



DCA THINK TANK

Summary of 5777 Activities

The Meaning of Religious Experience

- ▶ What is “religious” and how does it relate to “spiritual”?
- ▶ What qualifies as an “experience”?
- ▶ Are we referring to something spontaneous or carefully crafted?

Our theme for this year was “Religious Experience.” Before members could present on this, we first had to try to nail down the definition of these two words—not a simple task. What is “religious” and how does it relate to “spiritual”? What qualifies as an “experience”? Are we referring to something spontaneous or carefully crafted? Many questions were raised in our initial discussion.

Some thought-provoking statements that arose in this conversation were:

- ▶ I’m fairly sure that a Jew can’t be religious unless s/he has lived in Israel.
- ▶ I think that to be religious is to be convinced of the goodness of God.
- ▶ I could say that an atheist can have a religious sensibility.
- ▶ I think religiosity is defined more by action, not feeling, thinking, or intention.
- ▶ I have a problem with people who think they are religious just because they follow a code of law.
- ▶ I’m pretty sure Judaism is not a religion.
- ▶ Having a deep appreciation for complexity, especially the complexity of the human condition, is religious.
- ▶ Religious experiences are like a drug: they give you an amazing feeling, but it’s hard to catch, so you try harder, and find you can never get that high again.

The variety in members’ understanding of the terms “religious experience” manifested itself in the diversity of member presentations. Over the course of the year, we were treated to presentations that included, amongst others:

- ▶ A presentation on models of theological response to a harsh world.
- ▶ A study of texts proving that religious life is meant to be lived in Israel.
- ▶ Hearing music played in different ways, and exploring the deeper essence of music.
- ▶ Having a tish (with herring, of course!), appreciating art, and listening to a life story.
- ▶ A discussion of the value of spiritual experience versus the value of religious experience and practice.

A guest speaker shared with us a model of five stages of evolution and maturation of the Jewish People, that has today reached an adult stage, including rethinking prayer and organized religion. We also reflected on the legacy of Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik, in the wake of a very lively debate between Rabbi Cardozo and his correspondents on this subject; and we gathered on Yom Hazikaron to share our experiences with and thoughts about Israel’s memorial day.



- ▶ What should be hidden, and what brought out in the open?
- ▶ Should poskim give private psak that is not to be published? What about psak that contravenes general halacha, should it be kept secret?
- ▶ Is always telling the full truth a value to be adopted? Is it a Jewish value? How is it reflected in Tanach?
- ▶ Why have Jews traditionally dealt with difficult issues behind closed doors, instead of going to the authorities – and should this continue to be a norm?

Open Think Tank, Jerusalem,
March 9th 2017/12 Adar 5777

Dropping the Mask

Should *everything* be out in the open, halachically, hashkafically and personally?

These and many other questions were raised at the Open Think Tank in Jerusalem, just before Purim. After the fast of Esther ended, DCA Think Tankers and members of the public gathered together for an evening of study and discussion, prepared and facilitated by TT coordinator Yael Unterman.

Appropriately, we began by recalling Queen Esther in Achashverosh's palace, forced to keep her identity secret and present a false face to the world – up until the moment when it was time for “venahafoch hu”, to reveal her identity and save her people. The message seems to be: one moment's right action is another moment's wrong action.

This broad topic was discussed from several angles; yet when 10 PM arrived, we had only just begun the debate. One participant commented: “This should be not an evening, but an entire study day!”

Rabbi Cardozo opened by mentioning the major importance of transparency in money dealings. In a telling anecdote, he recounted the time when at the airport, customs officials caught two Hasidic Jews smuggling diamonds in their suitcases. Though he tried to admonish them, they would not listen, and were caught red-handed. When the officials checked his own case, and found nothing, he told them, “As an Orthodox Jew it is against my religion to commit crimes like this!” “But what about them?” they said, pointing in surprise to the Hasidic Jews. Rabbi Cardozo retorted: “They are not religious! They are secular!”

OPEN THINK TANK
SESSION

March 2017
at Yad Harav Nissim



Member Comments



Think Tank member Yael Shahar urged us to embrace indeterminacy as central both to human free will and to halakhic change:

“
Chaos is the signature of God when
He preferred to remain anonymous. Just as God must
conceal Himself to create the world, so we should not be ashamed
of those parts of ourselves that must remain hidden away in the
depths of our souls.”

She also shared the fact that, at a certain point in her life, she had to carry around much information that she could not discuss with a soul; and the creative solution she found for this situation...

Think Tank member Eliot Sacks discussed “truth telling”, surveying the book *Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites Its History* by Marc Shapiro. Inter alia, he brought quotes for and against the act of privileging education and inspiration over facts.



SHOULD
INSPIRATION TRUMP
FACTS?

FOR

“Rather than write the history of our forebears, every generation has to put a veil over the human failings of its elders and glorify all the rest which is great and beautiful. That means we have to do without a real history book. We can do without. We do not need realism, we need inspiration from our forefathers in order to pass it on to posterity.”
(R. Shimon Schwab)

AGAINST

“The Torah never hides from us the faults, errors and weaknesses of our great men. Just by that, it gives the stamp of veracity to what it relates. Were they without passion and without internal struggles, their virtues would seem to us the outcome of some higher nature, hardly a merit and certainly no model that we could hope to emulate... From our great teachers of the Torah...we would accordingly learn that it may never be our task to whitewash the spiritual and moral heroes of our past, to appear as apologists for them. They do not require our apologies, nor do such attempts become them. Truth is the seal of our Torah, and truthfulness is the principle of all its true and great commentators and teachers. (R. S. R. Hirsch, Commentary on Bereshit 12:10-13)

Havruta

The blessings & curses of secrecy

Participants then split off for chevrotah time, picking one of three sections to study:

- ▶ “A Time to Keep Secrets”
- ▶ “A Time to Reveal”
- ▶ “Halachic Gaps”



The hum of voices in the room and the sound of lively debate testified to the engagement with the texts and the topic.

- ▶ Rabbi Yitzhak said: Blessing only applies to things hidden from sight (Taanit 8b)
- ▶ R. Ilai says, If one sees that his evil inclination is gaining sway over him, let him go away where he is not known; let him put on sordid clothes, don a sordid wrap and do the sordid deed that his heart desires rather than profane the name of Heaven openly. (Moed Katan 17a)
- ▶ It is forbidden to hand over a Jew to the heathen, neither his person nor his goods, even if he is wicked and a sinner, even if he causes distress and pain to fellow-Jews. Whoever hands over a Jew to the heathen has no part in the next world. It is permitted to kill a moser (informant) wherever he is. It is even permitted to kill him before he has handed over (a fellow Jew).” As soon as he has said: I shall hand over so and so, his person or his property, he has put himself under sentence of death... (Rambam Hilchot Chovel Umezik, 8:9-10)
(Note: this halacha is used as the basis for not revealing misdeeds of fellow Jews publicly. Many different opinions exist among modern rabbis as to how valid this law is today)
- ▶ R. Hanan b. Ammi reported that whenever Rab laid down the rule to his disciples he would rule according to R. Meir’s view, but whenever he lectured at the public session he would expound the law according to R. Judah’s view because of the ignorant masses present. (Hullin 15a)

- ▶ “In practice, when faced with such questions I investigate carefully whether this [pregnancy] endangers the woman. And I grant permission only if the husband and wife are God-fearing and discreet, and will not be more permissive than is proper and also will not inform others of my lenient ruling for them so that others will not be improperly lenient.

(R’ Moshe Feinstein: Quoted in “Public and Private Rulings in Jewish Law (Halakhah): Flexibility, Concealment, and Feminist Jurisprudence,” Ronit Irshai (Bar-Ilan University and Shalom Hartman Institute)



“
It
was thoroughly stimulating
and most interesting to hear
different people’s views on the subject
along with the sources. I very much
appreciated hearing Rabbi Cardozo’s
words of wisdom and looking forward
to joining such events in the
future.”

– Open Think Tank Participant



QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- ▶ Do the issues or sources discussed here engender strong feelings in you in one direction or another?
- ▶ Is traditional Judaism too secretive in your eyes, or perhaps not enough? In what ways?
- ▶ Should we really be aiming for transparency in everything? Is this world ready for that? What are the potential pitfalls?
- ▶ What's your general approach or personality, more secretive/discreet or more open? Would you like to change it in any way?

**See you at the
next Open
Think Tank!**

