

Religion and Belongingness

Moshe Taragin

Ya'akov barely escapes his homicidal brother, fleeing from his family, penniless and alone. Traveling at night to a faraway sanctuary, he is uncertain about his future and uncomfortable about his past. Though his mother supported him and promoted his interests, his father always favored his violent older brother. Even though Ya'akov secured his father's blessings, he never received his father's explicit endorsement. As Yaakov departed for the unknown, he was still unsure whether his father endorsed his behavior. Carrying all that pain, uncertainty, and feelings of abandonment, Ya'akov flees to a safe refuge, hiding from his angry and vengeful brother. His nighttime journey is probably the loneliest scene in the entire book of Bereishit.

Lost and bewildered, Ya'akov goes vertical, dreaming of a heavenly ladder. Observing the angels hiking up and down, he realizes that he is no longer alone. Positioned atop the ladder, Hashem assures Ya'akov's safe voyage and guarantees his ultimate return to Israel. Realizing that he now journeys under the watchful eye of Hashem, Ya'akov becomes more confident in his future prospects.

Before he dreams of the ladder Ya'akov discovered an additional anchor for his journey. The midrash narrates, that suddenly he realized that he walked where his grandfather Avraham once prayed. Halting his voyage, he too prays on this sacred ground, the very mountain of courage where Avraham was prepared to sacrifice it all. Between his heavenly dream and the memory of his grandfather, Ya'akov no longer travels alone. Protected by Hashem and accompanied by the memories of his legacy, he is filled with belonging and with purpose. With refreshed determination he sprints to his uncle's house, brimming with confidence and optimism. Empowered by his new sense of purpose he hoists a heavy stone covering a well of water, personally lifting a load which an entire team of herdsman couldn't budge. A lonely and frightened traveler has now transformed into a confident and formidable provider. He has been empowered by his meeting with Hashem and by his unexpected encounter with his past. He feels as if he belongs.

Belongingness

Identity is partially composed of our personal traits, values, achievements, dreams, and aspirations. However, these components only form one part of our identity. Additionally, we form our identity based upon the larger groups and institutions to which we belong. Human beings possess a primal need to belong to something larger than themselves. Social scientists refer to this as “belongingness”. Biologists trace this inner need to the evolutionary advantages of belonging to a tribe. In a harsh world of survival of the fittest, membership in larger groups assured safety, shelter, and food. Psychologists trace our need to belong to an inner loneliness which produces an unrelenting desire to bond with ideas and people beyond our own small lives. Either way, human identity is forged not only through personal experience and personal values, but through “belonging” as well.

Belongingness also shapes religious identity. As individuals, we yearn for a personal and private relationship with our Creator in heaven. We search for Him in the heavens and in the solitude of our souls. However, we aren’t just individual creatures of Hashem, we also belong to a long and illustrious lineage of people who found Hashem and lived according to His will. Religious identity is carved from personal belief coupled with collective belonging. Since we received the eternal word of Hashem at Sinai, religious experience has been draped in human traditions transmitted across time. Practicing those traditions along with the actual word of Hashem, enables our collective national belonging and forges religious identity.

For this reason, “masorah” or the collected traditions of Jewish ritual life are crucial to successful religious behavior and identity. The norms and conventions of “masorah” may not be legally institutionalized in the same manner as halacha proper, yet they anchor us to our heritage, convey belongingness and enrich religious experience. Whenever we adapt Jewish practice to changing realities, we must take care to also preserve traditions and masorah. Altering a tradition may not violate halacha and may also serve a larger beneficial purpose. However rearranging traditions can also disrupt historical continuity and sever us from belongingness.

In addition to belonging through religious traditions we also belong through affiliation with our national historical project of representing Hashem in this world. Throughout the ages we have paid a heavy price for disseminating knowledge of Hashem to a resistant and often hostile world. Identifying with that historical project also generates historical belongingness, which in turn, deepens religious identity.

Unbelonging

Modern man feels less “belonged” than ever before. The modern world stresses personal identity but devalues collective experience. Political democracy, and personal and economic freedom have all strengthened personal identity at the cost of the identity of belonging. The ideas and groupings to which human beings once belonged have begun to fray. Religious belief has diminished, national narratives have been shattered, and value systems have become muddled. In the past, people had a clearer sense of belonging and possessed a well-defined notion of which culture, religion or nation they were associated with. These associations have weakened and in the absence of more meaningful belonging, people latch on to superficial groups of belonging such as sports teams or political parties. Without authentic belonging human experience is becoming brittle and identity is becoming less sturdy.

The modern challenges of belonging are severely damaging religious identity. It is difficult to craft successful religious experience solely through personal identity, without belonging to Jewish past and to the overall world of Judaism. In a world of unbelonging, attempts to build religion solely based upon personal experience are faltering. In previous eras multiple generations lived in the same city, providing a geographical anchor for belonging. In today’s mobile world, we are constantly migrating to new communities, rarely spending our entire lives in one location. We rarely attend the same schools as our parents, and we rarely pray in the same synagogues. There is less in our lives for our children to latch on to.

Recently I was asked which subject is most neglected in Jewish education across North America. As a Rabbi I was expected to select an area of Torah study which is overlooked and deserves more attention. Instead, I encouraged greater investment in the study of Jewish history. The current crisis of religious identity is,

in part, a product of unbelonging. Studying additional Torah texts will not always create more belonging. Knowing our past and sensing our role in our future just might.

Rabbi Soloveitchik penned a famous religious essay entitled “The Lonely man of Faith” which captures private odyssey of religious experience. Have we become too lonely and is this damaging our faith? Can we be more successful if we don’t build religious identity alone?

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