RELIGIOUS vs. SPIRITUAL
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People often tell me they are uncomfortable with religion. You may think it odd to tell that to a rabbi but it happens all the time, usually in the form of an apology, though they have nothing to apologize for, certainly not to me. They then continue and explain, that while they are not religious they do consider themselves spiritual.

Such a dichotomy begs the question of course, what is the difference between the two, between being religious and being spiritual?

The answer is found in this book, in the book of Leviticus, a book literally overflowing with religious practice. Indeed gallons of blood and whole herds of animals are spilled and sacrificed in the name of religion in the book of Leviticus – nothing could seem farther from spirituality than these ancient rites.

And yet our rabbis teach that Leviticus is the MOST spiritual book of the entire Torah. In fact so important are its teachings for living a spiritual life that tradition holds that when we

begin teaching a child Torah we start with this book. Not the stories of Genesis or Moses and the Exodus but with sacrifices. WHY?

Because sacrifice is not religious ritual, it is sacred communication, it is about having a relationship with God, and a relationship with God is spirituality.

In this week's Torah portion God says to Moses, "When a person sins by stealing, cheating or lying they not only sin against their fellow they sin against me." In the Talmud Rabbi Akiva asks, how is a sin against a person also a sin against God, presumably the person stole from or cheated his neighbor not God – how possibly could such an action involve God?

Then as all good rabbis do, Rabbi Akiva answers his own question by explaining that when a person loans a friend money or an object and does not return it, he sins not only against the person he stole from but also the Third Party that witnesses everything; the ever watchful eye of God. Deny the loan or the theft and you deny that God saw what you did as well as your fellow.

The Torah text continues that the offender must first restore the stolen item, the broken pledge – with interest no less - THEN he makes a sacrifice to God to repair that relationship as well.

Spirituality is to live as though God sees and hears everything and then to act accordingly. God, G-O-D is as one teacher described Good Orderly Direction.

Leviticus teaches how we treat others is a direct measure of our faith and our faith must always be made manifest in how we act in the world. The challenge is to remember that there is a Third Party to any human interaction or relationship, one who urges us to be our best selves at all times, at the office, at home, between friends. This challenge has its own reward as well because every interaction with another can also become a meeting place between us and God.