

WHEN *CHUTZPAH* IS A GOOD THING, By Rabbi Tom Heyn, November 2011 for BAJC Newsletter

"I'm God, You're Not." This bold statement is the title of a recent compilation of essays written by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner and published by Jewish Lights (Woodstock, VT, 2010.) It highlights the humorous side of his insightful observations on organized religion and, as he put it, "other disguises of the ego."

In the opening section of essays, Rabbi Kushner reflects on what he's learned as a rabbi and shares "mischievous, heretical, and humorous truths about surviving and healing congregational life." Since reading these truths a few months ago, I've been thinking long and hard about them and feel compelled now to share three of them with you, along with my reactions:

1. If synagogues were businesses, the product would be Jews. The more Jews they could manufacture from otherwise illiterate, assimilated, and un-self-aware members, the more successful they would be. That is (to continue the metaphor) the bottom line. Simply getting together with other Jews may be ancillary and even indispensable to this ultimate goal, but it can just as easily be – as is often the case when Jews get together to watch a movie, eat dinner, or play tennis – a pleasant way to pass time.

OK. So, if that's true, how do we make more Jews? He explains:

2. Jews need one another, and therefore congregations, to do primary religious acts that they should not, and probably cannot, do alone. Doing primary religious acts is the only way we have of growing as Jews. Consequently, it is also the only justification for the existence of a congregation. Everything else congregations do, Jews can always do cheaper, easier, and better somewhere else.

So, as Rabbi Kushner is suggesting here, the only way for us to grow as Jews is by engaging in "primary religious acts," or as he calls them in his next paragraph, "primary *Jewish* acts." And what are these? He explains:

3. There are three ancient kinds of primary Jewish acts: communal prayer, holy study, and good deeds, or in the classical language of *Pirke Avot*: *avodah*, *torah*, and *gemilut hasadim*. This is not a capricious categorization. Prayer (*avodah*) is a matter of the heart. Study (*torah*) is intellectual reading, questioning, discussion, rigorous logic and argument – a matter of the head. And good deeds (*gemilut hasadim*) are public acts: helping, repairing, matching, fighting, and doing – matters of the hand....

He goes on to say that the many other things we do with the synagogue and for the synagogue are important – but not as important as engaging in primary Jewish acts.

I would love to bring Rabbi Kushner here to Brattleboro to see how we're doing and I'm sure he could help us do even better. But, in the meantime, I think we're moving in the right direction. We're slowly building up a community of “pray-ers” – that is, people who can read, sing and connect with communal prayer. And we're seeing more of our members engaging publicly, as JEWS, in the work of helping and repairing the world. Yet the particular area in which I'd like to invest more energy now is that of study.

I know that at least a few BAJC members would enjoy studying Talmud and Torah, translating biblical and rabbinic texts and discussing them. Unfortunately, these texts seem largely irrelevant to most other Jews today, especially here in Brattleboro. I'd like to experiment a bit more with these texts and I hope that folks who enjoy Talmud and Torah study will participate, and that those who are curious will come also. But I believe there's another kind of study which could engage even more Jews in our community and make BAJC unique, locally and beyond. It's the study of spiritual transformation made possible through a primary Jewish act known in Hebrew as “*devekut*” (pronounced *d'vay-KOOT* or *d'VAY-kus*)

I made mention of this word in my sermon on Yom Kippur and will expand on its meaning in a course I'm teaching this month aptly entitled, “What is *Devekut*?” (See course description on p. ___) For now let me say that *devekut* is a practice that involves prayer, study and good deeds, but also transcends them. It is a word whose meaning can be understood from its inclusion in the Torah but was more fully developed in the history of *Kabbalah* and *Hasidism*, both remarkably rich systems of Jewish mysticism and spirituality.

I know that, so far, my definition of *devekut* is vague, but it is hard to define within the limits of a brief article such as this. My hope is that you'll inquire further, read my course description, and even register for the introductory session to be held on Nov 15th.

I am grateful to Rabbi Lawrence Kushner for his recent publication. In fact, had it not been for his work over three decades ago, I would not be a rabbi today. But I am going to try and pick up where he leaves off by saying that my goal, as a rabbi, is not “to make more Jews” or to make people better Jews. My goal, as a rabbi, is to make Jews better people. And I believe this work can best be accomplished by establishing and developing here in our community a spiritual basis for personal and communal transformation.

The statement “I'm God, You're Not” may be easily misunderstood as nothing more than an expression of egotistical *chutzpah*. After all, who would have the nerve to say such a thing? But I'm hoping you'll join me in the weeks ahead as we come to see that it's much more than that. It would serve us well as a means for making the study of Torah more relevant than a nostalgic pastime or an intellectual exercise. And it is a good starting point in our study of *devekut*, a practice potent enough to effect transformation. I'd call that “spiritual *chutzpah*” – something we could probably all use a little more of.