

SHAVUOT AS THE ULTIMATE 'PEAK EXPERIENCE' by Rabbi Moshe Thomas Heyn June, 2014

Tradition tells us that when God gave the Torah to Moses, our ancestors trembled in awe. They had recently left Egypt, an event we commemorated with Passover, and were now standing together at the foot of Mount Sinai. God spoke amidst an awesome spectacle of smoke and thunder, and the people responded in one voice, saying “*na’aseh v’nishma* – We will do (the practice) and later (*hopefully!*) we will come to understand why.” The collective memory of that experience, and our communal response to it, is what has sustained Judaism for well over 3,000 years since that time.

When the ancient Israelites eventually settled in the Land, they instituted a spiritual practice that relied just as much on experience. Three times a year, all males were obliged to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. It was often a difficult journey and the experience of ‘going up’ to worship on that holy mountain was one that elicited awe and trembling. The Temple’s grandeur, with all the hustle and bustle that surrounded it, was ‘over the top’ in those days. The sacrificing of animals, with their blood being splashed on the altar and worshippers standing nearby, was gut-wrenching. The visceral intensity of that experience helped sustain the practice for about 1,000 years while the Temple stood.

Once the Temple was destroyed, the rabbis had to come up with an alternative. They chose prayer and study, drawing on images intended to replicate the experience of awe and trembling. For many Jews, images of God as a punishing or benevolent father/judge/king were enough to elicit deeply emotional responses. Mystics went even further by developing elaborate techniques for inducing trances and other mystical states. In traditional circles, these images and techniques are still practiced with the intention of producing the desired outcome – the experience of awe. It is for this reason that the ultra-Orthodox in Israel are called ‘*haredim*,’ meaning “those who tremble before God.”

In Reform Jewish circles, however, this intense, experiential component has been almost completely lost. Reform Jews are passionate about many aspects of Jewish life, but the experience of awe in the context of prayer is rarely present. I believe it is for this reason that so few Jews spend time in the pews. Instead, they are drawn to activities that have more practical outcomes. I’d like to suggest here that ***altering our brain chemistry is an outcome which may be as valuable as what can be achieved on a practical level.***

A few decades ago, one might have been more skeptical about this idea, but today we know it is more than just an idea. It’s a fact. Think of the millions of people who now use prescription drugs to alter their brain chemistry. Their ability to function on a practical level is often compromised without help from medications that lift depression or enhance their ability to focus. I’m not saying that the increasing prevalence of prescription drug use is good or bad, but my point should be clear: ***When it comes to how we experience the world, what happens inside our brains is just as important as what happens on the outside.***

From this perspective, we can now understand why people do what they do. For example, we can now understand why billions of people use (or abuse) drugs and alcohol. These substances provide quick and easy ways to alter brain chemistry, helping people take a temporary break from what they consider to be 'normal' consciousness or 'ordinary' experience. Virtually all the things we choose to do – such as going to movies, plays, concerts and sporting events – are enjoyable because they alter our brain chemistry.

Miami psychiatrist, Dr. Eva Ritvo, wrote an interesting piece entitled “Miami Heat Playoff Win, the Fans, and the Dance of Hormones” in which she explores the role that hormones play in spectator sports. She explains how oxytocin, known as the ‘Love Hormone,’ is boosted by touch, hugging and a wide range of group activities – particularly those that involve fan frenzy. She also notes that activities like singing, dancing and chanting with a group can produce similar surges of oxytocin. You might think it's the activity you're enjoying, but it's really the internal, biochemical/hormonal reactions that keep you coming back for more.

Nowhere is this more evident than in activities that involve physical exercise, stimulating the release of endorphins and other neurotransmitters. The positive neurological effects of physical exercise are complex and still being researched, but we now know for a fact that altering our brain chemistry can help us feel better and function better. This brings me back to the subject of spiritual practice, which we can now view through a rational and scientific lens.

Spiritual practice is, and has always been, a means for altering brain chemistry. We know that yoga and meditation are highly-effective means for doing that, and so too is singing, dancing and chanting with a group. Any religious beliefs associated with these practices are really secondary, having once served as a rationale for engaging in them.

Not only do substances, recreational activities and spiritual practices alter brain chemistry. Research indicates that our thoughts influence, and are influenced by, neurological processes. ***Our patterns of thinking, from day to day and moment to moment, shape and are shaped by corresponding patterns in the brain.*** By focusing more attention on these patterns, we can consciously alter them in positive ways. It is in this area where religious experience, spiritual practice and everyday life converge.

The most essential element in Jewish religious experience and spiritual practice is the idea of a Transcendent Intelligence or Higher Power. When this idea is skillfully integrated into day-to-day thought patterns – through prayer, contemplation, meditation or other means – it can have a powerfully transformative effect. We most often recognize this effect by an increasing sense of joy, gratitude, and awe. Whether this is caused by a surge of oxytocin or by other neurological processes, we know that something important is taking place. Moments when these emotional states are felt most deeply or intensely can be called ‘peak experiences.’

The cultivation of, and high regard for, peak experiences is an essential part of the Jewish religious enterprise, going all the way back to Sinai. Whether they were once induced through prayer, study, mystical incantations or animal sacrifices, we now realize there is something that happens beneath the surface in these moments that is immensely valuable and can be cultivated through practice and repetition.

In this season of Shavuot, we commemorate the ultimate, paradigmatic 'peak experience' which stands, like Mount Sinai, at the very center of our tradition. It is worth reflecting on how our ancestors, and every generation since, has tried to 'make sense' of the experience and find ways to replicate it. It is worth reflecting on the unparalleled impact of the experience, insofar as it produced the Torah, the Ten Commandments and other foundational elements of Western civilization. But most importantly, it is worth reflecting on how we might reclaim the experience of deeply-felt joy, gratitude and awe in our own time, in our own way, and in our own lives.

I have no doubt that there is something of immense value in the Jewish religious experience and how it relates to our brain chemistry. What the world needs – and what we are developing here at Temple Israel – is a community of seekers willing to say “*na’aseh v’nishma* – we will do the practice **and** come to understand why we are doing it.” It is time for us to discover and realize the personal and communal benefits that religious experience and spiritual practice in the context of everyday life has to offer. Now, how awesome is that?