

Worship: What makes it vital?

We are accustomed to saying that the rabbi "conducts" services and that the congregants "attend" services. Now, the word "services" in itself is a non-Jewish term. We do not have services. We have worship. We have *tefila*. The idea of "service" indicates that we are doing something either to service Divinity, or to service our selfish needs.

In Judaism, unlike paganism, the Deity has no need for, nor is He dependent upon, the ritualistic deeds of His adherents. Nor is worship meant to provide for some momentary cathartic, aesthetic, or spiritual need of those who "attend" the worship "performance." The term "service" is pagan, mythological and ritualistic; it is in discord with the refined Monotheism arrived at by Judaism much before the Common Era.

What we are called upon to do in the synagogue is to worship — not to "service" anyone, God or the congregants. A Jew comes to the synagogue not to "service" God, but to express and find himself — his true self — before God — to gain insight, knowledge and spiritual elation. A Jew comes to the synagogue not to do a favour to God — nor to pay homage to Tradition, nor to "save" Judaism, nor to contribute to Jewish survival, nor to find favour in the eyes of God or the community. He comes there to do himself a big favour, to relieve himself of his agonies and stresses, to quench his thirst for nearness to God and adoration of Him, and to enliven his innermost sensitivities; to seek and find himself. He comes there to be invigorated spiritually, mentally and intellectually. He comes there because he wants and needs a place where he, as an individual and as an integral part of the community, can express himself — his true self.

These expressions "conduct" and "attend" suggest an atmosphere of the concert hall, where people come to derive some artistic gratification, and not the aura of a house of worship, where people come to *avodah* — to "work" out their inmost emotions, and to pay homage to their Maker.

The truth is that rabbis do not "conduct" worship, because it cannot be conducted. Nor is it possible to "attend" it. Only ritual can be conducted and attended, not worship. One can only participate in worship, which is a shared experience.

Both the rabbi and the congregants are participants in the same experience of worship in which everyone, as an individual, and as a member of the community, is actively engaged in *avodah* — the "work" of intimate, personal devotion to God.

The duty of the rabbi, thus, is not to "conduct," dictate, and set rules; but rather to guide, lead, direct, teach, explain, clarify and inspire; he is not to "conduct" an orchestra. The duty of the congregants is not to "attend," nor to passively comply with the rabbi's instructions, but to participate actively; they are not to be an audience. To worship in a synagogue is to share in a common experience in which congregants and rabbi stand equally and humbly before the Almighty.



We are used to assuming that the best asset of a rabbi is a compliant, well-disciplined congregation. But, truly, the most rewarding and challenging achievement of a rabbi is not just an obedient congregation, but rather an enlightened one.

We are used to assuming that the greatest achievement of a synagogue is good attendance. But, truly, the success of a synagogue is not merely measured by quantitative visitation. That is not the purpose nor the criterion. The synagogue in itself is not an end; it is only a tool: "Ask not how many congregants does the synagogue attract to its services; but ask how much does everyone take from the synagogue to his daily life."

In this respect too, we may see one of the differences between mythological ritual and genuine Jewish worship. Ritual is considered as a non-worldly enactment detached from the mundane on-going human life; the place for ritualistic worship is regarded as a sanctuary — a divine domain. Not so in Judaism.

In Judaism, the whole arena of man's life is the stage for his worship. The synagogue, although crucial and focal, is not the only place for worship. A Jew's home is his temple; a Jew's table, his altar. A synagogue is an extension, a very noble and profound one, of the worldly, human domain. It is not a "sanctuary"; it is not a haven; it is not a place in which one is absolved of any kind of transgression committed there or elsewhere. Nor is it a platform for miraculous spiritual "heart" or "soul" transplants. The synagogue is not a refuge — where a worshipper escapes from himself, from his mundane world and life, but a "home" of assembly and study, whence he derives the strength to live with himself and elevate his world and life. There is no way by worship, or by coming to the synagogue, to rectify misdeeds in the human domain. In Judaism, faith unexpressed in man's behaviour is futile; ritual as pardon for transgression is blasphemy. We come to the synagogue to learn and to be inspired to act humanely and morally everywhere, inside as well as outside the synagogue. The synagogue is a place where a person is expected to be himself; it neither demands of him to be better, nor permits him to be worse, than anywhere else.

Nothing is to be gained in the synagogue by remaining passive. In Judaism, no person can be possessed by a demon, or even a *dybbuk*, unless he himself invites it and drags it within himself. Also, no person can be enriched by divine inspiration, unless he himself seeks it and opens himself to it. It all comes from within, not from without.

The synagogue is neither a transcendental nor an extraterritorial locale. More than just a "holy place": the synagogue is a place of holiness.

Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

Ed's Note: These remarks are an excerpt from an address by Rabbi Yehuda before Beth Tzedec Congregation, March 23, 1974.