

Geulas Yisrael #33 : Va'eira -The Value of Jewish Culture

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Moshe's initial daring message of redemption went unheeded by the Jewish population. The Torah describes the sad state of קוצר רוח and עבודה קשה- the slaves were so badly broken by heavy labor and persecution that they couldn't even dream of their eventual liberation.

Worse than their deflated imaginations, their religious identity had atrophied under two hundred years of bondage, plunging them into the surrounding pagan culture. Yet, despite this religious attrition, numerous "cultural anchors" were preserved. The persecuted slaves maintained their unique dress code, their Jewish names and the Hebrew language. While these cultural practices are not mitzvoth, they certainly serve as national identifiers. Though the Jews suffered religious collapse, they maintained a cultural identity which would ultimately serve as a platform for religious recovery.

Full Judaism should suffuse the entirety of the human condition- not merely ritual and Torah experiences. Human communities develop unique "cultures"- distinct social norms and behaviors. Cultural "belonging" lies at the foundation of our identity. We identify ourselves as belonging to a group of people expressing common behavior, values and past. Ideally, Jewish culture should strengthen our Jewish identity and should expand the breadth of religious experience. The great challenge of religion is to deepen our passion and intensity while also extending it across the entirety of human experience. Fusing religion to culture creates a "breadth" and sweep to religion which would otherwise remain cloistered within the limited experience of ritual.

Throughout our tumultuous history, Jewish culture continuously evolved, despite harsh conditions. Jews maintained unique dress, language and names, in the very literal sense, and this prevented the egression of Jewish identity. In addition to dress and language, Jewish societies developed distinct art, music and food. Jewish culture enabled Jewish survival under hostile conditions while also creating a religiously "hardy" experience.

In the modern era, several developments have dramatically recast the role of Jewish culture. Firstly, the enfranchisement or the opening of modern societies to Jews has introduced general culture to Jews, but also has extended Jewish culture to the general society. For some, this “cultural exchange” has actually diluted Jewish culture. For others, watching Jewish culture trickle into the broader society has reinforced Jewish peoplehood and has reawakened the notion that Jews can shape the broader society.

Seismic changes to Jewish identity in the 18th century further shifted the role of Jewish culture. As large Jewish populations abandoned conventional or traditional religious observance, the value of Jewish culture became even more pivotal. In the absence of the anchoring effect of mitzvah observance, Jewish culture has become instrumental in preserving Jewish identity. As religious-minded people, we are, and should be, saddened by this supplanting of religious consciousness by cultural identity. The erosion of halachik fidelity, and sometimes, even the rejection of basic tenets of Jewish faith is deeply distressing. Yet for many Jews, Jewish culture remains a ‘moor’ - preserving a general interest in Jewish peoplehood and commitment to Jewish destiny. Though this brand of Jewish identity is sorely deficient of ritual and ceremony, the cultural anchoring effect of Jewish culture showcases the power of culture in general, and of Jewish culture in particular.

In the modern State of Israel, the function of Jewish culture has been further redistilled. We view the process of returning to Israel not just as a “redemption” but as a “return” – to past lands, past opportunities and past identities. Even within the world of Torah study, the return to the “land of history” has sparked a renewed interest in the book of history- Tanach. Our return to Israel has spearheaded a revitalized interest in the study of Tanach – after it had been largely neglected for hundreds of years.

In a broader sense, the return to Israel has reminded us that, in our past, we lived in organic societies, not just as scattered individuals or dispersed communities. We once lived as a natural people, lodged comfortably in our homeland. As with every indigenous population, our national culture was a primary element of our identity. Returning to Israel has resurrected interest in general Jewish culture. Jewish language has been reconstructed by combining multiple linguistic layers:

Biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, Medieval, Rabbinic Hebrew, Yiddish, and of course modern Hebrew. Some see this as an adulteration of classic Biblical Hebrew, dismissing the validity of modern Hebrew. Still others sense that, culture and language are human conventions which, necessarily evolve throughout history. Modern Hebrew, as a compilation of historical layers, is a microcosm of our rich and layered history.

Another example of rekindled Jewish culture is the renewed Israeli interest in agriculture. Though Jews always farmed their lands, agriculture in Israel hadn't been practiced for centuries. Returning to our land revitalized interest in the unique agricultural practices of Israel. The culture of "Israeli agriculture" was a formative element in the foundation of the state.

Similarly, our renewed sense of culture has led to revitalized interest in archaeology, the geography of our land, art and music. Though some view these developments as irrelevant to religion and Jewish identity, for others the expansion of Jewish culture fastens religious identity more deeply and more broadly.

Culture plays a profound role in the evolution of any society and Jewish culture is no different. Of course, the core of our personal and communal identity is our religion and its rituals. However, cultural mores can broaden and deepen Jewish experience, just as they can anchor Jewish identity for people of diminished religious practice. In the modern State, the restoration of Jewish culture has revived our past, while providing a platform of Jewish pride. Hopefully this cultural platform will once again catalyze redemption and spiritual reawakening.