

An Interview with Rabbi Hershel Reichman

BY: Ari Lamm

Kol Hamevaser: “Spirituality” is a very fashionable term. How does Judaism view spirituality? Does Judaism’s view of spirituality differ from that of contemporary society?

Rabbi Hershel Reichman: When contemporary society talks about spirituality, it’s about having a certain psychological, emotional awareness of some experience. In Judaism, it’s not so clear that the individual psychological experience is necessary to have a spiritual experience. According to Judaism, and especially *hasidut*, a Jewish soul has many levels. There are five fundamental levels of the soul: *nefesh*, *ru’ah*, *neshamah*, *chayah*, and *yechidah*. The first three levels, *nefesh*, *ru’ah* and *neshamah*, refer to the biological, emotional, and intellectual. These are the levels of the soul an individual is aware of, and so he could, on any one of those levels, have something you could describe as a spiritual experience. You could do something physical that could be spiritual as well. You could have some sort of emotion, and that could be a spiritual emotion. You could do something intellectual and that might have some sort of spiritual effect. But according to *hasidut*, the *chayah* and *yechidah* levels of the soul are, many times, beyond human awareness. They can be experienced, but it’s not common. On the other hand, we can do things that affect all five levels of our soul; probably everything that we do affects all five levels. So let’s say someone does a mitzvah without any experience of spirituality at all. It’s dry, plain, rote, robotic, and he doesn’t really experience it in his *nefesh*, *ru’ah*, or *neshamah*. But it’s possible that one might have spiritual nourishment from a mitzvah through the *chayah* and *yechidah*, which anyway aren’t usually experienced spirituality. So that’s why we say a person should do the mitzvah even without *kavvanah*. We *paskn* that *mitsvot lo tserikhot kavvanah*, because the mitzvah has a spiritual meaning and effect on us, even if we don’t know it. This experience is beyond our awareness and located on higher levels of the soul. So the first major consideration is that for general culture, spirituality must be experienced. For us, though, it can be experienced, and I imagine it’s great when you do experience it, but it doesn’t have to be experienced. That’s a very important difference. Spirituality is not identical with spiritual experience.

Now, there’s an old question in my mind about why contemporary Jewish Orthodox life, especially Modern Orthodox life, has neglected the spiritual experience so much. The emphasis has been on doing the mitzvah and getting the thing done, which obviously is very important. But there’s been an educational and communal neglect of the spiritual experience. We don’t need the spiritual experience to make the mitzvah or the deed worthwhile or worthy, but we definitely need the spiritual experience just in order to practice the Torah and Judaism in the right way. The *pasuk* writes that you must perform the mitzvot “*be-khol levavkhem*,” which means you have to have a heartfelt feeling and experience when you do the mitzvah, when you serve Hashem. To me, this is a great challenge that I think Jewish education must confront and really grapple with and hopefully successfully bring the experience of spirituality into peoples’ lives.

KHM: Is there ever a tension between spiritual experience and halakhah? Is there a tension superficially, or a harmony at some level?

RHR: I think that everything in this world was created by God in a mirror way, in a double way; there's a good side and a bad side. There's no such thing as neutral – it's either good or bad, or I can use it for good or for bad. The same thing is true of spirituality: there's a good spirituality and there's also a bad spirituality. Obviously, the people who worshiped *avodah zarah* had spiritual experiences, but they were bad. The Torah doesn't say that just any spirituality is good; it has to be the right kind of spirituality. Unfortunately, today in the Jewish world, and through it the non-Jewish world, we have a phenomenon called the cult of the kabbalah. Now, there are ways of studying and learning kabbalah that will enhance one's spiritual experience. However, if it becomes a cult and the goal is the experience rather than what's right or wrong, you can get a wrong experience out of the kabbalah. This phenomenon is expressed by Madonna, who is dressed in a way that is not *tsanua*, wearing *tefillin*, and singing a song. This whole thing is just a paradox, the bad kind of spirituality. It reminds me of the rites of *avodah zarah*, which mixed religion with women and all sorts of terrible practices. So we have to be careful, when we go for spiritual experiences, that we do it the right away.

That's where halakhah comes in. Halakhah is really a control system to make sure that you gain the spiritual experiences but in the right way; otherwise, you're playing with fire. The logic and control of halakhah in the spirituality of physical commandments, is very important. When we speak about spirituality, it's a function of a certain soul experience. The soul and the body are really two different things. God attached the soul to the body in order to sanctify the body. The body of the person is basically neutral and not holy. The soul, being holy, is supposed to share its holiness with the body. I don't know if non-Jewish spirituality recognizes this concept. The Christians felt that you could never really sanctify the body, so they want people like nuns and priests not to get married because they don't see how you can possibly bring spirituality into sex. But Judaism has a mitzvah of *peru u-revu*. And the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur has to have a wife to serve. So we think that if God put the soul into the body, that means that God knows, since He created us, that the body can be sanctified. Even though you might think the body is carnal, low, and animalistic, that might be true as you start the struggle, and we agree it's a struggle. But we don't believe like the Christians that it's a lost cause, that it's impossible, and that you must restrict the body. Instead, we feel that you have to control the body and channel it, and when you do that you get a very special spirituality that permeates not just the soul, but the body as well.

KHM: Throughout the ages, various Jewish movements have attempted to address a perceived lack of spirituality within daily Jewish practice. Two of the most recent and popular have been the *Musar* Movement and *hasidut*. What does Rav Reichman see as the most important contributions of these movements, and how should students at YU relate to these movements, their works and their legacies?

RHR: Both movements have made a most important contribution of making people sensitive to, and giving them methods to attain, the spiritual side of Judaism. Personally, I go for *hasidut* much more than *musar*. I've never really had a good teacher of *musar*. Some people think it's amazing. I've always found that the *musar* side is very demanding – to use a *hasidic* phrase, *musar* is coming from the side of *din*. I never thought I could do it. But when I came into *hasidut*, I found it to be more on the *hesed* side. The *hesed* side is light, more optimistic, more joyous, involves more singing, so it's positive rather than negative, and that's why I chose it.

I might be wrong, but I think that in general that *musar* has become much more *hasidic* than it ever was. I think if you go today and hear a *musar* schmooze in a regular yeshivah where there's a regular *mashgi'ah* giving *musar*, very often he's using *hasidic* sources, like the *Sefat Emet*, the *Shem mi-Shemuel*, and other *hasidic* books that are well organized. And they also have moved from the somber, morose "*din*" into the optimistic, *hasidic* point of view. So it's harder today to distinguish between *musar* and *hasidut*, because they have merged. Call it whatever you want, *musar* or *hasidut*, but it's the bright, optimistic side which talks to me, and I think it talks to the general public today more than the strong demanding side.

KHM: A common complaint is that it is difficult, after the year(s) in Israel, to maintain the spiritual high felt during the year(s) in Israel. What recommendation would Rav Reichman have for students at YU who experience this?

RHR: It's a difficult question to solve. I personally think that you have to be very innovative. If you're going to wait for YU to do it, you're probably going to become very disappointed. For example, Rav Wolfson came last night (September 15, 2008), so a lot of the boys heard, for the first time, a great *hasidic* master talk in a way that was so inspiring and so uplifting. So what's going to happen next? If a boy says he's going to wait for the next time Rav Wolfson comes to get the same kind of inspiration, he's going to have to wait a very long time. But if you're innovative, you say, "Hey, Rav Wolfson really inspired me, and he has a *shul* in Brooklyn where I hear there's a lot of inspiration every Shabbat. I'm going to make it my business to go once or twice a month." You have to be innovative. You could go to Israel during vacations. For someone in YU, spending two months a year in Israel would be a tremendous dose of maintenance.

Now, within YU itself, which is where people are spending almost all of their time, you have to look for those pockets, those places within YU, which can help you maintain and climb the ladder to more *avodat Hashem*. The first place is the *beit midrash*. A student has to maximize his time in the *beit midrash*. He has to. It's spiritual survival. Minimizing his time in the *beit midrash* means shooting himself in the leg. If he maximizes it, he can really succeed. That includes everything he has to do in the morning, the whole nine yards, and then going at night to the *beit midrash*. That's voluntary, but he can do it, he has to. If he says, "My schedule doesn't allow me," then he should change his schedule. I don't believe in the sixteen or seventeen credit schedule. I myself took six years to go through college.

KHM: So should everyone stay for a fifth year?

RHR: Absolutely. Everybody should take the fifth year. You should take nine credits in the college, and three credits of *shiur*. Or if you've already maxed out with your Jewish Studies, take twelve credits in the college. You should never take more than 12 credits of secular courses. This way, you'll have the time to go to the *beit midrash* at night. So I think going outside YU to find spiritual inspiration is a great thing, but since very few boys do that, you must be in the *beit midrash*. That's the first thing.

The second thing in YU is to attach yourself to a *rebbe*. The *rebbe* spends basically his whole day immersed in Torah and *avodat Hashem*; he's not studying secular courses. He is a very holy person compared to the average student, because of how he spends his day. So if a *talmid* attaches himself to a *rebbe*, it rubs off. When I was here, I attached myself to Rabbi Soloveitchik, the Rav. Whatever he did rubbed off on me as a student. There's nothing wrong with a big candle lighting a small candle.

So I think that the disaster and the failures come from the boys who violate these two things. They don't maximize the *beit midrash*, and they don't have a *rebbe*. If you don't have both, you will probably have a very big fall. If you do have both, you can do very well. You can do even better than Israel.

KHM: YU students split their days between Torah study and general studies. Does the spirituality of the former relate, in any way, to the latter? In terms of religious development and spirituality, how would Rav Reichman advise students view the latter part of their day?

RHR: There's theory and then there's experience. To experience spirituality while doing secular studies is going to be a challenge. It's possible, but not very likely. The average person doing mathematics or English literature is not going to have a Torah experience. I think you have to be able to see it, at least intellectually, as a broader part of your Torah being. Let's say you look at it as a way of making a *parnasah*. Only very few people will, or are expected to, make their *parnasah* from Torah. One out of a hundred may do so. The other ninety-nine are going to, and are expected to, make their *parnasah* outside of Torah, so you have to say to yourself that God put me into this world and I see from various experiences that this *parnasah* is what He wants. A person who sees he could successfully make a *parnasah* in Torah, he should definitely go that way; it's the shorter path to the spiritual goal. And I think that even if a person has a *safek* that maybe he could make Torah his career, he should try it. It's like a Pascal's Wager: sometimes, you make a bet where you can only win. So if someone spends five years after college learning Torah, in *semikhah* or *kollel*, and then it turns out that he can't find a job, or he tries for a year to be a teacher of Torah and he's not a success, he has still won, because he got five years of Torah learning out of it. So I say that even if you have a *safek* that you could do it successfully, you should try it, because the worst you can get is five years of Torah and spirituality.

But what about the others? From the point-of-view of plain *parnasah*, you know intellectually that it's part of a Torah life, because God made me in a way that I have to be an *ish yotse ha-sadeh* – that's Hashem's *ratson*. A guy who makes a living and supports a wife and children – right away he's doing a mitsvah. So you have to look at it, at least intellectually, as a mitsvah. Don't think that you're a second-rate citizen, a failure. You're not a failure. You have your mission: to make a *kiddush Hashem* outside the *beit midrash*. Is that going to give you a spiritual feeling when you do it? Probably not. But that doesn't mean that it's not a mitsvah. As we said before, there are many mitsvot you can do without a spiritual feeling. In *hasidut*, we say a remarkable thing. If you are forced by life to do a mitsvah where there is no spirituality, something difficult which is made even more excruciating because there's no immediate spiritual payoff, *hasidut* says that's really the greatest mitsvah. Hashem is testing you to see whether you are so loyal to Him and to the Torah that you will do it without an immediate payoff. So when a guy goes into general studies, he has to know that Hashem wants him to serve Him in that way. He's not going to enjoy it on a spiritual level. He's not going to come home and say that he had an *aliyah*. He may even say he went down, but he has no choice – he has to pay the bills and take care of the children. In the end, then, it might be an even greater mitsvah.

Having said that, you have to do things to maximize the spirituality. I say that if you have to make a career choice, you have to look and see which career choice will give you the opportunity to maximize real spirituality. Let's say one career is going to be a nine-to-three job, where you're going to make a basic income, and the other job is a nine-to-nine job, like that of a lawyer, where you're going to make much more money. The question is: if you're doing nine-to-nine in a law firm, where's the time for Torah and mitsvot? Intellectually, you know you're doing a mitsvah and being *mekhaven le-shem shamayim* when you choose to become a lawyer, because you want to be able to use the money for family or *tsedakah*, but you're not experiencing spirituality. If you choose to work from nine to three, you'll probably be a public school teacher or a physical therapist, so you're not going to make half of what a lawyer would, but you'll make enough for a living, and when you come home at three, you can teach your children Torah, you can give your wife personal attention, and you can do many things which are real, direct spiritual activities, not just an intellectual concept. So I think that a person, when making a career choice, has to put the spirituality side of things into the question. It has to be something where he can feel the spirituality, not just know it intellectually. I'll tell you the truth: I feel very saddened by the way the boys make their choices. I don't think they think about it. They think about success, but success, I'm sorry to say, is a false idol. The way the world defines success is not the Jewish concept. It's a sad thing when I see that they make choices without putting everything into the equation.

KHM: How should one view things that won't affect your *parnasah*, like English literature classes? Also, how would Rav Soloveitchik fit into this discussion?

RHR: The Rav, and I'm a great student of the Rav, was a man who was able to teach and to live with paradoxes. His theory of Torah and of life was that paradox, though against basic logic,

was within Torah logic. The theory of the “two *dinim*” could mean either-or, but it could also mean both. What does that mean for someone who wants to say, “I want to follow the Rav.” Well, the Rav is teaching a paradox. You must learn Torah on such a level that you’re completely immersed in it every moment of your waking hours. You have to think about it when you walk, when you eat – even when you’re talking to someone, part of your mind is still thinking about the Torah. But he then says that secular knowledge is great, it’s all from God, and you can get inspiration there. For normal, everyday people, that’s going to take time and mind. You can’t do two things at the same time. So the Rav teaches you a paradox. He himself apparently enjoyed paradox, but most of us don’t. Most of us like a simple thing. You have to have a great, philosophical mind to say paradox is essential and that you like it. So I can’t really tell you that the Rav gave us a clear road through this paradox of Torah and General Studies. I, personally, go for the Torah and leave the General Studies for *parnasah*. I don’t accept for myself the idea that General Studies is worth replacing time spent on Torah. My mind is one-dimensional in that sense. I knew the Rav a little bit, and I can say that from what I saw, his mind could work two tracks at the same time – no doubt about it. Maybe Rav Aharon Lichtenstein has that kind of head and he can do it, too. I, myself, am very limited. I’m a small fry, and I only work one track at a time. When I got my Ph.D., which the Rav told me to do, I did so under a lot of parental pressure, too. To me, it was taking time away from Torah, and I did it only because of *parnasah*. I *takke* used it for 5-6 years when I was a teacher of math at City College before I became a *rebbe*. So, for me, the Ph.D. gave me a *parnasah*; but what the Rav meant, I have no practical idea, because I am not at the level to deal with his dualities.

Getting back to the first question, if the College requires English literature, I need to do what the College requires for me to have a *parnasah* as a lawyer, as a doctor, or as a computer programmer. But if it were not required, I would never take it as an elective. I would maximize whatever Torah learning I could, and if I would take more courses, they would be in my major. Let’s say I had three free credits and I was maxed out in Torah – I couldn’t take more *shiur*. So if I were a computer major, I would take an advanced course in computers to be a better programmer, for my *parnasah*, I would not be a dilettante and say that I want to broaden my view of the world and be more of a romantic scholar within the world of liberal arts.

I never agreed with the whole philosophy of a liberal arts college. For me, it was crazy. By studying liberal arts, you learn the philosophy and the culture of the world and that replaces the time you could be learning Torah. The Rav, until the age of 29, only learned Torah. He went through *Shas* many times and knew it on a deep level. He had a desire to learn what the nations of the world say, so he went to university. We are not like the Rav, we don’t know Torah like that. 99.9% of the people I know, adults and younger people alike, can only work on one thing at a time. We are relatively simple people. Therefore, every hour of English literature I take voluntarily is an hour I take away from Torah, *hasidut*, and *musar*. This does not make sense. We don’t know enough Torah to serve Hashem properly. We have to spend more time in

the *beit midrash*, more time in *shiur*, more time back in Israel in yeshivah. I do not believe that there is any substitution from the nations of the world which can replace our responsibility to Torah and spirituality.

We're not here to prove that someone can know a lot of Torah, Plato, and Shakespeare – that's been proven already. When the Rav was young, the irreligious Jews were claiming that in order to have a *parnasah* and be successful, you had to throw away your Judaism. So in those years, when the Rav went to college, there was a huge cultural, social, and intellectual challenge to show that a person could be in university, learn everything they had to offer, and still stay *frum*. And that's what the Rav did. He went to show that a huge *talmid hakham* can study everything they have – Hegel, Aristotle, Plato, Neitzche – and still remain a big *talmid hakham*. This isn't an issue for us today. We don't have to prove that you can study English and stay religious; it's been proven already. The issue today is not whether or not our students/children are being drawn away from Judaism by the non-Jewish world's intellectual attractiveness. No Orthodox Jews today are going to say, "I'm going to throw out religion to make money." People would laugh. So why would someone today throw away religion? Because it is dry and boring for him. It doesn't mean anything to him. We have to give our boys a full experience of religion. Secular studies are nothing but a tool in a person's life. Do I have to prove that I can learn English and remain religious? I think it's beating a dead horse. If it helps for *parnasah* do learn these subjects, that's fine. But why pledge allegiance to a cause that is no longer relevant? The cause now is to strengthen the religious experience for people who are religious – to make it more real.

KHM: Since we are in the season now, could the Rosh Yeshivah comment on the topics of *teshuvah* and *tefillah*?

RHR: As I have said, the experiential side of Torah is what needs strengthening. Unfortunately, today the Torah education in America focuses on the intellectual side of Torah, not on the experiential side. What happened to experience? What happened to the *lev*? Gone. Our boys and girls are spiritual cripples. They are certainly intellectually trained, and maybe they can read a text nicely, but they are missing in sensitivities; they are like blind bats. So we have to shift gears to a new agenda, namely a total Jewish experience in education. Education has to move from just training the intellect to being a total immersion in Torah and Torah Judaism. That's what a year in Israel does for a lot of boys and girls. All of a sudden they say, "Wow, I like this!" All of a sudden, there is a feeling. But when they come back to America it has to be nurtured. That is the challenge for today.

Now, how do you teach *teshuvah* and *tefillah* – how do you teach *lev*? Rav Soloveitchik said many times in his writings and teachings that he has no idea how to do it, and he said many times that he considered this a failure on his part. So how can you do it? You can read certain

books that give you inspiration. You can hear lectures which focus on it and give you an intellectual appreciation. But obviously that is not going to satisfy the need. It has to move from the brain and get into the heart. I find that a *kumzits* with music is a very powerful experience, and that's what I do for myself.

Now, the boys here don't know how to *daven* at all. I am speaking in generalities; obviously, there are some that do. It is very difficult for me to remember, in my forty years here, a boy crying during his *tefillah*. It's crazy. *David ha-Melekh* is crying so much in Tehillim. You are talking to you *Abba* – how can you not cry? They are not *davening* with their hearts. Instead of talking to their Father in Heaven, they are just being *yotsei* the *Shulhan Arukh*. So what's the solution? The first thing in *tefillah* is to seek out the slow *minyán*. Sometimes, for *Ma'ariv*, I'll go to a dormitory to *daven*. I am not going to say which *minyán* it is, but this *minyán* has a rule that you have to finish in five minutes. It's crazy. Five minutes for a *minyán*? I can't believe it. The slower, the better, from my perspective. It gives you time to talk to God. If you see a *minyán* that speeds, either don't go there or take the *amud* and go slowly. Don't be ashamed. No one is a boss about the speed. There is no bylaw in the YU Catalog that *Ma'ariv* should take five minutes. The one who takes the *amud* decides. You can decide to go slow. If they scream at you, it's not your problem. Slow is the key when it comes to *tefillah*.

As regards *teshuvah*, *teshuvah* is very difficult. The thing to keep in mind, though, is that you are not expected to achieve it – just to try. You are human, so you try and continue to try. That's all that *ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* is asking. Hashem gives you a chance to clean the slate, and if you have that *ratson*, you can receive it.

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