DEFINING A SPIRITUALLY HEALTHY COMMUNITY:
How do we recognize it?
Why does it matter?

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A Paradigm from the Past

Somewhere between 200 BCE and 200 CE, the religious leaders of the Jewish community of the land of Israel began to produce what became Judaism's major corpus of civil, criminal, and religious law. Although this work drew its ecclesiastical authority from the Hebrew Bible, it was clearly the product of the human religious and civil authorities of the time. They had the sanction to interpret the Bible for the people of their day, to expand on the Bible's meaning, and to explain to the people the expectations of their god.

In addition to laws and rules designed to maintain a civil and religiously coherent community, they also composed a special, smaller collection of guidelines that directed the public behavior and comportment of the judges of their society.

In the context of that era, their jurists were the same people as the law-creators, and their title was, in Hebrew, "*rav*", or "teacher" ("rabbi" in our day). The implication of this title of "teacher" was this: A "teacher" needed not only to demonstrate a knowledge of and facility with the law and how to apply it, but one also needed to be willing to teach through doing and acting, to serve as an exemplar of righteous behavior. The rules found in this judicial guidebook directed the hearts and hands of those who would judge the people according to the laws they created and adjudicated.

One proverb in this collection of guidelines for public judicial behavior pertains directly to the creation and preservation of a spiritually healthy community. It is this: "Reflect on three things - knowing what is above you - and you will never come to sin: an eye that sees, an ear that hears, and all your deeds recorded in a book." (Mishnah Avot 2:1)

People in that society believed that God was, indeed, watching, listening, recording, judging, and reacting to their behavior. And because of this divine oversight and the possible retribution that would come as a result of missteps,

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the judges and, by extension, the citizens whom they taught felt a steadfast responsibility toward God to preserve their society through the rules found in the Bible and their extra -biblical legal codes. They believed that their individual and collective actions could affect God's actions - positively and negatively - toward their world.

Accordingly, they performed their daily tasks and interactions with these assumptions operating in the background: They acted with the sincere belief that each person was responsible for the fate of the world, and that - through their individual and collective actions - each citizen was directly accountable to one another and to God.

Translating Then Into Now

These early Jews produced a spiritually healthy community, with each citizen doing his and her share to maintain order through religiously inspired and directed behavior; I would have to assume that many homogeneously religious communities before and since have produced a similar kind of society for themselves. Their hope was to satisfy a set of values that existed beyond themselves. Through the perceived reality of the ever-present deity, they suppressed some of their immediate, personal needs and desires, and focused on the advancement of the community and society.

It is this sense of principled and upright obligation to something greater than the self -to citizens living around the corner, to the world, or to one's god - that can, once again, lead us to the creation of a spiritually healthy community today. What's needed is the identification and promotion of a strong, positive, unifying factor through which people in the community can strengthen and vitalize their connections to one another.

Because of the religious and political diversity that we Americans cherish, this challenge is great. In our times, a single, coherent religious, theological, or philosophical belief system is not present in diverse modern communities. Unified thinking along religious, political, and philosophical lines tends to exists only in the most circumscribed of cultures, and our American next door neighbor today is far less likely to be a member of the same religious community as we, or have any other affinity that would by happenstance bind them to us. So we have to look elsewhere.

Don't misunderstand me. Diversity is a healthy and necessary component of society. It is a positive societal value that we should promote. But I believe that creating a communal sense of accountability to a higher cause - the notion

that each member of society is accountable to an entity greater than him- or herself - is what can lead to the creation and preservation of a spiritually healthy community.

I believe that we can create aspects of a spiritually healthy community in our day, but doing so requires developing a connection between people that is different from the past. Members of a community need to create a new appreciation for some positive concept or purpose that his larger than themselves, some value toward which citizens can develop a common bond and, at the same time, express a sense of wholesome commitment. This would mean that each citizen would need to restrain the narcissistic attitudes and behavior that characterizes our society today - we would have to renounce the hubris that we tend to feel - and think about acting in more humble ways for the benefit of the entire community.

In "Fiddler on the Roof", the 1960's musical adaptation of the stories of Shalom Aleichem, Tevye the Dairyman refers to this fidelity to God and God's purposes when outlining his daily tasks that are dictated by 'tradition':

> "Here in Anatevka we have our traditions for everything: how to eat, how to sleep, how to work, even how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered, and we wear these little prayer shawls. This shows our constant devotion to God."[1]

Tevye's prescription for a spiritually healthy community would be appropriate for the people of ancient Israel or for the shtetl of Nineteenth century Eastern Europe, but not necessarily for 21st century America. In our day, our challenge is to find unifying factors toward which people will demonstrate fidelity and commitment:

- There must be a belief that one is responsible - through one's actions - to others.

- There must be an acceptance of the reality that one's actions will have an effect on others, both in positive and negative ways.

- There must be a common presumption that there will be a negative consequence if one does not bear in mind, and act in accordance with the first two understandings.

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[1] Joseph Stein, book. "Fiddler on the Roof", audio CD, Track 1 "Prologue – Tradition", original Broadway cast recording, RCA Red Seal, RCD1-7060.

- Individuals must feel a true sense of remorse if they commit a misstep, and a true dedication toward the reconciling or repair of any relationship that breaks down.

How we get to this point is a great challenge, and for a number of reasons:

We will ask people to discover or manufacture various kinds of personal affiliations that need to be commonly accepted, and which may not have been present in the past. We will ask people - at the beginning - to work with those whose lifestyles and value choices will be unfamiliar at best, and difficult to accept at worst. And we will ask people to pursue a set of objectives whose ends may not be easily perceived, and whose purposes - at first - may be a bit unclear.

So we'd be compelling people to think and act in unaccustomed ways and urging people to take risks for an intangible goal. These actions will certainly be frightening, if not downright unacceptable, at the start.

The Components of a Spiritually Healthy Community

These would be the characteristics and components of the spiritually healthy community, as a place where, even within the American ethos of diversity, we would have coherence of spirit and purpose:

- There would be a sense of positive intention toward other individuals and community at large. Each person would ascribe positive and constructive motivations to the actions of others.

- There would be respect for all people. The community would maintain the value that acceptance, and not merely the tolerance, of diversity, based on religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, race, nationality, and ethnic background, is the true accepted community norm.

- There would be encouragement for each individual citizen to search for his or her individual spiritual path.

- There would be a continuous search for discovering the best ways of educating one community group about another, whether in the context of religious congregations, service organizations, advocacy groups, municipal decision making bodies, or other community affiliations.

- The leaders of religious congregations, service organizations, advocacy groups, municipal decision making bodies, or other community affiliations would continuously promote the values of acceptance of those of other groups within their organizations.

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- Local media would strive for complete objectivity in presenting issues for community dialogue and debate; this would be a stated goal of each media outlet.

- In the community, there would be opportunities for education, on a strictly objective basis, of issues of international concern that touch upon the community groups in the community. Even problematic issues (such as our contemporary concerns about the Middle East, the priest pedophilia scandal, church-state separation issues, and more) would be presented with objectivity, so that each position can be understood by all and, thereby, opinions formed.

- Through this educational process, people would not merely receive information, but they would also be encouraged to search for, talk about, and promote solutions to the problems examined.

- The leaders of the community and its organizations would search for ways to train future leaders with the same vision of a spiritually healthy community.

Why is This Important?

Simply put, a spiritually healthy community would provide a crucial sense of security for the individual, for the various affinity groups that people belong to, and for the community.

In a spiritually healthy community, people act in ways that demonstrate acceptance of others.

In a spiritually healthy community, there can be a vigorous and positive curiosity about the different groups in the community, or issues outside of the community.

In a spiritually healthy community, where there would be the promotion of education and the expansion of knowledge, no person or group would have to worry about being marginalized, and everyone would be able to look with optimism toward the future.

In a spiritually healthy community, people who live with a sense of security and peace can grow in many other ways: creativity can flourish, and minds can expand.

In a spiritually healthy community, there would be a consensus that solving current and future problems through education and dialogue is part of the communal agenda, and is possible in a peaceful and meaningful way.

In a spiritually healthy community, citizens would continually search for ways to provide a positive local response - and perhaps offer suggestions - to the issues that plague the overall society, such as economic disparities between and among people, chronic illness and widespread epidemic, emergency responses to tragedies, and the like.

In a true spiritually healthy community, no one would focus on the differences that have tended in the past to force people apart. To the contrary, people would be supportive of others' successes, and they would promote the elevation of all people regardless of their individual state of being.

Can We Get There?

To achieve a spiritually healthy community, we would need to promote the reframing of some of the attitudes that historically have pervaded the human mind. The Second Century judicial guidebook from the land of Israel that I referenced earlier in my presentation offers some guidance in that regard.

The masters of that tradition understood the need for reorienting our minds to new ways of looking at the world, and for changing attitudes that can cloud human thinking. They suggest the following reframing of our understanding. They wrote:

"Who is 'wise?' They who learn from everyone. Who is 'mighty?' They who subdue their aggressive tendencies. Who is 'wealthy?' They who are happy with their lot in life. Who is 'honorable?' They who honor others." (Mishnah Avot 4:1)

The authors of these words knew that, without guidance and discipline, humans use ideas and concepts to promote the individual, rather than communal or joint agendas. The 'teachers' of that time suggested that changing the way we look at ourselves and our needs will lead to a better world.

In our day, the task of creating the spiritually healthy community will require a similar kind of paradigm shift. Let us begin this task today.