

Rabbi Howard A. Addison

Many years ago I was invited to the annual dinner of the Chicago Shomrim Society, where a leader of my congregation was being honored by the Jewish police benevolent association. Having delivered my invocation, I listened as Harry, my friend and congregant, spoke of his experiences on the police force. He told how the Chicago police, once almost exclusively Irish-American, found itself staffed by officers from a variety of backgrounds. There were the Italian-American Police League and an Asian-American Officers Society as well as the Shomrim. Finally, he joked, a now under-represented ethnic group had just formed its own police association — the Irish!

Every time that I hear the expression Jewish men's spirituality, I think of Harry's tale. Classically, Jewish spirituality was men's spirituality. The minyan for worship was 10 men, with the women segregated behind the mehitzah. The study halls of the yeshivah or beit midrash were populated by men whose pursuit of the true meaning of God's word led to pitched intellectual battles. The congregation and community were led by male officers and functionaries. Even social gatherings like the seudah shelisit, the communal Saturday twilight meal, or the hasidic ferbregen were largely male celebrations.

What happened? Two things. First, the advent of Jewish feminism has opened the observance and study and leadership of Judaism to all members of both genders. That long overdue inclusiveness, bringing Judaism new energy, new insights, and new leadership is a very good thing. However, when the pre-bar mitzvah tefillin club of fathers and sons transforms into the coed tefillah club, what becomes of the boy's rite of passage into the adult moral community of Jewish men? Or for that matter, the girl's passage into the adult moral community of Jewish women?

A second factor that has eroded the spirituality of Jewish men is that we live our lives less and less within a Jewish context. As our attention is focused ever more on the office, the professional or civic association, the health club, and family and friendship groups of more diverse ethnic origins, we wonder what relevance Judaism might have in our lives.

According to Pirke Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, the world is supported by three pillars: Torah study, worship, and charitable deeds. If we are to formulate a renewed Jewish men's spirituality, perhaps we should begin with these traditional areas.

The study of Torah, in its broadest sense, can transform our lives, providing us with religious competence and knowledge. Throughout the centuries, men predominantly have been the authors, teachers, and students of Jewish lore. Yet the orientation of these activities has been to describe and prescribe the overall relationship between the Jewish people, God, and the world.

Perhaps the time has come for us to examine Torah lessons with an eye toward how they can guide us to make critical decisions in the boardroom, the family room, and the bedroom. Abraham faced the call to uproot himself in midlife and suffered the trials of a blended family. Isaac was almost sacrificed for his father's beliefs. Ishmael was a rejected son, Joseph a favorite, and each suffered for it. Elderly Boaz was involved in a May-December relationship with Ruth,

while the judge Samuel was forcibly retired. The richness of these tales combined with the insights of halachah can instruct us as we face the twists and turns inherent in every man's life.

How shall we pray and for what shall we pray?

Given that men have been expected always to appear competent, it might be difficult for some to admit that they need help learning the prayers. It might be even more difficult to go beyond rote recitation and actually pray, to admit before God that we are flawed and in need of outside divine support. In what way can the values of honesty, courage, decisiveness, responsibility, and resilience inform our prayers and how can our prayers inspire us to embody these virtues and transmit them to our sons and daughters? Can we reclaim selected times, such as the Saturday afternoon meal, to worship together as men, to pray and sing and drink and tell tales and dance together, sharing physical camaraderie? These and many other questions can serve as our starting points as we define anew our relationship to God through worship.

By our charitable deeds, gemilut hasadim, God calls us to help realize God's dreams for a more heavenly earth. In addition to reaching for our checkbooks, personal service is needed to help strengthen God's presence among us. Building, protecting, and righting injustice were once the sole province of men. As we consider social action, perhaps projects such as Habitat for Humanity, helping abused children and spouses, and protesting social wrongs in our communities, should be added to our work in supporting the synagogue and Israel. All of these are needed if we are to help bring about tikkun olam, repair of the world.

Study and worship. Envisioning a better world and helping to perfect it. More than steps in our quest for God, these are spiritual activities that can renew us as men seeking to make God real in our lives and in our world.