (Ethics of our Ancestors) says, “Don't separate yourself from community.” (1:6) and “Acquire for yourself a friend.” (2:5) After all, each person, created in God's image, has a spark of Divine spirit. Together, friends can motivate each other to re-create the kind of community that IS meaningful and inspirational. And our New Year can begin with exciting potential.

L'Shalom,

***Rabbi Dan Gordon***