


Re'eh

Form, Feelings, Spirituality, and Judaism

 One of the criticisms which Judaism has had to endure throughout history is that it is legalistic and concerned only with form, that it does not really touch people's feelings. This criticism claims that it is feelings that are important and not form. It is true that Judaism stresses form, but that is because Judaism believes that it is form which produces feelings and not feelings which produce form.

We all know that our feelings vary greatly even within the very same day, and we know that the intensity of our feelings vary from day to day. We also know that different people have different levels of feelings. To base a spiritual experience on ephemeral feelings is a very risky business which can lead to cultic or other outrageous forms of behavior in order to try to cultivate certain sought after feelings.

We also know that many people try to think that they are unique and special, that only they can feel or endure certain things, but we know that this is not true. If these were true, then all medicine would be a lie. We would never be able to go to a doctor because all our symptoms would be special and unique and no doctor could prescribe any medicine for use. We know that this is not true. All of us are basically the same. It is true that there are a few little individual variations, especially between the sexes and between certain genetic groupings but, basically, we are all the same. If we go to a doctor with certain symptoms, he will say that we have a certain disease and prescribe certain medicines. If we were all unique and special, then this could not be the case.

We also know that, psychologically, if we are subjected to certain pressures, we will all crack. Some will crack before others, but nobody can take constant abusive pressures for too long. That's why psychology and psychiatry work. A person who was abused as a child needs to get help to alleviate his symptoms; otherwise, he will end up abusing his own children. Yes, we do have free will, but only free will not to get into certain situations. After we have been subjected to certain pressures and problems, we are going to crack just like everyone else. People who were exposed to certain viruses over a long period of time are going to catch that virus unless they are protected in some way. The same goes for different

psychological pressures. The rabbis teach us that man can resist everything except temptation. The best way to resist temptation is to stay out of temptation's way. When teenagers, especially, ask me, "What's the matter, Rabbi? Do you think I have a dirty mind?" I tell them, "No, you don't have a dirty mind. You just have normal hormones." We know that, even among professionals, there are certain professionals who are known to have higher incidents of certain social problems than others. Clergymen and psychiatrists and psychologists are known to have more problems with improper sexual conduct. That's because when people come to them, they are vulnerable and they want love and reassurance and this can lead to sexually improper conduct. Lawyers are known to have problems with embezzlement because people give them money to hold and doctors, at least in the past before the onslaught of the drug culture, had problems with drugs because they could write themselves prescriptions. Of course, the percentages of these who take advantage of their professions are still very low, but they are significantly higher than other people in these areas.

All of us are influenced by the circumstances in which we find ourselves. None of us should ever think that we are so unique and special that things that happen to other people will not happen to us. They will unless we take special precautions. Rabbi Twersky, who is also a psychiatrist and the director of one of the premiere drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers in America, has commented that one of the biggest problems with alcoholics is that they always think that "this time it will be different." They will be able to drink and because of certain stratagems that they have adopted, they will not become drunk. We all know that these stratagems always fail, that "this time will not be different." Also, when other people confront them with their experiences and tell them how they have to lay off drinking entirely, they refuse to believe it. They say, "I am different. I am special. That may apply to them but it does not apply to me." All of us are subject to the same forces. We are not so unique and special that the normal pressures and experiences of life will not affect us. True, there are slight variations between individuals, but these variations are not in the main very great.

Today in America we are in the midst of a spiritual revolution. People no longer believe that material things can satisfy them completely. They

know that they need spirituality and there is a great quest for spirituality. Unfortunately, many people are looking for spirituality in the wrong way. They are looking for all sorts of experiences that will heighten their feelings. Unfortunately, many very well-meaning people end up either in cults or trying all sorts of outlandish and orgiastic experiences in order to feel spirituality. All these attempts ultimately fail and leave a person much worse off than before. After all, 30 years ago there were many who claimed that taking drugs was mind-expanding and was the way to achieve a spiritual experience. We know especially now how wrong that claim was.

The problem with all these attempts at spirituality in our modern day is that they are based on the belief that feelings determine form rather than realizing that it is form which determines feelings. After all, if a person wants to feel healthy, he does not say, "I feel healthy and, therefore, I will eat balanced meals, sleep regularly, and get exercise." It works the other way. In order to feel healthy, you first have to eat balanced meals, exercise, and get adequate rest; then you will feel healthy. Feeling comes after the form. The feeling comes after you have done a regimen of things.

Judaism has always recognized this, that if you want to feel spirituality, you first have to do a regimen of things. If you keep kosher, if you keep *Shabbat*, if you keep the laws of family purity, you will feel spirituality. It is true that if you keep one *Shabbos*, you may not notice it. If you keep two *Shabboses*, you might not notice it. Even if you keep three *Shabboses*, you may not notice it, but if you keep *Shabbos* for several months and then stop keeping it, you will immediately notice a difference. You will feel something missing from your life. Judaism has 3500 years of experience. By following its forms, you become spiritual. It is true that within Judaism there may be certain minor variations, like between *Sephardim* and *Ashkenazim*, *Chassidim* and *Misnagdim*, but they are very minor and allow for an individual to express his individuality. But, in the main, they conform to what is necessary for a person to do if he wants to be spiritual. We Jews in the past were not plagued with certain problems, like juvenile delinquency, wife abuse, alcoholism, etc., because many of these problems are direct results of the frustration people feel because of a lack of spirituality in their lives. We Jews did not have this type of frustration. We felt G-d's presence in what we did, and we did not want to shatter our

relationship with G-d and with our family by doing despicable things.

In Judaism we believe that feelings follows form, and not that form follows feelings. Feelings are so ephemeral and so variable that you cannot wait for them to develop form. They will not be able to do so. It is also true that if you follow Judaism's forms, regimen of conduct, that the depths of your feelings may vary. Sometimes they will be more intense than others, but they will always be there.

In the *Torah* portion *Re'eh*, we learn about these things. We learn how the Jewish people were to know that G-d has placed before each of us a blessing and a curse. We were to know that we would receive the blessing if we would follow G-d's commandments. We would gain the spirituality we all know that we need. On the other hand, if we would not follow G-d's commands, then we would receive a curse. This curse would come from the terrible frustration which we would all feel when we do not have a spiritual base in our lives. That's why the Jewish people were told that when they were to enter the land of Israel, they were to come before Mount Grisim and Mount Abel, which are two mountains side by side. One is covered with lush vegetation and the other is barren. The mountain which has vegetation is called the Mountain of Blessing, and it is known as Mount Grisim. The word "*Goraz*" in Hebrew means "to be cut." In fact, the word for "hatchet" in Hebrew is "*Garzen*" If we limit our actions, if we cut away from us immoral and unethical conduct and observe *Shabbat* and the holidays and *kashruth*, etc., we will feel G-d's spirituality. On the other hand, Mount Abel, whose letters spell out in Hebrew *Al Yaday Becheeras Libo*, doing whatever your heart desires, will lead only to curses and barrenness. Not only will these feelings produce nothing, these feelings, themselves, will even cease. In order to have spiritual feelings, we must first fulfill the Jewish regimen, the Jewish form. That is what the rest of this *Torah* portion is about. It is about warning the Jewish people to stay away from idol worship because it will not lead to spirituality. It will only lead to immoral religious practices, like child sacrifice, false prophets, and to people who will try to incite you to engage in supposedly spiritual experiences, which are really nothing more than cultic and orgiastic experiences.

The end of the *Torah* portion teaches us what we must do in order to have spirituality. It speaks about keeping *kosher*. It speaks about giving

charity. It speaks about social justice, and it speaks about compassion and the Jewish holidays of *Pesach*, *Shavuot*, and *Succot*. Judaism is not legalistic and formalistic. We do not observe these forms just for form's sake. We observe these forms because they are going to lead us to spirituality, and they do so.

In the *Torah* portion *Korach* we learn how 250 Levites joined Korach's rebellion because they felt that they were being denied spirituality when Moshe denied them the priesthood. Moshe told them to put incense into censors and offer them before the Lord. They did and they were struck down. Then G-d commanded Moshe to tell Eliezer the priest to gather together these censors, to beat them into plates, and to have them cover the altar. This seems strange. Why should these sinners be rewarded by having their censors used to cover the altar? The answer is because these Levites mistook what Judaism is about. They thought it was feelings that dictated form, and they wanted to be close to G-d. They did not have the benefit of 3500 years of Jewish history. They were struck down, but G-d wanted to make sure that the Jewish people knew that it was form which produces true spiritual feelings, not the other way around. So these censors were used to cover the altar.

Let us all hope and pray that all of us will always realize that to our religion, religious forms are not just folkways. They are avenues to spirituality, spirituality which we all need and which we all crave. May we all attain this spirituality. Amen.