

I. A CALL TO SPIRITUAL ARMS

Observant But Not Religious

by Rabbi Aharon Feldman

What is the greatest issue facing religious Jewry in today's world? Along with the phenomenal growth and successes of our communities and institutions in recent decades, a host of seemingly intractable problems have arisen to beset us: the high cost of tuition, the "shidduch crisis," and the burgeoning population of youth at risk are all formidable challenges. Yet, the single greatest issue with which we must grapple is none of these. It is, instead, one that goes to the very core of our identities as Torah-loyal Jews: that many—too many—of us are observant, even punctiliously so—but not quite religious.

Two of the Torah's better known verses set forth succinctly the sum and substance of God's expectations of Man in this world. They read:

What does God request of you except to fear Him, to love Him, to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul.

To keep God's commandments and His statutes which I command you today for your good.¹

In these verses, God makes two distinct requests of Man. The first of these obligates the emotions and intellect that comprise Man's inner self: to fear God, to love Him, to serve Him with all one's heart, i.e., intellect, and all one's

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1. *Devarim* 10:12-13.

soul, i.e., emotions. The second Divine imperative, “to keep God’s commandments and His statutes,” bids Man to use his physical being to perform the mitzvos set forth in the Torah, e.g., performing circumcision, donning *tefillin* and eating *matzah*.

The mitzvos that involve and affect Man’s physical aspect (the “outer mitzvos”) are very many in number, and are the primary focus of the Talmud’s halachic discussions. The mitzvos relating to the inner self (the “inner mitzvos”) are, by contrast, far fewer. One of the pre-eminent Rishonim, Rabbeynu Yona, in his classic work, *Shaarey Teshuva*, enumerates eleven of these latter mitzvos:

1) Choosing to live;² 2) studying Torah; 3) emulating God’s ways, e.g., acting with mercy and kindness; 4) trusting in God; 5) contemplating God’s greatness; 6) contemplating God’s kindness; 7) holiness—living with sanctity and keeping indulgence in material pleasures at a minimum; 8) prayer (*avodah*)—beseeching God for one’s needs; 9) fearing God—to sense awe before His infinite greatness as well as to fear His punishment; 10) loving God—having a desire to come close to God and to know Him; and 11) cleaving to God—maintaining an ongoing awareness of God’s omnipresence.

On first impression, it would seem that since so much of the Written and Oral Torah is devoted to the outer mitzvos, these are the most important of God’s commandments. However, Rabbeynu Yona teaches us otherwise. After listing the inner mitzvos, he states that not only are they more important, they are Man’s very *raison d’etre*. Of one who fails to carry out these commandments, Rabbeynu Yona writes movingly, “What hope does a being have who does not make his main occupation and toil the attainment of the goals for which he was created?”³

In his introduction to *Mesilas Yeshorim*, R. Moshe Chaim Luzatto writes in a similar vein, that Man’s principal obligation is to sense awe and love of God, and to be aroused to spiritual perfection by a constant awareness of His presence:

What shall we answer on the Day of Judgment if we have forgotten to contemplate these, if we have neglected matters so incumbent upon us and which are the central issues which our God demands from us? Is it conceivable that we toil in investigations to which we are not obligated, in complicated

2. See below, “What Can Be Done?”, for the explanation of why this is a mitzvah.

3. *Shaarey Teshuva* 3:17.

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halachic discussions (*pilpulim*) which bear no fruit, into laws which are not applicable to us, and leave to habit and rote those matters to which we are so greatly obligated?

Why, then, is so much of the Torah devoted to discussions of the outer mitzvos? Because Man's inner service can establish a connection to the Divine only when accompanied by physical performance of the mitzvos. As R. Chaim Volozhiner⁴ writes, Man's actions, not the spiritual zeal that may underlie and animate them, are the *sine qua non* for his ability to draw close to God. The outer mitzvos form the ground floor of the human relationship with God; and only upon this foundation can one's inner devotions then build the upper levels of that bond.

Stated differently, performance of mitzvos is the substance of one's religious life; Man's inner devotion is its form. Without an effort to physically carry out the mitzvos properly, inner devotion is simply incapable of infusing a person with spirituality. Holding an esrog for mitzvah purposes at any time other than on the Feast of Sukkos, donning *tefillin* on Shabbos or fervently reciting a blessing, but in vain—all these are violations of God's will which are not only spiritually ineffective but, by definition, actually distance Man from Him.⁵

Yet essential as performance of mitzvos in all their details may be,⁶ nevertheless, it is the inner thoughts and feelings that accompany such acts that are the goal for which Man was created. If he is to carry out his mission on earth, the

4. The major disciple of the Vilna Gaon, the towering eighteenth-century authority.

5. R. Chaim Volozhiner, *Nefesh HaChaim, Perakim, Chap. 4 ff.* In truth, not all of R. Chaim Volozhiner's contemporaries agreed with him. Some of them, particularly many Chasidic leaders of his time, emphasized spiritual devotion to the exclusion of the minutiae of mitzvos. Thus, for example, ecstatic fervor in preparation for prayer was considered praiseworthy even when this would result in the prayers being recited after their prescribed times, and reciting Psalms with devotion was given precedence to the study of Torah. For them, mitzvos were mere vehicles for expressing devotion to God, not an end in themselves. R. Chaim Volozhiner demonstrated that this approach was, in fact, incorrect, and that spirituality is a multi-tiered endeavor which must have one's actions as its basis, and this view has subsequently been accepted by most Chasidic schools of thought.

6. In fact, *Mesilas Yeshorim*, which, as noted above, deplores the lack of concentration often accorded the inner mitzvos, only begins its discussion of these mitzvos after devoting more than twelve chapters to discussion of the importance of keeping the external mitzvos in all their details.

spiritually aspiring Jew must serve God with a combination of the external and internal mitzvos.

Today's Torah Jew

The last half-century has seen a rejuvenation of Torah observance among Jews. A Torah world has emerged which is to all appearances more meticulous than ever in its performance of mitzvos. Its *tefillin* are of a quality which previous generations never knew; its *esrogim* are of the purest pedigree; its Torah scrolls are written with unprecedented accuracy. The study of Torah has undergone a spectacular revival.

And yet, despite all these happy developments, something so indispensable, so utterly central to our existence as Jews continues to go wanting in the lives of many: the emotion of the heart, the focus and forethought of the mind, the commitment of the spirit. Amidst all the care lavished on correct fulfillment of the outer mitzvos, these essential inner obligations languish in neglect and the performance of the outer mitzvah acts remain without the inner mitzvos to enliven and exalt them.

Davening, in its essence a conversation with God Himself, often takes place at such breakneck speed that the mispallelim cannot even summon the requisite awareness of standing before God, let alone properly enunciate and focus on the meaning of, the words of the tefillos. Checking assorted technological gadgets for messages, perusal of the diverse *Parshas Hashavua* or tzedaka circulars strewn about the tables and that hardy perennial—talking during davening—all turn what was intended as a time of awesome encounter with the Divine into a sacrilege. In many a minyan, by the time the last kaddish has concluded, well more than a majority of the mispallelim have long since departed the premises, not necessarily for having been called to tend to an emergency.

The greatest gifts the Jewish people possesses are Shabbos and Yom Tov, which are meant to afford a Jew spiritual rejuvenation and elevation. Yet the potential inherent in these days is unfortunately squandered by many. Shabbos, intended to give the working man an opportunity to become engrossed in Torah learning, comes to center around little more than the hearty consumption of *cholent*, followed by an afternoon-long nap.

The days of Chol Hamoed, which likewise present rare opportunities for extended involvement in *limud haTorah*, are instead whiled away on trips and amusements.

Even learned Jews who are generally very scrupulous in their performance of the external mitzvos are not always commensurately meticulous in their inner service. The *Shema* is read, as the Halacha requires, with attention to proper pronunciation; however, internalizing the verse in it which reads “And you shall love God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might” goes wanting. Our *tzitzis* are of the highest quality, but rarely do we stop for a moment to allow the message of the *tzitzis*—to move us to remember God’s commandments—to register deeply within our hearts and minds.⁷

In short, a sustained focus on inner service of God by today’s observant Jews—which Rabbeynu Yona says is no less than the reason for Man’s existence—is all too uncommon. Modern religious music is a fitting metaphor for the approach to Judaism that holds sway for many in our community. The songs sung at celebratory events are all set to words that have profound meanings: *Utzu eytza vesufar ki imanu keyl; Ma ahavti torasechah kol hayom hi sichasi; Yemin Hashem romema yemin Hashem osa chayil*, and all the rest. Yet we sing and dance to these tunes without giving the slightest attention to what the accompanying words seek to convey. Our sole interest is the external tempo of the music (itself often absurdly out of sync with the words’ message). In the case of mitzvos, too, the lilting strains of the external “music” of our mitzvos lull us into complacency, when we ought to be alarmed at the internal emptiness of much of what we say and do in a religious context.

The Reasons

How might we explain the widespread neglect of our inner obligations? Several plausible approaches suggest themselves.

The most immediate and obvious cause is Man’s nature as a physical being with ego and bodily drives—his natural inertia, his desire for physical comfort and pleasure and his ego’s need to shirk obeisance to all others, including God. On his own, Man will not seek out service of God; he prefers to be left alone.

7. *Bamidbar* 15:40.

Buttressing the *yetzer hora* in this regard is the reality that the inner mitzvos are far more difficult to keep than the outer mitzvos. Fear and love of God are abstract concepts; strong faith, tenacious commitment and sustained training are required to internalize them. Thus, even once we are prepared, in a general sense, to subordinate ourselves to God, it is so much more difficult to devote our inner selves to His service.

In addition, everything about our surrounding milieu militates against inner service of God. We are all naturally drawn to accept the values of our host societies, and it is safe to say that love and fear of God are not high in their hierarchy of values; those are usually left for the benighted religious fundamentalists who are the bane of such societies. Western culture fervently believes that Man's ingenuity and efforts alone are what ultimately guarantee his success, that he alone is the master of his fate, and that Divine Providence is an illusory crutch that exists only in the minds of the religious. God is distant, if not absent entirely, from the modern secular society; and this sense of distance and absence works its deleterious effects on the Torah Jew as well.

To exacerbate matters, the Torah community does little to nurture its members' ability to serve God with their inner selves. Our educational system emphasizes religious acts over religious devotion. This is perhaps understandable at the elementary school level, where pupils are still too young to fully benefit from education in inner devotion and need instead to receive instruction in the external performance of mitzvos, but this neglect of the inner spiritual life continues on through the educational system.

Often during the high school years, too little attention is given on the inner mitzvos of *emuna*, *bitachon* and character improvement. The emphasis placed on the study of Gemara, is of course proper, since mastery of Gemara is the foundation of all of a student's future educational success. But all too often it is assumed that if a student becomes proficient in, and inspired to love, Gemara, his spiritual development will follow of its own accord. Without the active nurturing of an appreciation for the inner mitzvos, however, this will not be the case.

In Yeshivos Gedolos, the study of Musar, which emphasizes the inner dimension of Judaism and seeks to inculcate its students with *emunah*, *bitachon* and character training, has fallen largely by the wayside. In previous generations, the study and implementation of Musar texts was a strong component of most Yeshivos' curricula. In the post-war era, however, Musar

has ceased to be taken seriously. In some yeshivos it is simply non-existent; in others, Musar study has been transformed from an emotionally engaging vehicle for contemplation, self assessment and inner change into a subject of detached academic study with no serious effort made to apply its lessons to the student's life.

True, nearly all Yeshivos still feature weekly Musar discourses (*shmuessen*) by the resident spiritual guide (*mashgiach*). But there remain few *mashgichim* in the classic mold of R. Chatzkel Levenstein or R. Shlomo Wolbe, of blessed memory, who demand, and guide their students in, achieving ongoing spiritual growth. The explanation often given for this is that making excessive demands from the coddled youth of today might endanger their emotional health. This rationale, however, is surely exaggerated, and demands, properly presented, for students to aspire to meet high spiritual standards can and must be made. The end result of this widespread neglect of Musar study and practice is that an entire generation has come of age without having learned that inner service of God is a vital part of Judaism.⁸

This neglect continues unabated in the married lives of our young people. The Shuls they attend are often bereft of any demands on the individual's inner spiritual lives. Rabbis prefer to speak about Torah commentaries or the laws governing the outer mitzvos, or to convey a Torah viewpoint on current events—all certainly important topics. However, these spiritual leaders speak much less often about Man's relationship with God and maintaining a constant connection to Him, about living with *bitachon*, about developing love and fear of God, about character improvement, and about how to increase *kavana* in davening.

The Danger of Superficiality

Superficial Judaism poses a grave danger to the future of the Torah community. The gravity of the matter can be seen from the horrific consequences

8. In the past decade, there has been somewhat of a renewed interest in organized Musar study for adults. But for the most part, these groups seek only to cultivate character improvement, focusing on traits such as orderliness, truthfulness, and kindness, but not on the Jew's relationship to God through *yiras shomayim*, *bitachon* or *tefilah*.

that the prophet Yeshayahu foretells for those who engage in rote religious observance devoid of inner intention:

ויאמר ד' יען כי נגש העם הזה בפיו ובשפתיו כבדוני ולבו רחק ממני ותהי
יראתם אתי מצות אנשים מלמדה: לכן הנני יוסף להפליא את העם הזה הפלא
ופלא ואבדה חכמת חכמיו ובינת נבניו תסתתר:

Therefore, said God, because this nation approaches Me with their mouths and honors Me with their lips while their hearts are far from Me, and their fear of Me is as a commandment performed by rote, I will punish this nation with an remarkably unusual (*hafley vafele*) punishment . . .⁹

Uninspired, mechanistic performance of mitzvos brings upon the Jewish people unusually severe retribution of a sort not mentioned regarding any other transgression. The rationale for this can be understood in light of the earlier-cited teaching of Rabbeynu Yona. If constant growth in inner spiritual devotion is the *raison d'être* of life itself, then to perform mitzvos on a solely external level without involving the inner self, is to choose to remain oblivious to the ultimate purpose of Man's existence. Extreme betrayal of God's purposes for humanity begets retribution of an equally extreme nature.

On the practical level, what makes superficial religiosity so very harmful is that the mind does not operate in a vacuum. Where we serve God without involving our inner selves, those aspects of our being seek other outlets for expression. As one great Jewish thinker put it, "in the spiritual realm, there is no Switzerland," a zone of neutrality in which one can exist without either ascending or degenerating spiritually. When we cease to worship God, we begin worshipping ourselves. In other words, without subordination to God we subordinate ourselves to our *yetzer hora* and its selfish interests.

Once our self-interest begins to predominate, this erodes our interest and ability to perform even the external mitzvos. We begin to seek excuses, leniencies and rationalizations to free ourselves from the obligations of the Torah, whose 613 mitzvos have become 613 roadblocks to enjoyment of the "good life." While our consciences and social norms may not allow us to jettison the Torah's laws outright, we begin applying our ingenuity to discover *heteyrim*

9. *Yeshayahu* 29:14.

(halachic dispensations) to overcome or circumvent these “legal hurdles” standing in the way of the pursuit of our selfish interests.

So many compromises of modern religious Jewish life, such as the oxymoronic phenomena of glatt kosher night clubs, wigs that are far more provocative than a woman’s hair ever was, and spacially-challenged *mechitzos*, find their original source in the abandonment of inner Judaism. Because we do not take mitzvos seriously and thus feel constrained by a system of behavior stripped of its intellectual depth and emotional resonance, it is only natural that we seek out compromises that permit us to indulge ourselves while paying lip service to our obligations as Jews. This explains why in some circles the strongest opprobrium one can hurl at another is that he is seeking *chumros* (halachic stringencies). That the excessive pursuit of such stringencies can at times itself mask an underlying void of spiritual depth deserves its own treatment; but the disdain heaped upon the *machmir* is an emotive reaction to the attention he draws to those who would water down Jewish religious practice through endless compromise.

This attitude has very serious implications for our way of life. Where inner connection to Torah is lacking, one’s defenses against sin, which ultimately depend upon a non-negotiable loyalty to God and His Torah, begin to crumble, and temptations become difficult to control. The temptation of financial gain leads to dishonesty in business; the lust for other women can result in immoral behavior, and so forth. Where “the pit is empty [of Torah],” as the expression of the Sages has it, “it becomes filled with snakes and scorpions”;¹⁰ the consequence is a breakdown of individual commitment to mitzvah observance and a resultant breakdown of our society as a whole.

The serious problems mentioned at this essay’s outset, i.e., the high cost of tuition, the “shidduch crisis” and youth at risk, each affect segments, albeit large ones, of our community. But superficial observance of Judaism is a far more serious problem, because it weakens our entire communal fabric and strikes at our essence as a nation of internally-focused spiritual aspirants devoted to the service of God.

The most tragic fallout from the dissonance between our outer and inner selves we have described is that it undermines the transmission of Judaism to the next generation, and is probably a very significant factors in the increasing

10. *Shabbos* 22a.

drop-out rate of our children. Only an inner commitment to Torah by parents enables them to successfully transmit Torah values in their children.

Children sense the disparity between deed and inner commitment in their parents' lives and interpret it, rightfully, as hypocrisy. No matter how much parents insist on performance of mitzvos, if they lack an inner connection to God, their child will never see them as a model on which to base an honest commitment to Judaism. More likely, he will look forward to the time when he can unshackle himself from his parents' hypocritical demands.

What Can Be Done?

If our existence as Jews has become seriously affected by our superficiality, we must ask ourselves what we can do to effect urgently needed change in our individual and communal lives, to begin practicing inner Judaism. There are several practical ways in which we can embark on this journey.

The basis for acquiring the entire spectrum of inner mitzvos lies in the importance we ascribe to God and to his Torah, as manifested in thought, word and deed. This may be what Rabbeinu Yona intended in listing "choosing to live" as the first among the inner mitzvos. The obvious question is: Everything we do involves free choice; why, then, count it as a separate mitzvah? Rabbeinu Yona is teaching us that we have to consciously and actively choose to make the service of God our life's supreme value. This is the meaning of the commandment, "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse, and you shall choose life."¹¹ The way in which we approach His service is the basis of all the other inner mitzvos.

Thus: A Shul is the House of God, and we should conduct ourselves in it with respect, even if this requires unlearning decades-long habits of treating it cavalierly. When the Torah is taken out of the Aron Hakodesh, we ought to mindfully stand before it and treat it with adoration. All *sifrey kodesh* (holy books) should be treated with respect, in accordance with the laws pertaining to them. Teachers of Torah and those who study it full-time should be shown demonstrative respect; this is particularly so in regard to the Gedoley Yisroel who are the teachers of the entire nation. We must make the study of Torah and

11. *Devarim* 30:19.

the fulfillment of its precepts the focus of our lives and those of our children, the reason we wake up in the morning and the fulcrum of our daily activities.

Respect for God and Torah is something we can also begin teaching in elementary school. Children cannot be expected to live with *yiras shomayim*; however, they can be taught not to run or play in a shul, to lovingly kiss the Sefer Torah, to treat respectfully their Torah teachers and their holy books.¹² With respect for Torah ingrained in them, the mental and emotional stage will have been set for them to perform the inner mitzvos when they get older.

Beginning with high school and continuing into Yeshiva Gedola, our educational curricula must begin concentrating on the inner mitzvos. There has to be a revival in Yeshivos of the study of works pertaining to the inner mitzvos, such as *Chovos Halevovos*. Discourses given in Yeshivos must exhort and inspire students to live with inner Judaism, and there should be a concomitant return to the *vaadim* system in which students meet under the guidance of a mentor to internalize the ideas they have studied in Musar works.

Rabbis, as leaders of their communities, can have perhaps the greatest influence of all in changing their congregants' attitude towards the inner mitzvos. They should teach their communities the meanings of the prayers and the *dinim* about how to make blessings and how to daven. They should organize *vaadim* that will enable the laity to learn about and begin to incorporate the inner mitzvos in their daily lives.

On a personal level, the first priority for each individual is to increase his study of Torah. Besides being a paradigmatic inner mitzvah in itself,¹³ there is no better way to be connected to God than becoming engrossed in understanding His word. The other inner mitzvos then become easier to perform.

More generally, each individual must set aside time—even if only five minutes—every day to study some Musar work which deals with inner mitzvos and spend time in introspection about his relationship with God and how he can improve his service of Him.

12. Children should be taught to respect all elders and certainly all teachers, but there should be some way of establishing in a child's mind the difference between teachers of Torah and other teachers. Perhaps having them stand up to their full height exclusively for the former would help inculcate this message.

13. It appears as the second such mitzvah on Rabbeinu Yona's aforementioned list.

Blessings and Davening

A most powerful vehicle available for training ourselves in the inner mitzvos is the daily obligation to recite 100 blessings. Enacted by the Sages as a mitzvah on a par with the rabbinically ordained mitzvos of Chanuka and Purim, these many blessings, when said with proper intent, have the ability to help us internalize many of the inner mitzvos over the course of the day. Blessings over food, for example, bring us to a recognition of God's greatness and kindness; they bring us to love of God; and mentioning God's name with *kavana* is an expression of the fear of God—thus involving more than half of Rabbeinu Yona's list of inner mitzvos.¹⁴

We must strive to change the way we daven. *Tefilla* is a way of acknowledging God's providence and beseeching Him for our national and personal welfare.¹⁵ We must begin to pay attention to what we are saying in our prayers, for as the great Rabbeinu Asher (Rosh) observes, how can we expect a father to answer the request of a son who is not paying attention to what he is saying?¹⁶ A minimal awareness during prayer that one is standing before God, along with an understanding of the meaning of the first blessing of *Shemoneh Esrey* (and according to some opinions, the *Modim* blessing as well) are indispensable for fulfilling the prayer obligation. This is one of the most difficult obligations a Jew has, but experience has shown that one can train himself slowly, section by section, to concentrate on davening.

Implementing these various changes in our lives must perforce be incremental, and they cannot be expected to occur immediately on a mass scale. My own experience in Yeshivos Gedolos and in observation of the davening in Shuls bears this out. But when enough individuals are inspired, a critical mass will form which will, with God's help, develop into a nation-wide movement, with study and fulfillment of the inner mitzvos becoming part of Jews' everyday lives. Only then will our people become a truly religious nation.

14. The first, fifth, sixth, ninth, tenth and eleventh on Rabbeinu Yona's list.

15. This involves us in R. Yona's fourth and eighth mitzvah.

16. *Orchos Chayim leHarosh* 36.