

Where G-d and Humanity Touch

A guide to true avodas Hashem-
serving G-d with an understanding
of who you are, and who He is.

Kalil Shmuel (Kyle) Zaldin

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Introduction

Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen Rabinowitz of Lublin famously said: “Just as a person is required to believe in G-d, so too is he afterwards required to believe in himself”¹. This statement is a guiding principle in my life, and serves as the inspiration for this book. I believe that in order to live a happy, healthy, meaningful, and purposeful life one needs to be attached to something greater than himself, the Creator and Sustainer of all things. As I have learned and experienced, that connection with Hashem is only possible when a person knows and believes in himself.

Today, we live in a world of confusion. Far too many believers have adopted the inherently non-Jewish concept of the innate sinful nature of man. A byproduct of this is that people have lost faith in their own holiness and the pure, awesome potential hidden within. As well, in today’s society, those who believe in themselves and the awesome power of man do so to the exclusion of the Creator of the Universe. They feel that they know better than G-d, that is if they even think He exists.

Due to this, amongst observant Jews there is an epidemic plaguing the entire spectrum of Orthodoxy. Across the spectrum, Jews of all ages feel little, if any, connection to HaKadosh Baruch Hu. Far too many keepers of Torah and *mitzvos* do so out of a sense of commandedness and communal pressure; they lack connection to the Source. They go through the motions living a dry and empty life, serving G-d without an understanding of who they are, and who He is.

While this is heartbreaking, it is the people that do not fall into these groupings that I feel for most. Today, the vast majority of society has does not believe in G-d or themselves. Studies have shown what we have observed to be true; people go through life miserable. For most, time is meaningless; every day is the same as the day before; life is not worth living.

It is my hope that no matter which of the above categories you may find yourself a part of in the present moment, through this book, a collection of timeless Jewish wisdom from throughout the ages, according to my understanding of those sources, alongside reflections on my personal journey to and through *avodas Hashem*, you will gain an understanding and appreciation for yourself and for the One who created you.

¹ Tzidkat HaTzadik, 154

Foreword- Rabbi Joey Rosenfeld, LCSW

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches us something remarkable about the all too human struggle with difficulty. When a person comes in contact with a point of deficiency in their lives, the typical response is to react to our own personal struggle. Reacting and working through our own struggle should not be seen as a problem, rather as an opportunity for personal growth. But in a world where we are conditioned to expect perfection from ourselves, any encounter with a deficiency throws us into a state of self judgment and shame, attitudes that not only prevent us from moving forward, but push us further away from ourselves. Acknowledging the natural tendency to judge ourselves unfavorably in the face of personal shortcomings, Rebbe Nachman offers a revolutionary way of confronting our deficiencies (Likkutei Moharan 1:89):

“It is known that all human lack, physical and spiritual, is rooted in the Shechina, the aspect of Elokim. This is the meaning of the verse (Tehillim 8) “and he lacks”- it is certainly from the aspect of Elokim. With certitude one can say, the lack is rooted in Elokim, the Shechina. However, with this recognition that the lack is both above and below, certainly, the subject is filled with pain and sadness, and is unable to properly serve Hashem in joy. It is incumbent, therefore, to respond within: who am I and what is my life, that the creator Himself is informing me of this lack, is there any honor greater than this? Through this one may return to joy, and consciousness is renewed.”

Rebbe Nachman tells us something remarkable, namely that any deficiency we find in ourselves is in truth reflective of a deficiency that exists with the collective spiritual source of our own subjective personalities, the presence of Hashem in this world. Rooted in the essential unity between the upper realms of Hashem’s expression and the lower realms of Bnei Yisrael’s experience, we find that our own personal experience down here is in fact a reflection of the Shechina’s experience up there. This principle, however, reveals a difficult truth, for if it applies across the gamut of human experience, then it applies to our struggles and difficulties as well. And if my personal struggles reflect the pain of the Shechina, then my earnest attempt to move beyond my struggle is also the process of the Shechina ascending out of concealment back to its rightful place of clarity and revelation.

Like all of our Tzaddikim, what Rebbe Nachman is teaching us is that our typical way of looking at ourselves in the world is mistaken. We assume that there is the human realm of personal experience, and the Godly realm of Hashem’s unity and power. These two

realms appear as distant from each other as possible, for the “heavens are for Hashem, while the earth was given over to man.” In truth however, the inner teachings of Torah reveal to us that these are not two separate realms of existence, but rather two halves of a singular whole. Our experience down below is the expression and manifestation of the existence up above, just as the existence up above is informed by our experience down below. Our personal journeys are not separate and apart from the unfolding of Hashem’s infinite light within reality, our journeys are the vehicle (merkava) through which Hashem’s infinite light is revealed.

My dear friend Kalil Shmuel (Kyle) Zaldin drinks from the ancient wells of wisdom that our Tzaddikim have filled in preparation for our generation. With his sensitive mind and powerful heart, he reveals that each and everyone of us live lives of constant contact with Hashem, bringing to life the worlds of R’ Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin zy”a, “that just as one must have faith in Hashem, so too must they cultivate a faith in themselves.” May this small and powerful work reveal that “path towards the side” upon which we can all encounter the deep partnership we share with HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

Haskamos

"ה' יזכה אותך שתעשה רצונו בשלמות לעלות נפשך ונפשות אחרים, ולכתוב רק דברים אמיתיים וישרים המועילים לך ולזולתך."

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ב"ה

Balancing the modern day psyche with the Torah of our Sages, Kalil Shmuel Zaldin gives a tremendous introduction to connecting to Hashem and to one's self in a deeper way. This balance of self-knowledge and knowledge of our creator follows in the footsteps of the Talmidei HaBaal Shem, including my Rebbe HaRav Osher Freund zy"a. It is my brachah that Jews of all backgrounds will find this a worthwhile read. May the Torah and insights presented here continue to bring you closer to HaKadosh Baruch Hu and to your true self.

הנני מאשר ומועיד
לשאת חלקי
מספיקא

You are holding in your hands a remarkable kuntres (treatise), authored by a remarkable young man. My dear student and friend Kalil Shmuel (Kyle) Zaldin has chosen to live at that part of existence where G-d and humanity touch. A brilliant and articulate seeker, he has gifted us, the readers, with his fresh, hard-earned, Torah perspective of what it truly means to be a person of faith.

Unless one believes in himself and his unique purpose in Creation, he cannot nurture an authentic relationship with the Creator. Kalil Shmuel's intelligence, insight, and prolific familiarity with the world of pnimius HaTorah is astounding for a young man whose own journey began just a few years ago.

Moshe Rabbeinu pleaded with his father in law, Yisro: "Please do not leave us! You know where we should camp in the wilderness, and you have been as eyes for us" (Bamidbar 10:31). We are living in a strange and often frightening wilderness, and are in desperate need for the vision and clarity of Kyle Zaldin.

הנני מאשר ומועיד
לשאת חלקי
מספיקא

משה וויינבערגער

***In loving memory of
my grandmother, Edie
Goldstein a"h, Chaya
Tzippah bas Moshe***

***In loving memory of my
great aunt, Bernice
Goldstein a"h, Bayla bas
Shimon.***

*In honour of my
parents and siblings,
who have supported
me in my growth as a
person and
as a ben Torah.*

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Sha'ar Emunah B'Hashem Yisbarach
The Gate of Belief in G-d

Chapter One- HaBorei B'Iyun: In-Depth Analysis of the Creator

Knowing Hashem

“The foundation of foundations and firmest pillar of all wisdom is to know that there is a First Being, that He caused all beings to be.”². The first of the Six Constant Mitzvos³, “knowing G-d”, is the basis of Jewish life. This biblical commandment is learned out from the very first words Hashem says to the Jewish people, “I am the L-rd your G-d Who brought you out of Egypt,”⁴.

The underlying logic of this mitzvah is quite difficult to understand. For someone who already observes G-d's commandments and believes in His existence, why is there a need for a command to do so? If someone does not know that Hashem exists, why would they heed this commandment!? The answer to both of these questions is simple, yet profound. We should not believe in G-d "on faith" alone. This mitzvah, the very first thing G-d reveals to the Jewish people, is telling us to investigate, to look at the evidence. We need to research, study, and analyze the existence of the Creator. In Judaism, there is no such thing as blind faith. You have to know, not just believe. It is only when we understand what we believe that we can believe when we do not understand.

Knowledge of G-d is not simply an intellectual pursuit. It means recognizing Him in all that surrounds us. The verse states: “In all your ways, know Him,”⁵. Rav Kook wrote that this small portion contains the entire body of the Torah⁶. However, this knowledge cannot be in the mind alone. It must be integrated into our hearts⁷. The Baal Shem Tov remarked that this is a general principle; to connect to G-d in all that we do, even in physical matters⁸. Once we recognize that Hashem is everything, and that there is nothing else but Him, we must feel this with every fibre of our being: in our minds, in our hearts, and in our bones⁹.

² Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah, 1:1

³ Sefer HaChinuch, Iggeres HaMechaber

⁴ Shemos 20:2

⁵ Mishlei 3:6

⁶ Orot, Lights from Darkness, Israel and its Rebirth 3:1

⁷ Devarim 4:39

⁸ Kesser Shem Tov 2:16

⁹ Nesivos Shalom al HaMoadim, Pesach, p. 281-283

At this point, it is important to note that “the search for religious certainty through science or metaphysics is not merely fallacious but ultimately pagan. To suppose that G-d is scientifically provable is to identify G-d with what is observable, and this for Judaism is idolatry,”¹⁰. The third of the Thirteen Principles of Faith of the Rambam is that G-d has no body and no physical form¹¹. All the corporeal terms in Tanach used to describe Hashem, such as walking, standing, sitting, and speaking, are metaphorical. As the Sages have said: "The Torah speaks in the language of man,"¹².

“People often say that "G-d is spirit" or that "G-d is power" or that "G-d is love." But the fact is that none of these sentences is true. Actually, the sentence "God is . . ." is a statement that cannot be completed. To complete the sentence would be to place G-d in the same category as something else. If one understands the true nature of G-d, then this is impossible,”¹³. He is Infinite. He was, is, and will always be. In contradistinction, we are finite beings, there is only so much we can grasp. When we speak of “knowing G-d”, it means to understand His existence and His attributes, how He manifests in our world, to the best of our limited abilities. We can never comprehend His true essence.

Thus, as I have come to learn, knowledge of Hashem means striving to truly understand the following principles:

- Everything is from Hashem.
- There is nothing else.
- Hashem is completely independent.
- He is the Absolute Truth.
- He is the Master of All.
- Everything depends on the awareness of Hashem.
- His Oneness is most unique. He is unlimited and has no physical limitations.
- His power is forever.
- He is everywhere.
- We use human terms in describing Him and His actions only because we are limited in understanding Hashem.

These concepts, which will be discussed at length in the first *Sha'ar* of this book, are the building blocks to living a rich and fulfilled life as a Jew. Avodas Hashem means serving G-d. Unless you know who He is and what He wants, you may be learning

¹⁰ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Crisis and Covenant p. 258

¹¹ Rambam on Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1

¹² Talmud Bavli, Berachos 31b

¹³ Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Jewish Meditation, p. 89

Torah, *davening*, and doing *mitzvos*, but you are not serving Him. You are simply worshipping your concept of Him.

The Purpose of Creation

The Ramchal, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, in the beginning of Derech Hashem writes: “Every person of Israel must believe and know that there is a pre-existing, eternal First Being. And He brought into being, and brings into being, everything that exists. And that is G-d, may He be blessed,”¹⁴. The starting point for knowledge and belief in Hashem is the recognition that He created and continues to sustain the vast universe that we live in.

“There are some people who claim that the world came into being by chance, without a Creator who created it and without a Maker who formed it. It is amazing to me how a rational, healthy human being could entertain such a notion. If such a person heard someone else saying the same thing about a water wheel, which turns to irrigate part of a field or a garden, saying that it came to be without a craftsman who designed it and toiled to assemble it and placed each part for a useful purpose - the hearer would be greatly amazed on him, consider him a complete fool, and be swift to call him a liar and reject his words. And since he would reject such a notion for a mere simple, insignificant water wheel, which requires but little ingenuity and which rectifies but a small portion of the earth - how could he permit himself to entertain such a notion for the entire universe which encompasses the earth and everything in it, and which exhibits a wisdom that no rational human intellect is capable of fathoming, and which is prepared for the benefit of the whole earth and everything on it. How could one claim that it came to be without purposeful intent and thought of a capable wise Being?”¹⁵. Through logical proofs, like this one brought down in the sefer Chovos HaLevavos, we clarify for ourselves that the world has a Creator, that “in the beginning, G-d created Heaven and Earth.”¹⁶.

Once we understand that there is indeed a capable wise Being that brought the world into existence a new question must be raised. What is the purpose of creation?

Rashi, in his commentary on the Torah, writes that the entirety of Creation is for the sake of the Torah and the Jewish people¹⁷.

¹⁴ Derech Hashem, Part One, On the Creator

¹⁵ Chovas HaLevavos, Shaar Rishon, Shaar Yichud, Chapter 6

¹⁶ Bereishis 1:1

¹⁷ Rashi al HaTorah, Bereishis 1:1, 2

In Mesillas Yesharim, the Ramchal writes “that man was created solely to delight in G-d and to derive pleasure in the radiance of the Shechinah (divine presence). For this is the true delight and the greatest pleasure that can possibly exist,”¹⁸. As the Maharal writes based on a verse in Tehillim¹⁹, the entire world was created and is sustained because of G-d’s lovingkindness²⁰. The principle is clear throughout the writings of the sages. Hashem desires to bestow good on his creations.

The Alter Rebbe of Lubavitch, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, author of the seminal Chasidic work, the Tanya, teaches that the purpose of creation is the construction of a dwelling place for G-d within our material world²¹. This is based on the Midrash which tells us: “He desires to have a dwelling place down below, just as He has on high,”²². This concept, known as “*Dirah b’tachtonim*” is the central theme in hundreds of Chassidic works, particularly in the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbes, which translates this seemingly abstract concept into a cohesive system, an approach to meaningful living. The essence of the philosophy is as follows: In order to have a relationship with Hashem, we have to bring Him into our lives at all times. G-d is not only present in *shul*. Hashem is everywhere. All we have to do is let Him in.

Throughout history, from Ancient Rome to Nazi Germany, Medieval Europe to Western civilization today, throughout history, Jews all over the world have suffered from antisemitism, hatred for being Jewish. There is surprisingly little agreement on why people hate the Jews, but the fact is, every group has found their reasons. One of the main proponents of antisemitism is the concept of a “chosen people”²³. Antisemites seem to think that we believe that as Jews, we are favoured in the eyes of G-d and more important to the continuation of the world. Is that actually true? Is Judaism so backwards that we really believe we are superior? After all, we do believe in the notion of “chosenness”. What does this actually mean and isn’t this a conflict with the modern-day notion of equality? If we are all created equal “*btezlem elokim*”²⁴, in the image of G-d, then how can one person or one nation be chosen? This question is closely related to the essential question of why be Jewish. What is the purpose and point of chosenness? What is the purpose of Jewish identity? What is our purpose? What is our mission? After all, it would be so much easier just to be moral people and keep the Seven Noahide Laws. Why do we need the 613 biblical commandments?

¹⁸ Mesillas Yesharim, Chapter 1

¹⁹ Tehillim 89:3

²⁰ Gevuros Hashem, Chapter 6

²¹ Tanya, Chelek Aleph, Sefer shel Beinonim, 36:1

²² Midrash Tanchuma, Nasso, Siman 16

²³ Devarim 14:2

²⁴ Bereishis 1:27

Chosenness can be a function of exclusivity or of responsibility. Sometimes something is chosen to the exclusion of everything else. When at a buffet, when I choose only the dessert, I choose it to the exclusion of everything else. Other times what is chosen is merely a responsibility that the chosen may or may not accept. This is the case of someone elected as valedictorian, or asked to speak publicly. In the Torah, G-d tells Moshe that we are His firstborn²⁵. All nations are children of G-d, but we are described as the firstborn child. In a family, the firstborn child is not necessarily the recipient of more love, rather his or her role differs. As the oldest in the family, the firstborn is expected to establish direction and be a leader within the family unit. Ultimately, chosenness is an opportunity of responsibility, we are given the choice to accept.

The Torah does not explain why G-d chose Avraham Avinu. Though we have some intriguing stories about his childhood, they were not written explicitly in the Torah. They are only known to us through various Midrashim. This is an indication of the idea that there is an element of irrationality and mystery to our chosenness. The Talmud²⁶ and many commentators emphasize that non-Jews not only have a portion in the world to come²⁷, but they have important ideas related to spirituality and life. Though there is major contention about secular influence in religious Judaism, everyone agrees, all people are equal and important and each person has valuable contributions to society.

Anne Frank wrote about the root of antisemitism on April 11, 1944, in her diary: "Who knows -- it might even be our religion from which the world and all peoples learn good, and for that reason and that reason alone do we now suffer. We can never become just Netherlanders, or just English, or representatives of any other country for that matter. We will always remain Jews." Chosenness as defined by our sages, simply means that as Jews, we have a specific purpose. Thus, as Jewish law dictates²⁸, and as Anne Frank famously wrote, we will always remain Jews, we cannot give up this responsibility of chosenness, the responsibility of continuing the mission of the Jewish people.

Weaving together the words of Rashi, the Ramchal, and the Baal HaTanya, the specific purpose of creation and of the Jewish people, as I understand it, can simply be stated in the following manner: G-d desired to bestow His ultimate goodness, so He

²⁵ Shemos 4:22

²⁶ Pesachim 87b

²⁷ Rambam: Hilchos Teshuva 5:3; Hilchos Melachim 8:11

²⁸ Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 44a; Shulchan Aruch, Even HaEzer 44:9, Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 267:8

created something that can exist seemingly outside the realm of His control. With this, He chose the Jewish people as the primary partners in Creation, working in tandem to make the world a more moral and G-dly place.

Chapter Two- Avodah: Serving Hashem

The Seven Noahide Laws

The Jewish idea is that the Torah is a truth for all humanity. Thus, our sages teach us that there are seven mitzvos for all people, Jews and non-Jews to observe²⁹. They are:

1. Do not murder.
2. Do not steal.
3. Do not worship false gods.
4. Do not be sexually immoral.
5. Do not eat a limb removed from a live animal.
6. Do not curse God.
7. Set up courts and bring offenders to justice.

These seven laws are the pillars of human civilization, and are named the "Seven Laws of Noah," since all humans are descended from Noach. As well, when Shlomo HaMelech built the Bais HaMikdash, he specifically asked G-d to heed the prayer of non-Jews who come to the Temple³⁰. The Temple was the universal centre of spirituality, which the prophet referred to as a "house for all nations,"³¹. Serving G-d is not just for the Jewish people. That being said, as a function of chosenness, as discussed in the previous chapter, the Jewish people have added responsibility³².

The 613 Mitzvos and Their Many Branches

Jewish tradition teaches that there are 613 biblical commandments in the Torah; 248 Positive Commandments (do's) and 365 Negative Commandments (do not's)³³. However, the Talmud does not provide us with a list of these commandments. Amongst the later authorities and commentaries there is no consensus whatsoever as to what exactly makes up the 613 biblical commandments.

“The [biblical] commandments can be divided into two categories, decrees (*chukim*) and ethical laws (*mishpatim*). The ethical laws are necessary for the preservation of society. As such, they provide the basis for the moral structure of

²⁹ Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 56a

³⁰ Melachim I 8:41-43

³¹ Yeshayahu 56:7

³² Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Melachim v'Milchamos 9:1

³³ Talmud Bavli, Makkos 23b

Judaism. G-d's decrees (*chukim*) are commandments for which there is no apparent reason. To some degree, these serve to test our allegiance to G-d in observing His commandments even when not dictated by logic. There is also a third category, midway between the above two, known as "testimonies" (*eidus*). These have no moral basis, but are inherently logical insofar as they serve to remind us of important religious truths or key events in our history. Included in this group are the various holidays, as well as such commandments that bear "witness" to the important concepts of Judaism,"³⁴. This is based on Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi's classifications³⁵.

There are seven mitzvos that the prophets and rabbis initiated during the first millennium after the giving of the Torah. They are:

1. Saying Hallel
2. Blessings
3. Washing hands before eating
4. Eruv on Shabbos
5. Shabbat Candles
6. Purim
7. Chanukah

"The rabbis also instituted many additional decrees for the purpose of preserving the original 613 commandments. When a rabbinical court institutes a new mitzvah or decree, and it is accepted among the Jewish nation, it becomes a part of Torah and Judaism. In fact, the Torah states, "According to the law they [the rabbinical courts] instruct you and according to the judgment they say to you, you shall do; you shall not divert from the word they tell you, either right or left,"³⁶. Thus the Torah commands us to heed the instructions of the great rabbinical courts,"³⁷.

The Purpose of the Mitzvos

The tzaddikim teach that the word mitzvah is related to the Aramaic word *tzavta*, meaning to attach or join. A mitzvah connects the person who is commanded and the Commander, creating a relationship and essential bond³⁸. By doing what Hashem has expressed should be done, we connect and cling to Him in the greatest manner.

³⁴ An excerpt from Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan's "The Handbook of Jewish Thought"

³⁵ Sefer HaKuzari, 1:98; 2:23; 3:53

³⁶ Devarim 17:11

³⁷ What Are the 7 Rabbinic Mitzvahs?, Rabbi Yechezkel Posner, Chabad.org

³⁸ Likutei Halachos, Orach Chaim, Laws of Morning Hand Washing, Chapter 4:11; Pri Etz Chaim, Shaar Lulav u'Minav 3; Shnei Luchos HaBris, Asarah Maamaros, Maamar Shlishi u'Revi'i; Ohr HaChaim on Shemos, 27:20; Torah Ohr, Bereishis 6b

Torah is the explicit word of G-d, as taught to Moshe Rabbeinu and interpreted throughout the generations. Even though a particular mitzvah may not make rational sense to you, you do not get to rewrite the rules and regulations of the Torah as you see fit. The question we now have to ask, which people do ask all the time, is: why? “Why can I not challenge the mitzvos? Why can I not just do what I want to do? After all, if a mitzvah is all about connection I should do only that which makes me feel good and holy.” The simple answer is because Hashem said so. It’s the truth, but it seems highly dismissive. In further explanation, we shall see that it is in fact the opposite. It is deep and crucial to understanding what Judaism is all about.

In modern times, certain streams of Judaism have de-emphasized the needs to follow *halachah* and fulfill mitzvos. This is a fundamental flaw for obvious reasons. Mainly, it neglects to recognize the very nature of the bond between G-d and the Jewish person. It is a relationship! Any relationship, whether it be between spouses, neighbours, or parents and children, is built on doing what is asked of you in the context of the relationship. It does not matter how affectionate a person is if the way he shows affection is the way he wants to show affection. Only when you do what is requested of you, when you give to the other, does a relationship truly begin to take root.

Mitzvos need no explanation. With some exceptions, we do not need to understand why we do a particular mitzvah. We do mitzvos because that is what we do to build a relationship. Relationships are built on doing for the other, even if it goes against the desire of the self. We do mitzvos because that is what we do to maintain and build up our relationship with our Creator. Throughout the ages, the Jewish people have functioned on the basis of *na’aseh v’nishma*, we will listen and do what we are told³⁹. Still, mitzvos have to be done in a way of holiness and purity, with intense preparation, and feeling. Judaism should be pleasurable! Avodas Hashem, when done properly, is not a restriction. The Torah is the eternal blueprint of creation, the explicit way for living a meaningful and fulfilled life.

Service of the Heart: Prayer

Tefillah, prayer, is known as “*avodah shebaleiv*”, service of the heart⁴⁰. Jewish men have an obligation to pray the set liturgy of the Shemoneh Esrei thrice daily. Jewish women also have an obligation to *daven*. So, what is *tefillah* all about? Why is it so important? In Judaism, prayer is not a laundry list of requests begging G-d for our

³⁹ Shemos 24:7

⁴⁰ Talmud Bavli, Taanis 2a

needs. He is All-Loving, All-Knowing, and All-Powerful. He knows what we need. “Prayer is not for G-d at all; it is for you... Prayer, therefore, is actually a sophisticated vehicle for self-knowledge and self-improvement. And to the extent that we improve ourselves through prayer, we become more capable of absorbing and incorporating G-d’s blessing,”⁴¹. “Prayer is the act of listening to G-d listening to us,”⁴². The Nesivos Shalom, on the verse “I believe because I will speak”⁴³, writes, based on the teachings of the Saba Kadisha of Lekovitch, that through the return of [concepts of] *emunah* to the mouth, it roots itself in the heart⁴⁴. When one *davens*, he or she truly internalizes thoughts and feelings. “The siddur is the map of the Jewish heart. Through its words we retrace the steps taken by countless generations of Jews as they turned from their private hopes and fears to journey towards the presence of G-d,”⁴⁵.

While important, *davening* from a siddur is not the only way. Originally, prayer was entirely individual. There was no set liturgy. Each person simply spoke to Hashem. This is how it was in biblical times⁴⁶. The ideal form of prayer, *hisbodedus*, self-reflective, personal prayer, is not only for followers of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov⁴⁷. Throughout the ages, all great rabbinic authorities, no matter their background, stressed the importance of spending time alone in conversation with Hashem outside the standard prayer services. To have a relationship with Him, you have to be able to speak to Him in your own words, just as you would speak to a friend.

The Joy of Avodas Hashem

The verse in Tehillim states: “Serve Hashem with happiness. Come before him with shouts of joy,”⁴⁸. The Talmud teaches us that a person should not pray when in a state of sadness or laziness or laughing or conversation or lightheadedness or idle talk, but out of joy of a mitzvah⁴⁹. The Arizal elaborates on this further, when he says, “It is forbidden to pray out of sadness, and if one does, his soul cannot receive the higher light drawn on him during prayer. Rather, his prayer should be in exceedingly great joy, as much as possible. This is comparable to a servant serving his master out of great joy,”⁵⁰. *Tefillah* is called the service of the heart because it is the mechanism that truly connects

⁴¹ Rabbi Noach Weinberg, What the Angel Taught You, p. 66

⁴² Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Celebrating Life p. 78

⁴³ Tehillim 116:10

⁴⁴ Nesivos Shalom, Pesach, Ma’amar Revi’i, Pesach Chag Ha’Emunah

⁴⁵ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, The Chief Rabbi’s Children’s Siddur, p. xvii

⁴⁶ See Ha’Maspik L’Ovdei Hashem, R’ Avraham ben Ha’Rambam, Examples in the Torah of Complete Hisbodedus

⁴⁷ For contemporary works on Hisbodedus see Eshpoch Lefanav Sichi, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Carmel (Hebrew); Birth of a Spoken Word, Rabbi Dovid’l Weinberg (English)

⁴⁸ Tehillim 100:2

⁴⁹ Talmud Bavli, Berachos 31a

⁵⁰ Shaar Hakavanos, quoted in Nesivos Shalom vol. 1, p. 285

us with our Creator. It is the pinnacle of *avodas Hashem*. This can only be done out of joy.

The Torah explicitly records that the *tochachah*, the many curses that the Jewish people are warned about, will come about “because you would not serve Hashem, your G-d, in joy and gladness,”⁵¹. The Rambam writes that “the joy that a person experiences by the performance of mitzvos and the love of Hashem Who commanded them is a great service. One who refrains from this joy is worthy of punishment,”⁵². “When one performs Hashem’s mitzvos enthusiastically and studies Torah joyfully and with gladness of heart, there is nothing comparable to the reward one receives for this,”⁵³. As explained above, living a Jewish life in service of G-d is supposed to be enjoyable. If not, it means that you are not doing the mitzvos in the correct manner.

⁵¹ Devarim 28:47

⁵² Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Lulav, 8:15

⁵³ Rabbi Ovadia Yosef when he was sitting Shiva mourning the loss of his son. During the visit of Rabbi Aharon Yehuda Leib Shteinman.

Chapter Three- Hastarah and Hashgacha: G-d in Concealment

G-d Conceals Himself

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, in his magnum opus- Likutei Moharan, writes: “Everyone says that there is an *Olam HaZeh* (This World) and an *Olam HaBa* (World to Come). We believe *Olam HaBa* exists. Now, possibly, *Olam HaZeh* exists—somewhere else. But what we see here is Hell, for everyone experiences constant, terrible suffering,”⁵⁴. We live in a world of darkness and evil. Wickedness prospers and seems to be rewarded, while the righteous live out their lives in pain and agony.

There is a famous line in the Torah that people have a hard time swallowing: “Yet I will keep My countenance hidden on that day because of all the evil they have done in turning to other gods,”⁵⁵. This is one of the many sources for the concept that if we do not follow the words of G-d, He will turn his back on us, so-to-speak. What does this actually mean? How does G-d hide His face from us? Even if we are doing evil, how can Hashem, the source of ultimate good, allow us to suffer?

The Talmud explains that this verse comes to teach that even though HaKadosh Baruch Hu hides His countenance, He speaks [to the prophets] in a dream⁵⁶. At first, this statement seems irrelevant. What does this have to do with our lives? The era of the Prophets of Israel is long over. Even if there were prophets today, we are not amongst them. As we shall explain, even though Hashem cannot be clearly seen, it is in the darkness that we encounter our Creator.

Hashgacha Pratis: Divine Providence

When our sages asked where Queen Esther is hinted to in the Torah the answer given is the *pasuk* mentioned above⁵⁷. This is peculiar. Why would Esther, the heroine of the Purim story, be embedded within the hiddenness of Hashem? The truth is, this makes perfect sense. If someone is hiding, it means he is there, but you cannot see him. Megillas Esther is full of coincidences: Vashti does not go to the party as Achashverosh commanded her to do, Esther becomes queen, Mordechai overhears Bigsan and Teresh

⁵⁴ Likutei Moharan, Tinyana, 119:2

⁵⁵ Devarim 31:18

⁵⁶ Talmud Bavli, Chagigah 5b

⁵⁷ Talmud Bavli, Chullin 139b

plot to kill the king, and Achashverosh cannot sleep and asks that his Book of Chronicles be read to him, to name only a few. As my teacher and mentor, Rabbi Derek Gormin, frequently relates, “Coincidence is an eleven letter name for G-d.” The story of Queen Esther and of Purim shows us that when we look at a specific event, it may seem random or even typical. Still, when looked at in conjunction with other events, we can see that each instance was a divinely orchestrated mini-miracle.

This is in line with what the Ramban says in his commentary on the Torah: “For no one can have a part in the Torah of Moses, our teacher, unless he believes that all our words and our events are miraculous in scope, there being no natural or customary way of the world in them, whether affecting the public or the individual,”⁵⁸. With these words, the Ramban, a leading medieval Jewish scholar, philosopher, physician, kabbalist, and biblical commentator, explains a key point in Jewish thought. There is no such thing as nature! There is a flow of cause and effect. Yet, the entire world is miracle after miracle, directly from G-d. It is such a tragedy that “we read in the newspaper about the statement of this president or that official or about events far or near without perceiving the deep *hashgacha* that works within the annals of history,”⁵⁹.

Hashgacha Pratis, divine providence, is the Jewish ideal that not only did G-d create the world, but He also supervises it and plays a role in every moment. As we say in *davening* every morning, “He renews in His goodness, each day, continuously,”⁶⁰.

Seeing Hashem Within Concealment

Rabbi Gedaliya Kenig said, “There is no place in *Gehinnom* in which Rebbe Nachman has not already inspected, and left for us a candle or flashlight to help us find our way out,”⁶¹. The *pasuk* in Tehillim reads: “Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm, for You are with me,”⁶². Even though at times it seems like we are living through hell, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches us that “in truth, even in all the concealments, even in a concealment within a concealment, G-d is certainly enclothed there as well”. Indeed, there is nothing that is without the life force of G-d, since without His life force there is no existence,”⁶³. Rav Kook writes: “The Jewish nature is such that merely meeting with pain doesn't cause a spiritual distancing from

⁵⁸ Ramban al HaTorah, Shemos 13:16

⁵⁹ Alei Shur, vol. 2, introduction to the Second Gate.

⁶⁰ Siddur, Shacharis, Birchos Kerias Shema, First Blessing before Shema

⁶¹ Questions & Answers In Avodas Hashem, Adapted from the Lectures of Rabbi Nissan Dovid Kivak Shlit”a, Purim/Megillas Esther, p. 62

⁶² Tehillim 23:4

⁶³ Likutei Moharan, Part I, 56:3

the foundation of *emunah*. Even at the time when the entire world is confused, and it is impossible to stand on the foundation of life that is found within the holiness of *emunah* without pain and suffering - behold, Klal Yisrael is forever ready for this. For even though it may pain us (*meitzar li*), we know that our Beloved it to us as well (*Dodi li*),”⁶⁴.

The very first thing we have to do is to catch ourselves, to remember that we do not run the world. The Almighty has given us so much wisdom, yet, there's so much we don't know; there is so much that's beyond our control. If we recognize that Hashem loves us and we count on Him and trust in Him, we will not only survive, we will truly thrive. Everything He does is the best for us even though we don't understand it. There is no such thing as despair, for we know that Hashem is always with us. There is always a way out, by letting Him in.

Letting G-d In

Among the few rabbis who left behind written well-structured proofs which attempt to confront the questions of faith during the Holocaust was Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Piaseczna Rebbe, known for his sefer *Chovas HaTalmidim* which was published in inter-war Poland. His writings include a collection of messages given in the Warsaw Ghetto between the years 1940 and 1943. This has been published under the title *Aish Kodesh*. In his writings, the Rebbe develops the thought that Hashem is only revealed through pain, in the suffering within the ghetto and thus among the Jews themselves. By his reasoning, suffering facilitated the ability to catch “rays of G-d” by means of a particular attitude toward suffering of the whole of Israel. He held the view that drawing near to HaKadosh Baruch Hu required the pain of the individual to extend to the pain of all and unite with the suffering masses. The *Aish Kodesh* depicts G-d as suffering with his people based on a *pasuk* “for in all their suffering He suffers,”⁶⁵.

A Jewish thinker said, “G-d is everywhere. Sometimes it looks like He's nowhere,”⁶⁶. The Kotzker Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, famously taught: “Where is G-d? Hashem is only where you let Him in,”⁶⁷. Our relationship with our Creator is reciprocal. He desires the relationship, yearning for us to reach out to Him. While Hashem is everywhere, the extent we bring Him into our life determines the quality of our relationship.

⁶⁴ Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, *Shemoneh Kevatzim* 7:139

⁶⁵ *Yeshayahu* 63:9

⁶⁶ Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, *Even Shlomo on Shemot*, Parshas Ki Sisa, Holy Brokenness

⁶⁷ It is fitting to point out that the Kotzker first asked “where is HaShem?” When we allow ourselves to feel, to question, then we can let Him into our lives.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote: “Faith does not mean certainty. It means the courage to live with uncertainty. It does not mean having the answers, it means having the courage to ask the questions and not let go of G-d, as He does not let go of us. It means realising that G-d creates divine justice but only we, acting in accord with His word, can create human justice – and our very existence means that this is what G-d wants us to do,”⁶⁸.

The Talmud records a comment of Abba Shaul on the words “this is **my** G-d and I will exalt him,”⁶⁹. Teaches Abba Shaul, *Ve’anveihu* (I will exalt Him) should be interpreted as if it were written in two words: *Ani v’Hu*, me and Him,⁷⁰. Not only is the entire purpose of Torah simply to feel a closeness to G-d, but it is to recognize that Hashem is your G-d. You have a personal relationship with Him! Through the good and the bad, the Ribono Shel Olam is with you. All you have to do is let Him in.

⁶⁸ To Heal a Fractured World, p. 199

⁶⁹ Shemos 15:2

⁷⁰ Talmud Bavli, Shabbos 133b

Chapter Four- Bitachon and Hishtadlus: Trust in Hashem vs. Personal Effort

Bitachon: Trust in Hashem

In Tzava'as Harivash, the collection of the Baal Shem Tov's teachings as recorded by his primary disciple, Rabbi DovBer, the Maggid of Mezritch, it is written: "Ponder and believe with complete faith that the Divine Presence is with and protecting you; that you are bound up with the Creator and the Creator is bound up with you, with your every limb and every faculty; that your focus is fixed on the Creator and the Creator's focus is fixed upon you"⁷¹.

Rabbi Ephraim Wachsman sings a *niggun* which contains these powerful words: "I believe in Hashem, I trust in Hashem, there never is a moment when, that I am alone, that I'm on my own, I believe and I trust in Hashem. And I understand that He is holding my hand, that every step is perfectly planned, He is holding me tight so I will be alright, I believe and I trust in Hashem,"⁷².

There are thirteen "*ani maamin*"s and not one "*ani meivin*". In the Rambam's Thirteen Principles of Faith, we say "*ani maamin b'emunah shleimah*", I believe with full faith. We do not once say "*ani meivin*", I understand. We do not understand why the world works the way it does, why the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper. Still, we believe. We trust in Hashem⁷³.

"There is *emunah* (faith in Hashem) and there is *bitachon* (trusting in Hashem). The Ramban explains that *emunah* is to know in our minds and to feel in our hearts that Hashem runs everything. *Bitachon* is to act upon that belief,"⁷⁴. The substance of our trust in Hashem is that nothing in the world happens by accident and everything that occurs beneath the sun stems from His pronouncement. Rabbeinu Yonah, in his work Shaarei Teshuvah, explains that trust in G-d obligates one not to fear at all⁷⁵. The Chazon Ish points out in his work, Emunah U'Bitachon, that one who does not trust in Hashem "barely has any part in the principles of Judaism,"⁷⁶.

⁷¹ Tzava'as Harivash, p. 137

⁷² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5RmobovZlQ>

⁷³ Heard several times from the Spinka (Donolo) Rebbe, Rabbi Yisroel Chaim Weisz

⁷⁴ Rabbi Itamar Schwartz, Drasha- Emunah & Bitachon In Uncertain Times

⁷⁵ Shaarei Teshuvah, Sha'ar 3, section 32

⁷⁶ Emunah U'Bitachon, 2:4

Hishtadlus: Man's Effort in G-d's World

There is quite the apparent conflict between trust in Hashem and a person's obligation to resort to natural means, a concept known as *hishtadlus*. Rabbi Avigdor Nebenzahl, explains that “maybe the most difficult of all the wars within a person's soul in which one has to engage is the struggle between the demand to trust in G-d, and his obligation to resort to natural means”⁷⁷.

“The Heavenly decree, “by the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread,”⁷⁸ obligates a person to exert effort as a condition for attaining the Heavenly blessing. Namely, a person is obligated to perform all actions and employ all means that are needed according to the dictates of nature in order to obtain the things he wishes to obtain and, should he not do so, he will not merit the Heavenly blessing... On the other hand,... a number of sources say that a person should not engage in any natural effort. According to these sources, it would seem that a person who trusts in G-d is obligated to refrain from doing anything, while believing that G-d alone will provide all his needs,”⁷⁹.

“The general rule is that a person has to serve G-d in keeping with his current spiritual standing, and he is prohibited to pretend that his standing is higher than it actually is... Some consider resorting to natural means permissible, whereas others consider the use of natural means as proper and even a fulfillment of a commandment and divine service.”⁸⁰.

All agree that ultimately, “everything is in the hands of heaven, except for fear of heaven,”⁸¹. Despite the amount of effort a person puts in, he is not guaranteed to be successful. Rabbi Yisroel Chaim Weisz, the Spinka (Donolo) Rebbe, quoting from Rabbi Osher Freund, teaches: “In the world, only one thing is certain- that nothing is certain.” The Rebbe, Rabbi Elimelech [of Lizhensk] says that if a person is 100% certain that his plan will succeed, it is certain that he will not succeed! As the Yiddish proverb goes: “*Mann Tracht, Un Gott Lacht*”, “Man plans and G-d laughs.”

⁷⁷ Sichos B'Tanach, 5741

⁷⁸ Bereishis 3:19

⁷⁹ Rabbi Dr. Avraham Weinroth, Faith in G-d Versus Human Effort, p. 65-66

⁸⁰ Rabbi Dr. Avraham Weinroth, Faith in G-d Versus Human Effort, p. 166

⁸¹ Talmud Bavli, Berachos 33b

Bitachon vs. Hishtadlus: A Case Study from the Torah

The Torah states: “Yaakov sent “*melachim*” ahead to his brother Eisav in the land of *Seir*, the country of Edom,”⁸². The Sforno explains that Yaakov, worried about his brother’s feelings towards him and state of mind at the time, sends *melachim* to Seir to seek out information⁸³.

The Radak⁸⁴, in his commentary on the *pasuk*, writes that even though Hashem had assured Yaakov of His support twice, Yaakov was still afraid of his brother, Eisav. Yaakov knew that at the time he left home, Eisav was very angry at him and planned to kill him. He was now afraid that due to some sin he may have committed and had been unaware of, he might forfeit Hashem’s support. How can the Radak suggest that Yaakov Avinu did not fully believe in Hashem’s explicit promise? The answer can be found in the writings of Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher, the Baal HaTurim, in his full commentary on the Torah. He writes that the assignment of the *melachim* was to walk in front of Yaakov and his family, to protect him and his family. Only after that was their assignment to investigate Eisav’s attitude towards his brother at the time⁸⁵.

Although Hashem had given him all kinds of assurances, sometime earlier, Yaakov Avinu did not rely on his righteousness alone to save him from Eisav, but took every precaution to minimize the risk to his family and to himself. In one of the most famous Rashis on Chumash, Rashi comments that Yaakov lived with Lavan, kept the whole Torah, and did not learn from his evil ways⁸⁶. Yaakov Avinu, who kept all the *mitzvos* clearly lived with the principle brought down all over Shas of “*ein somchim al haneis*”, one does not rely on miracles⁸⁷. Even though we believe in miracles and the reality that Hashem can override nature for a specific goal, according to Jewish thought, we should not ask for or rely on miracles that defy nature. In this case, when Eisav had a contingent of four hundred men with him⁸⁸, Yaakov could not rely on his covenant with Hashem, he had to take all the necessary precautions.

⁸² Bereishis 32:4

⁸³ Sforno on Bereishis, 32:4, וישלח יעקב מלאכים

⁸⁴ Radak on Bereishis, 32:4, וישלח יעקב מלאכים

⁸⁵ Tur Ha’Aroch on Bereishis, 32:4

⁸⁶ Rashi on Bereishis, 32:5, גרתי

⁸⁷ Talmud Bavli, Shabbos, 32a; Taanis, 20b; Pesachim, 64b; and others

⁸⁸ Bereishis 32:7

Bitachon and Hishtadlus: The Proper Balance

“Rabbi Meir says: A person should always teach his son a clean and easy trade and pray for success to the One to Whom wealth and property belong, as ultimately there is no trade that does not include both poverty and wealth, since a person can become rich from any profession. Poverty does not come from a particular trade, nor does wealth come from a particular trade, but rather, all is in accordance with a person’s merit,”⁸⁹.

As Jews, we believe that our *hishtadlus*, the effort we put in, does not necessarily relate to the outcome. As Rabbi Noach Weinberg said: ““I can't” is idolatry. If the Almighty helps us, we can change the world. And if He doesn't help, we can't do anything.” Any profession, no matter what conventional wisdom might say about its prospects, can generate prosperity. The work is our duty, we must put in the effort, but it is not the actual source of success. In fact, there is a Gemara that states that economic status is decided before birth⁹⁰ and that the specific details for this year were set last Rosh Hashanah⁹¹.

Though we say that “*Talmud Torah k'neged Kulam*”⁹², “Torah learning is juxtaposed to [every other mitzvah]”, all of our sages, throughout the history of the Jewish people, recognized that working in a worldly profession is essential to obtaining money and providing for a family. If it is a strain on the community or you can not adequately support your family, it is absolutely forbidden to rely on the generosity of others.

The Chovos HaLevavos discusses how we should choose a career, what we do to figure out what we should do with our lives. Each and every one of us "has a desire for one type of work or business more than for any other. G-d planted in each man's nature a love and passion for that, just as He did with all living things which naturally desire what's best for them,”⁹³. It is our job to look within ourselves, to discover our hidden talents, the abilities that were planted inside of us, to figure out how we can maximize our G-d given potential, to ultimately make the world a holier and more G-dly place.

⁸⁹ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Kiddushin, 82a

⁹⁰ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Niddah, 16b

⁹¹ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Beitzah, 16a (Discussing Shabbos, Yom tov, and Chinuch expenses being deductible)

⁹² Mishnah, Peah, 1:1

⁹³ Chovos HaLevavos, Shaar HaBitachon, end of Chapter 3

The Mishnah states: “It is not incumbent on you to finish the task, but neither are you free to absolve yourself from it,”⁹⁴. G-d doesn't ask us to make things happen; He only expects us to put in our maximum effort and try our best, then He promises to take us the rest of the way.

Through self-analysis, we must try to understand how much effort is appropriate for our unique situation. We must realize that overly intensive involvement in worldly pursuits can distract us from Torah life. On the other hand, we also know that if we minimize effort, relying wholeheartedly on G-d to meet our needs, we might not yet be spiritually ready to face the disappointment of unmet expectations. The trick is to find the proper balance. By earning our own way during our lifetime, a person can ensure that his or her reward in the World to Come will not be prematurely spent miraculously supporting him or her in this world.

⁹⁴ Avos, 2:16

Sha'ar Emunah B'Atzmo
The Gate of Belief in Yourself

Chapter One- Ha'Adam B'Iyun: In-Depth Analysis of Man

Knowing Ourselves

The verse states: “Yaakov awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely Hashem is present in this place, and I, myself did not know!’”⁹⁵. As you will soon see, Jewish tradition is clear, “if you don't “know” yourself--you will never be able to truly experience divinity,”⁹⁶.

Rabbi Noach Weinberg said: “The essence of wisdom is to know yourself.” Self-knowledge is the foundation for living a life of meaning and pleasure. Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler taught: “A person may come to know themselves in three ways: In their aloneness; when they are giving as opposed to taking; when they yearn to be instead of yearning towards acquirement,”⁹⁷. The profundity of this statement certainly needs contemplation. We can never really grasp these deep truths shared by Rav Dessler. Everything in the chapter, and for the remainder of this Shaar, is simply a commentary on Rav Dessler's words.

“G-d is the source of all being. The consummation of human life is reunion with its sources; yet the essence of human life is its individual existence,”⁹⁸. “If you are willing to devote your life to continued growth, there are virtually no limits to the levels you can reach,”⁹⁹. As mentioned earlier, G-d created the world for mankind, and specifically for the Jewish people¹⁰⁰.

The Mishnah teaches us that Rabbi Akiva used to say: “Beloved is man for he was created in the image of G-d. Especially beloved is he for it was made known to him that he had been created in His image, as it is said: “for in the image of G-d He made man”¹⁰¹, ”¹⁰². Our sages explain that we are a *tzel*, a shade of G-d. Just as Hashem is one and

⁹⁵ Bereishis 28:16

⁹⁶ Rabbi Dr. Benjy Epstein, explaining this verse

⁹⁷ Michtav Me'Eliyahu, Vol. 4

⁹⁸ Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch, Chametz and Matzah: A Halakhic Perspective
Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought- Vol. 7/8, Vol. 7, no. 4/Vol. 8, no. 1
(WINTER, 1965 - SPRING, 1966)

⁹⁹ Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide, p. 165

¹⁰⁰ See Shaar Emunah B'Hashem, Chapter One, The Purpose of Creation

¹⁰¹ Bereishis 9:6

¹⁰² Avos 3:14

there is none like Him, so too we are also one. There is only one of us. Just as no two faces are alike, so are no two personalities alike¹⁰³. As Rabbi Noach Weinberg famously said: “Every person is obligated to say: “The whole world was only created for me,”¹⁰⁴. That means each of us is responsible for the entire world.” Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught: Insofar as the world was created for me, I must at all times see and look into rectifying the world and to fill the lackings of the world and pray for them¹⁰⁵.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira of Piacezna, gave over the following Torah on Shavuos in 1925: “This is what the Jewish people hinted to when they said *naaseh*, we will do, before *nishmah*, we will hear. For if *nishmah* came first, who would hear? The "I", what "I"? I, the person in his consciousness who had previously discovered the world and its fullness. If so, I can only hear according to my physical senses. This, the Jewish people did not want. They only said in the beginning *naaseh*. What would we do? [Come to know] ourselves. The Torah would give birth to the concealed inner essence of man, and through this [we would be able] to hear,”¹⁰⁶. We first do, because, in the beginning, we cannot understand anything when we do not understand ourselves. When we allow ourselves to think, to feel, to act, to live, we will allow the Torah to reveal our inner essence, that which can never be fully comprehended or expressed.

Free Will¹⁰⁷

The foundation of this Gate, *Shaar Emunah B'Atzmo*, and the most important thing to grasp about being human is the fact that you have free choice. You make the decisions. You are responsible. The secular world is not so sure about this, but as a Jew, you have to know that everything significant in life depends on this idea.

What are the components of human free will and what are its limits? Free will applies only in the area of morality. That is, you are free only when it comes to decisions and actions which relate to your personal battle, when you are tempted to do that which is immoral. Only in the arena of the battle between good and evil are you free to win or lose. Only when you are challenged with a situation in which you can act as you know you should, in line with your higher self, and at the same time you are tempted by the more physical, the more sensuous and animalistic self, can you apply your free will and battle the ordeal. You have very little free choice outside the area of morality. As

¹⁰³ Talmud Bavli, Berachos 58a

¹⁰⁴ Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 37a

¹⁰⁵ Likutei Moharan, Part I, 5:1

¹⁰⁶ Derech HaMelech, Shavuos, First Night, 5685

¹⁰⁷ This entire section is drawn from Rabbi Dr. Akiva Tatz, *The Thinking Jewish Teenager's Guide to Life*, p. 15-35

discussed briefly in the chapter on *bitachon* and *hishtadlus*, your health, wealth and many other areas of life have large components that cannot be controlled no matter how hard you try. But in moral tests, you are entirely in control. That is where you are free.

How free are you? What is the nature of this freedom? What about someone who has tremendous disadvantages: disadvantages of upbringing, emotional problems, lack of natural talents, financial limitations or anything else which seems to make personal progress difficult? Do we say that such a person has less free will? Do we say that such a person is less accountable for his or her moral failures? Perhaps such a person is not accountable at all?

Each person has a point of free will which is determined by many factors. In fact, in various areas of life, you may have very different levels of free will; some types of ordeal may be much more difficult for you whereas for someone else other types of ordeal may provide greater challenges. You may not be tempted by things which someone else can hardly resist, and yet you may have a mighty struggle with things which would be a walkover for that person. In fact, some tests may be exceedingly difficult for one person and be virtually out of the realm of free choice for someone else.

As explained at length by Rav Dessler, your battle of free choice takes place only at your point of free choice¹⁰⁸. In any area of your life which involves moral issues, you have a point at which you are being tested. Below that point, things are so easy that they are not really tests; you would not fail there because you are too powerful. You always succeed there because you handle those things correctly out of habit. In short, they are not tests at all. Above that point, you are not being tested either. Things above your point of free choice are too difficult for you; you do not handle those things correctly because you are too weak. You are not yet ready to grapple with things at those higher levels; you fail there without doing battle. The experiences of those levels are not your tests either.

Your point of free will moves as you make choices. As you handle a free will ordeal, you rise or fall. If you win in your battle with your own lower self, if you overcome your temptation and choose the higher path in your ordeal, you immediately become a higher person. As you exert effort to defeat the temptation, as you push through the test successfully, you rise. As you conquer tests, you conquer yourself, you take control and you build yourself. If you lose the battle in an ordeal, you fall, you become a lesser person. If you fail to engage your ordeals, if you give up without a

¹⁰⁸ Michtav Me'Eliyahu, Vol. 1, Kuntres HaBechirah, chs. 2-3

struggle, you become a lesser person. As you conquer ordeals, you must face more difficult ordeals. As you grow, you are given tests that are more difficult. If you grew as a result of a test, but the next test remained as easy as the previous one, you would immediately outgrow free choice. When a player outgrows the “little league” it would be pointless and ridiculous to continue playing against children. For free choice to remain free, your point of free choice must rise as you rise.

Put another way, your negativity grows along with your positivity. As your positive or spiritual side grows, so does your negative or dark side, what we would call the evil inclination, the *yetzer hara*. Your pull to evil grows in exact proportion to your pull to good. A greater person has more temptation than a lesser person. If free will ordeals must remain real challenges, then the individual, who is growing and facing new ordeals, must experience a more powerful evil. Why do your ordeals become more difficult as you grow? Why does your negativity grow with your positivity? The answer is that you are here to exercise your free will. The only way to do that throughout life is to be faced with ordeals that are exactly at your level, always. As your level goes up, your tests become more difficult, and of course, by overcoming a new test at a higher level, you grow further. Your drive to do that which is negative, your drive to harm and destroy, grows exactly as much as your higher drive. That is why, unfortunately, we see so many of our peers turning to destructive, harmful behaviours at this age. As we grow up, as we reach higher and higher, our potential for bad, to choose wrong, grows.

Judaism believes that what you do in your tests is who you are. Your choices are the reflection of your character. There is so much in life that a person simply cannot control. Real success or failure is success or failure in your free will ordeals, in the choices that you make. When you grasp the fact that you are in control, that in where it really matters in life, you are free, you have begun to grasp who you really are and what you are meant to be doing here. If you see your decisions and actions as the passive results of your background and your nature, your circumstances beyond your control, you have not begun to live. It is when you recognize that you have free will, that you have the ability to choose who you are, how you live, that is what it means to be a Jew. That is what it means to be alive.

We Shall Overcome

Living in Romania during the Holocaust, Rabbi Eliezer Zusia Portugal, the first Skulener Rebbe, was repeatedly imprisoned and tortured by both the Germans and the Russians. It is said that it took the Skulener an hour to *daven* the Shemoneh Esrei, and that was when he had other things to do! Stuck in prison, with nothing else to occupy his

time, he prayed even slower, concentrating on every word. He began to review all the daily prayers, to ensure that when he would pray he would do so knowing the full meaning and intent of every word. When he reached a certain phrase, “*Baruch gozer u’mekayeim*”, “Blessed is He who decrees and fulfills”, in Baruch She’amar, he was a bit puzzled. Generally, when we talk about a decree, we are referring to what we perceive as negative. Why then do we praise G-d for carrying out evil decrees? The Rebbe pondered this phrase for days and days, attempting to learn exactly what the intent was of this prayer. He even announced, “I will not leave this prison cell, even if I am freed until I uncover the meaning behind this phrase.” After three days, an insight finally came. The word “fulfills” does not refer to the G-d who issues decrees. It refers to mankind. G-d enacts the decree and also gives, or has given us the strength to endure it; to withstand the trial. In understanding this sentence, “*Baruch gozer u’mekayeim*”, we must read it, “Blessed is He who decrees and enables us to fulfill.”

No two people who ever lived had the same purpose and mission in this world. No one can ever accomplish what a second person was meant to contribute to the perfection of the universe, which was the purpose of his descent to this world. Each person is placed in precisely the circumstances he needs to fulfill that mission. Everything in life, even the challenges and struggles, is part of a divine mission, uniquely designed for that person’s individual mission and task. All the *nisyonos*, all the tests that are put in our paths, these trials and tribulations, are “for your good, for your benefit¹⁰⁹.” To be a man, to be a person of intelligence and responsibility, to transition from being a child to being an adult, means to see suffering and to do something about it¹¹⁰. That is what defines a Jew. If we are to achieve our purpose in life, we must escape the limitations of the conditions with which we begin our journey, forging our own path.

When Oprah Winfrey got her chance to address the graduating class of Harvard University in the Spring of 2013, it was Oprah, who has been called one of the most successful women in the world, that decided that she had to speak about failure. To a group almost certainly assured of great success in life, Oprah stressed the need to understand the message of failure. She said, “If you’re constantly pushing yourself higher, higher, the law of averages... predicts that you will at some point fall. And when you do, I want you to know this, remember this: There is no such thing as failure. Failure is just life trying to move us in another direction,”¹¹¹.

¹⁰⁹ Rashi on Bereishis, 12:1 “לך לך”

¹¹⁰ Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, Shabbos Drasha: Being a Man, Doing for Others, Parshas Shemos 5774

¹¹¹ Full speech: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMWFieBGR7c>

Viktor Frankl famously wrote: “When we are no longer able to change a situation... we are challenged to change ourselves,”¹¹². This does not mean that we must get a new wardrobe, talk a certain way, and act like everyone else to “fit in”. In fact, it’s the opposite! It means that we have to dig deep, to find out who we are inside; in other words, to change our attitude not our actions.

¹¹² Man's Search for Meaning, Logotherapy in a Nutshell, p. 117

Chapter Two- Self-Confidence: Believing in Who You Are

Hashem Needs You

In Judaism, we believe that the fact that you were created, that you are alive at this very moment, means Hashem loves you and believes in you. If you are alive, that means G-d believes in you to fulfill your unique mission, the purpose of His creating you. It means that your work here is not done yet. You have more to accomplish!

Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk in his sefer, the Noam Elimelech, explains that the entire purpose of Har Sinai, of the Torah, and of every mitzvah, is for a Jew to recognize that there is a Creator, that G-d exists. In another place, the Noam Elimelech on a *pasuk* in Sefer Devarim¹¹³ writes: a person not only has to constantly go with the concept of *dveikus*, clinging to G-d, to think about the greatness of Hashem, to examine in his mind the wonders which he always sees, the miracles and tragedies in G-d's creation; a person also has to contemplate how he himself is a part of the miracle of creation, how he furthers the mission of humanity, because when a person does not know himself, he also lacks understanding of G-d. The Noam Elimelech teaches that loneliness can only be felt when one sins, when one is distanced from G-d, when a person does not understand their purpose in life. When you understand your purpose for existence, when you feel that Hashem loves you, when you recognize that the *Borei Olam*, the creator of the world, created you, sustains you, and believes in you to fulfill your mission, how can you feel alone in the world?

Healthy Friendships

The Mishnah teaches that Yehoshua ben Perachiah was known to say: “appoint for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a friend, and judge all people favourably,”¹¹⁴. According to the Rambam, there are three types of friends: a friend for benefit, a friend for enjoyment, and a friend for virtue¹¹⁵. A friend for benefit is the lowest level; the example he gives is a friendship between two business partners. The friendship for enjoyment, what most of our relationships are, unfortunately, is a friendship solely for pleasure and for confidence. At this stage, there's nothing to hide. This type of friendship is open and honest, where a person feels that he or she can share their innermost thoughts and feelings, that they can confide in their friend, and that their

¹¹³ Devarim 4:9

¹¹⁴ Avos 1:6

¹¹⁵ Rambam on Pirkei Avos, 1:6, 1

friend can confide in them. Yet, at the end of the day, a person is only in the friendship, in the relationship, because of what they get out of it. The third type of friendship, the highest level there is, is a friend for virtue. The desire of both friends is the intention only for the good; each one wants to be helped by his friend in reaching this good for both of them together.

The Rambam points out that Yehoshua ben Perachiah said it with the *lashon*, with the language of acquisition. He did not say, "Make for yourself a friend," or "Befriend others." A person must make every effort, with all his heart, to "acquire" friendship, this third level friendship, of an absolute friendship in which each person is in the relationship only for the good of the other.

Rabbeinu Yonah, in his commentary on this Mishnah, explains: A person needs three things from a good friend¹¹⁶. The first is for words of Torah. Based on a gemara¹¹⁷, he explains that one of the main functions of friendship is to share words of Torah, or more generally, to inspire each other. The second is in the arena of *mitzvos*. If two people truly care about each other, they truly want the best for each other, then they should be there to push each other, to make sure that their friend is making good choices, to model that good behaviour. The third necessity from true friendship is regarding advice. To be a good friend is to be a good listener, to accept advice, to listen to the pain of your friend, to give advice when it is needed.

Our sages teach, based on a Gemara¹¹⁸, "*kol Yisrael areivim zeh l'zeh*", "All Jews are intertwined, collectively responsible for one another." It is taught that the Baal Shem Tov used to say: "A soul enters this world for seventy or eighty years just to do a favour for another." Our entire existence, while it is to refine ourselves and make the world a more G-dly place, is just as much to help others. True friendship is the pinnacle of this ideal. As recorded in Sefer HaMiddos, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught that "one who sees his friend in pain must ask for mercy on his behalf,"¹¹⁹. The explanation of this is simple, in order to have a true friendship, a person must concern him or herself with the plight of their friend.

Rebbe Nachman taught that when one wants to discuss *yiras shamayim* (recognition of the awesomeness of G-d) with their friend he or she must possess fear of

¹¹⁶ Rabbeinu Yonah on Pirkei Avos 1:6, 3

¹¹⁷ Talmud Bavli, Taanis 7a

¹¹⁸ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Sanhedrin, 27b

¹¹⁹ Sefer HaMiddos, Mercy, Part I, 10

Heaven¹²⁰. Rebbe Nachman explains that this is so that his or her words make an impression on their friend, as our Sages, of blessed memory, taught: “Any person who fears Heaven, his words are heard,”¹²¹. One of the many explanations is, Rebbe Nachman was teaching that if a person does not have *yiras shamayim*, which is one of the six constant *mitzvos*, one of the foundations of living a spiritually connected life, how can he give any advice, particularly in this subject, to a friend. This teaching does not apply just to *yiras shamayim*. Rebbe Nachman is teaching us that the *yesod*, the foundation of being a good friend, is speaking only from a place of knowledge. When it comes to areas we are not knowledgeable in, we must recognize that in essence, we know nothing at all, and it is best to not say anything. Sometimes, and frankly often, it is our silence that speaks volumes.

The Gemara tells us Choni Hame’agel, a sage who had been in a deep sleep for 70 years, woke up to find no one recognized him. He pleaded with G-d to kill him¹²². With the aforementioned, we can now understand this strange story. Not only is a healthy, stable, and supportive friendship highly valued, but it is considered a necessary function of human existence. A true friend is one who inspires; is consistent in their actions; and a good listener who is able not only to accept advice, to listen to the pain of a friend, to give advice when it is needed. To be present and to connect, even when words fail and when you have nothing to contribute, is enough.

Clean Surroundings Are Key

The Rambam is one of many great thinkers, Jewish and non-Jewish that concur with the principle that man is influenced by his surroundings. He writes: “It is a natural tendency of man to be influenced in his ideas and conduct by his fellows and associates, and to follow the usage of the people of his state. Because thereof, it is necessary for man to be in the company of the righteous, and to sit near the wise, in order to learn from their conduct, and to distance himself from the evil-doers who follow the path of darkness, in order not to learn from their conduct,”¹²³. This is similar to a piece in Avos D’Rebbe Nassan, which teaches in the name of Rabbi Akiva that: “anyone who clings to sinners, even though they did not do like them, they receive the calamities that befall them, and anyone who clings to those who do mitzvos, even if they do not do their good actions, they receive the reward that behooves them.”

¹²⁰ Likutei Moharan, Tinyana, Torah 7:5

¹²¹ Talmud Bavli, Berachos 6b

¹²² Talmud Bavli, Maseches Taanis, 23a

¹²³ Mishneh Torah, Hilchos De'os, 6:1

The current Slonimer Rebbe, Rabbi Shmuel Berezovsky, known by the title of his works, Darchei Noam, taught: “As long as a person is sunken into the mud, there is no possibility that he can begin to clean himself off. First, a person has to get out of the mud that he has fallen into. Only then can he clean the dirt that stuck to him,”¹²⁴. This powerful allegory shows that in life, the first thing to do is to leave situations that are not conducive, or perhaps even detrimental, to the way you want to live your life. Only then can you truly brush off the dust.

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Druk, in his commentary on the Haggadah teaches that the reason for the biblical commandment to not see *chametz* (leavened products) on Pesach is that it is not enough that you are careful to guard yourself from *chametz*, which our sages teach us is representative of the *yetzer hara*. Rather, it is up to you to try to supervise your surroundings, everywhere you go, to influence others, that there will not be with them any *chametz* ¹²⁵. This seemingly simple *drasha* is quite profound. As Jews, we are obligated not only to focus on ourselves. We must also care about our surroundings as well. It is up to us to stay away from that which could negatively influence us.

The following story illustrates this point further.

Rabbi Meir of Premishlan was travelling to greet his friend Rabbi Yisrael of Rizhin. “They met on the road. Rebbe Meir traveled in a modest cart drawn by a pitifully skinny horse, while Yisrael of Rizhin was seated in a sumptuous carriage with four exuberant horses in harness. The Rizhiner, ill-at-ease, felt the need to explain, to apologize: “The roads are bad, there has been so much rain. One horse would not be enough to pull me out of the mud... just in case...”

“I understand,” said the Rebbe of Premishlan, who liked to speak of himself in the third person. “Yes, Meir understands. Mud is a danger and horses can be of help. But, you see, Meir has only one horse and so he must be very careful, very careful indeed, not to sink into the mud,”¹²⁶.

Rabbi Noach Weinberg taught: “It is a greater pleasure to love than to be loved. So why spend so much energy on gaining the approval of others? Work on loving them instead.” Trust yourself. Surround yourself with true friends. Hold onto the people that share your goals and ambitions. Stay away from those that put you down, either

¹²⁴ Darchei Noam, Raava D’Raavin, Ki Seitzei, 5778

¹²⁵ Haggadah shel Pesach: Aish Tamid, p. 145

¹²⁶ Elie Wiesel, Souls on Fire, p. 156

mentally or spiritually. When you know your own worth, you will value others regardless of whether they see your true value. When you can do that, you will be able to love G-d, yourself, and those around you, as the Maharal wrote: “When you love Hashem, it is impossible to not love his creations, and if he hates His creations, it is impossible to love Hashem, the G-d that created them,”¹²⁷.

Focusing On The Good

“At the end of days everyone will be Breslov¹²⁸. It doesn’t mean that everyone will know Rebbe Nachman. It doesn’t mean that everyone will learn Rebbe Nachman. It means that the only way to survive is when your spiritual practice is guided by the advice that our teacher brought into this world. To have the heart be broken. To have infinite hope in spite of all the darkness To have joy in spite of everything. To allow ourselves to vacate that need for knowledge and to abandon rationality and throw ourselves into a meaningless and chaotic faith in HaKadosh Baruch Hu beyond anything. Rebbe Nachman’s Torah is not a Torah of certainty, it is a Torah of reassurance. It doesn’t deny the doubts or the worries of the individual, it provides a reassuring voice that speaks from within the doubts and worries themselves,”¹²⁹. One of such Torah teachings is as follows: “G-d’s way is to always focus on the good which people do. Although there is also some not good mixed in with it, He pays no attention to this,”¹³⁰. Rebbe Nachman, unlike any other *tzaddik*, taught the world what it means to see good in ourselves and in others¹³¹.

We all know that two people can see the same thing and perceive it totally differently. In Parshas Shelach, the *meraglim*, the spies who were sent to scout out the Land of Israel, saw the exact same thing. The only difference was their reaction. Calev and Yehoshua responded to the obstacles the Jewish people would surely encounter during their conquest of the land with a positive attitude, “we shall surely overcome it,”¹³². The ten other spies were not of the same mindset. They said, “We cannot attack them, for they are stronger than us,”¹³³. When faced with a really difficult endeavour they only saw the negative, problem after problem. As such, their state of melancholy caused them not to believe in themselves or in Hashem.

¹²⁷ Nesivos Olam, Nesiv Ahavas Reiah, Chapter 1

¹²⁸ Chayei Moharan, 339

¹²⁹ Rabbi Joey Rosenfeld, LCSW

¹³⁰ Likutei Moharan, Tinyana, Torah 17

¹³¹ See Likutei Moharan, Part I, 282

¹³² Bamidbar 13:30

¹³³ Bamidbar 13:31

When the spies are giving their report to the Jewish people they tell of a frightening encounter they had in Israel with giants. The verse states: “There we saw the Nephilim- sons of giants amongst the Nephilim- and we felt like grasshoppers and so did we look to them,”¹³⁴.

Many point out that the spies first report how they felt and only after say how the giants saw them. It was only because the spies felt small and powerless that they were seen by the giants as such. Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the Alter of Slabodka, takes this idea one step further.

Why did the spies seek to sabotage the Jews’ entrance into Israel? Rav Nosson Tzvi explains that the spies realized that once the Jews had a land to call their own, G-d would no longer need to provide for them with constant miracles as had happened in the desert. The spies thought that they could not handle this transition to “normal life”. We see that the fundamental sin of the spies was not believing in themselves. Had they held themselves in higher esteem they would have trusted in their ability to forge a meaningful relationship with G-d anytime or anywhere. This lack of self-confidence was revealed when they couldn’t face down the giants of Israel without feeling puny and weak.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, a *tzaddik* who truly carried the weight of the world on his shoulders, once said: “If you see what needs to be repaired and how to repair it, then you have found a piece of the world that G-d has left for you to complete. But if you only see what is wrong and how ugly it is, then it is you yourself that needs repair.” In our society today, there are so many problems. That being said, it is up to us to recognize that we are responsible to find solutions. The world does not need us to point out its problems. We need to step up to the plate and take responsibility!

At the same time, we need to remember the words of Rashi, in his commentary on the Torah. He explains that the reason Yaakov could not stop mourning Yosef’s death as Judaism prescribes was because Yosef was not actually dead¹³⁵. Hashem gives us the strength to get over all of our problems. But, if we create problems that do not exist or try to handle other people’s problems, we will never be consoled.

Dwelling on life’s failures is a pointless endeavour. Rabbi Michel Twerski explains: “When one does not see success in the service of Hashem, he must be careful

¹³⁴ Bamidbar 13:33

¹³⁵ Rashi on Bereishis, 37:35

not to accuse or to degrade himself, rather, he must only remember the greatness of his soul and focus on fixing what needs to be fixed.”

In Likutei Yehudah, a five volume compilation of teachings from the Rebbes of Gerron Chassidus, it is written: “We are accustomed to say the confessional according to the alphabet... and the holy rabbi, the Sefas Emes from Gur explained that the reason for this is because if not for going from the beginning to the end of the alphabet, we would not know when to stop.” Human nature is one of focusing on the bad, on all that we have done wrong. That is why, we have to learn how to focus on the good, on all that we do correctly. As Rav Kook writes: “Just as there is great value to the confession of sins... there is also great value to the confession of mitzvos, which gladdens the heart and strengthens the holy paths of life!”¹³⁶.

We need to stay away from punishing ourselves for the situations we find ourselves in. The only thing to do is to see the good in the midst of evil and to focus on that, correcting what we need to correct, bringing more light into a world full of darkness.

¹³⁶ Ein Ayah, Ma’aser Sheni 7:1

Chapter Three- Treading Water

Staying Afloat

Rabbi Noach Weinberg said, “The battle for life is a battle for sanity.” In a topsy-turvy world, being emotionally stable is a challenge. To be a human, and particularly to be a Jew, is to live on the roller coaster of emotions. It’s to be able to withstand the waves that come crashing in, trying to knock us down and keep us under the water until we drown. In this chapter, a few different points to consider will be presented. The goal is that by thinking about and utilizing these teachings, you can live a life that is aimed at thriving, not simply surviving.

Selfishness vs. Selflessness

It is important to hold the words of Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe close. He writes: “A person who is constantly entrenched in his own pursuits doesn’t even see the other. Such a person must make an effort to leave his personal space and forsake his pursuits from time to time. We must not give the impression that this is unimportant, for how can a *ben Torah* remain an egoist? May Hashem save us from this! Even one who isn’t an egoist in the true sense of the word, but someone who is constantly preoccupied with building his inner world, contemplating deep thoughts of Torah and *yirah* — it will be similarly difficult for such a person to be aware of things happening around him,”¹³⁷. One who is solely occupied with his own pursuits, even in the spiritual realm, is unable to retain an awareness of those around him. Rabbi Naftali Tzvi of Ropshitz taught: A “kosher Jew” has to be good, in awe of G-d, and a scholar. For, if a person worked solely on being good, he would be a lustful person, G-d forbid. If he worked solely on fear of Heaven alone, he would be mentally unstable. And if he worked solely on attaining wisdom, he would be a heretic. It is only when we align these three characteristics together that he can be a “kosher Jew”,¹³⁸.

Though we are obligated to put ourselves first, to work on our own personal growth, we must remember that there are others that will be affected. Our happiness and prosperity cannot come at the expense of those around us. “I have set G-d before me at all times,”¹³⁹. This *pasuk* is the guiding principle of Jewish life¹⁴⁰. The Baal Shem Tov

¹³⁷ Alei Shur, vol. 2, p. 204

¹³⁸ Ohel Naftali, Likkutim, 312

¹³⁹ Tehillim 16:8

¹⁴⁰ Rema, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 1

taught: “*Shivisi* is an expression of *hishtavus* (equanimity): no matter what happens, whether people praise or shame you — or with anything else that comes your way — it is all the same to you,”¹⁴¹. Balancing anything, especially between living a selfish and selfless life is undoubtedly difficult. That is why having true friends and teachers is crucial.

Sharing What is On Your Mind

In a fascinating responsa from one of the biggest Religious-Zionist rabbis in Israel, Rabbi Shlomo Aviner answers why when they publish his *sefarim* they choose to leave in silly questions. Rav Aviner answers: “There is no such thing as a silly question. It is permissible for a person to ask anything that is causing them heartache. And if the reader does not find in this a point, he should relate to it as simply something he does not connect to,”¹⁴². Here, in *halachic* responsa, we learn this deep truth. If the questioner is asking, it means it is bothering him or her. Therefore, Rav Aviner chooses to answer each and every question with care and sensitivity, and prints in it his *halachic* works. Imagine if everyone took this approach!

When something is bothering you, when you are experiencing difficulty, that is when you must begin to open up. Too many people feel alone. They bottle up their emotions. They feel uncomfortable sharing with others. If that is the case, if you feel that you cannot share with another person, find someone else to talk to, the One who is always listening. “You should speak to Hashem Yisbarach, about the difficulty itself, and say “Father, even though it's hard for me, I know that you are with me, and therefore I am not giving up this closeness with You, and I am attempting to strengthen the bond [that I have] with You,””¹⁴³. If you find yourself in a place where you feel alone in this world, remember that you are never alone. Speak to Hashem. In the language you're most comfortable in. Whenever you want to talk to Him, He's ready to listen. This is *hisbodedus*, the ideal form of prayer, which was discussed earlier.

Imperfection as the Ultimate Perfection

Rashi, in his commentary, cites a Midrash¹⁴⁴ to explain that Noach only entered the ark at the last possible moment¹⁴⁵. While he believed in G-d fully, as the Torah

¹⁴¹ Tzava'as Harivash, p. 1

¹⁴² Piskei Shlomo, p. 407

¹⁴³ B'Yam Darkecha: Pesach and Sefiras HaOmer, Chapter 6- Shvi'i shel Pesach, p. 45

¹⁴⁴ Bereishis Rabbah 32:6

¹⁴⁵ Rashi on Bereishis, 7:7

attests to, it seems that Noah also held out a little bit of hope that Hashem would indeed save the planet from the impending flood.

Our *tzaddikim* teach that this was the wrong attitude to have. Noah could have either given up on the world, choosing to get on the boat, or he could have gone out and actively done something to try to get the people to repent, making their no need for such an event. Instead, he chose neither approach, waiting until the absolute last moment before deciding that there was nothing more he could do.

While the first insight alone says a lot about what Jewish thought teaches is the need to actively make decisions and take actions, this Rashi teaches us much more than that. Noah who was "righteous in his generation"¹⁴⁶ somehow had absolute faith in the reality of the flood, which he displayed by building the ark over 120 years. Yet, he still did not believe that the flood would occur, waiting until the last second, once the rain had begun, to enter the ark. With this, the Torah teaches that we can hold onto our faith, while also questioning our faith at the same time.

The first words of Megillas Eichah, which is read on Tisha B'Av, is "*Eichah yashvah badad*," "Alas, [the city] sits alone?"¹⁴⁷. Our sages explain that Yermiyahu is asking "how can it be that Jerusalem is desolate?" In Bereishis, after Adam HaRishon ate from the tree, Hashem calls to him and questions him with the word "Ayekah", "Where are you?"¹⁴⁸. The Piacezna Rebbe, in Derech HaMelech, teaches that G-d was really asking: "Where are you within yourself? Do you know who you are? Do your actions match the person that you want to be?"¹⁴⁹. The Zohar draws a parallel between Yermiyahu's use of the word "*Eichah*" and HaShem's questioning with the word "*Ayekah*", both words being spelled with the same letters, only vowelized differently¹⁵⁰. When experiencing tragedy, there are two responses. The first is to turn to Hashem and to ask, "How could you do this?" The second is to turn inward and to say, "What can this teach me? How can I grow because of this?"

A person cannot attain perfection. Crossing the finish line, arriving at the destination, reaching the end, those are all euphemisms for death. Judaism believes that every moment of life is infinitely valuable. If you are breathing, it is because there is a goal you must still pursue, something that you have not yet accomplished. When a

¹⁴⁶ Bereishis 6:9

¹⁴⁷ Eichah 1:1

¹⁴⁸ Breishis 3:8

¹⁴⁹ Derech HaMelech, Seventh Day of Pesach

¹⁵⁰ Zohar, Vol. 1, 29a

person forgets this and tries to act beyond what he is capable of, in the end, he will just fall into nervousness, anxiety, and sadness. “The fundamental experience of the soul in this world is the sheer confrontation of the true reality of this-worldliness with all of its brokenness and darkness- to reveal the light of HaShem within the shell of darkness,”¹⁵¹. We need to learn to be upset and angry, to sit with the pain, and to retain hope and joy. It is not a contradiction. We have to keep reminding ourselves of that.

Rabbi Avraham Tzvi Kluger teaches that *ish* (man), the descriptive word used to introduce Mordechai in Megillas Esther¹⁵², is an acronym for *ein shum yeush*, there is no despair, and *v'ish*, (and the man), the words used to describe Haman, contains the letters to spell out *yeush*, despair; meaning, Haman wanted to make the Jewish people give up hope of redemption and faith itself, he wanted us to forget that we are close and desired by Hashem. Mordechai HaTzaddik stood up and shouted “*ein shum yeush!*”¹⁵³. The enemies of holiness and of the Jewish people attempt to uproot our faith, to make us give up on our greatness, to lose belief in our personal and national redemption. The heroes and leaders of the Jewish people, who are recorded in Tanach as imperfect, flawed individuals, stand up against them and remind us that "there is no such thing as despair in the world at all", that we are holy and special at our core, that we have greatness within.

Niggunim: The Melody Within

As noted above, human beings tend to bury their feelings. As such, there is so much stored away, to the point that we do not recognize the depth of our experiences and emotions and how they can be harnessed in a healthy and healing manner. This is the melody within, which we so desperately need to tap into.

The power of a *niggun*, of expressing that which we cannot express otherwise, is beyond expression. That being said, there are a few brave souls that tried to express the awesome power of a melody. Rabbi Dovid'l Weinberg commented: “A melody, plucked from the garden of “seeing good in yourself and others” (one note at a time)—brings healing, light, life and redemption to the world, thus sustaining everything from the horns of the wild ox to the eggs of the tiniest louse.” Rabbi Ari Waxman, describing the power of a *niggun*, wrote: “The drops of inner expression, of heart and soul, that surface in the outer world in the form of *niggun*, refresh, rejuvenate and reconnect the heart and soul of oneself and others with the inner dimension of our existence. Rabbi Shloime

¹⁵¹ Rabbi Joey Rosenfeld, LCSW

¹⁵² Esther 2:5

¹⁵³ Vayoshet HaMelech, p. 28; see Likutei Moharan, Tinyana, Torah 78

Twerski, the Hornesteipler Rebbe of Denver, taught: “*Neginah* is the direct path to the *neshamah*,”¹⁵⁴. The Divrei Yisrael of Modzitz exclaimed: “The *Heichal HaNeginah* is itself the *Heichal HaTeshuvah*!”¹⁵⁵.

While beautifully poetic, these statements are quite difficult to grasp. Perhaps a story will make this clearer.

“There was a Chassidic Jew in Bnei Brak who had lost everything during World War II and was spiritually broken. One day he came to pour his heart out to Rav Shach, who was not at all Chassidic, but who understood full well the pain of a broken Chassidic heart.

This Jew told what happened to him and said, “I cannot even pray anymore.” Rav Shach said, “What Chassidic group do you belong to?” The man told him, and Rav Shach began to hum a *niggun*, a tune, from that group. The Chassid closed his eyes and hummed the *niggun* together with Rav Shach, until he started to cry. Rav Shach said, “For a Chassid, it’s not enough to sing a *niggun*, we have to dance.” So Rav Shach stood up and danced with this Jew for a long time. Afterwards, this Jew could pray again.

Rav Shach did not give him a theological explanation about where G-d was during the Holocaust. He knew that this *niggun* was still inside that Jew, hidden underneath the pile of ashes from Auschwitz,”¹⁵⁶.

¹⁵⁴ Malchus Shlomo, *Neginah*, p. 93

¹⁵⁵ Imrei Shaul, p. 309

¹⁵⁶ Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, *Song of Teshuvah: A Commentary on Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook’s Oros HaTeshuvah*, p. 110

Chapter Four- Returning to Your Inner Essence

Teshuvah: What is it?

Teshuvah is not a scare tactic. We do not fear the High Holidays or the World to Come. If we have the right approach we can see that we simply want a stronger connection with G-d. *Teshuvah* is commonly translated as repentance, but that is inadequate and misleading. *Teshuvah* means to return, to return to the path G-d set for us when we were born, the path that our souls know as homeward bound, the path of goodness, of becoming a better person. “*Teshuvah* is not about attaining something new that we didn’t already have before. It is simply about returning to the most natural state of the Jew, a life lived in alignment with the strivings of our innermost identity,”¹⁵⁷. At the core, *teshuvah* is about living a life of personal authenticity.

When we make a mistake, we are to go through the process step-by-step. The result is forgiveness and growth. There are four basic parts to *teshuvah*: regret of the misdeed, the decision to change, verbal expression of one’s sins, and a resolution for the future, or what we call in Hebrew, *charatah*, *azivas cheit*, *viduy* and *kabbalah l’asid*.

The completion of these steps is called *teshuvah gemurah*. The Rambam explains, this occurs when you are put in the exact same position as when you originally made the mistake and you do not repeat it¹⁵⁸. Many people take this to mean that you must place yourself in the exact same situation and manage to escape. This is so wrong! If, for example, you frequented parties and did things that were not exactly befitting of your inner holiness, that does not mean that you have to seek out a party and put yourself in the same place, with the same temptations, and manage not to succumb to them. What the Rambam means is that complete *teshuvah* is shown by the fact that if you were to be in the same situation, because you are a changed person, because you went through this reflective cleansing process known as *teshuvah*, you would not make the same mistake.

Teshuvah is a constant, ongoing process that cannot be accomplished overnight. No matter how many times a person may stumble, he always has the power to get back up. True success comes only if a person has worked hard. We cannot hope to never fail;

¹⁵⁷ Rabbi Yaakov Klein, *Story of Our Lives*, p. 31

¹⁵⁸ *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchos Teshuvah*, 2:1

that is impossible. What we can do is continue to rise every time we fall, which will guarantee us success.

Shlomo HaMelech famously wrote in Mishlei, “The righteous fall seven times and rise again,”¹⁵⁹. Rav Yitzchak Hutner, in a letter to a student, explains: The *pasuk* is generally interpreted to mean that even though the righteous individual stumbles often in his or her journey, he or she always rises again. Rav Hutner suggests an alternative explanation. It is because the tzaddik falls seven times, that he or she can rise to even higher heights¹⁶⁰. “The main pleasure Hashem has from the service of man is according to the effort to fight against the *yetzer hara*, not according to the success in fulfilling the mitzvos of Hashem,”¹⁶¹. Life is not one big game, collecting tokens that we can redeem for reward in the next world. G-d wants to see us battle the *yetzer hara*, to choose holiness. In the *teshuvah* process, in the process of personal growth, in the journey that we call life, a person has to simply pick him or herself up and keep trying to stay on the right path.

Teshuvah is not about beating ourselves up because we are ashamed of what we have done, or because we are afraid of impending doom, a potential punishment that may come. *Teshuvah* is about recognizing that we have a connection with Hashem and our inner holiness, and through the mistakes that we’ve made, we’ve distanced ourselves and severed that connection to some degree. The *teshuvah* process is the steps we take to try to sustain and rebuild the connection to what it once was. Not only that, but through complete *teshuvah* we return to our inner pure essence.

The Power of Teshuvah

“It is no more possible to think about religion without sin than it is to think about a garden without dirt. By its very nature, the ideals of religion entail sin and failure. Judaism has its own language and framework for sin that expresses themselves both legally and philosophically,”¹⁶². *Teshuvah* is that framework.

The great Chassidic masters speak often about the awesome power that is the possibility of starting over. The previous Slonimer Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky, in his sefer *Nesivos Shalom*, writes that *teshuvah* is an expansive topic that is relevant to each and everyone at any given moment. We must always live in a world of

¹⁵⁹ Mishlei 24:16

¹⁶⁰ Pachad Yitzchak: Igrot U’ketavim No. 128

¹⁶¹ Derech HaChassidus- Aleksander, p. 104

¹⁶² Sin•a•gogue: Sin and Failure in Jewish Thought, Rabbi Dovid Bashevkin, Cherry Orchard Books, Summary on Back Cover

teshuvah!¹⁶³. Rabbi Naftali Tzvi of Ropshitz explains that *teshuvah* is only possible because we can tap into the literal piece of G-d that is within¹⁶⁴. Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbitz explains that the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh, of setting the calendar¹⁶⁵, is to teach us that it is possible to begin again, to renew ourselves in Torah and in our actions.

Rabbi Gamliel Rabinowitz said: “When Rosh HaShanah falls on Shabbos, we do not blow Shofar. When Sukkos falls on Shabbos, we don't take the *Arba Minim*, the four species, even on the first day. When Yom Kippur falls on Shabbos, we don't push off anything! We say *viduy* and do *teshuvah*, we confess our sins and strive to return to G-d and our essential selves. When it comes to real *teshuvah*, it's not something we can put off,”¹⁶⁶.

Rabbi Benzion Rabinowitz, the Biala Rebbe, known by the title of his works, *Mevaser Tov*, taught that “just as the Jewish people were in Egypt on the 49th level of *tumah*, spiritual impurity, and Hashem took them out, similarly each and every person, no matter their connection or how deep they have sunken into the pit of despair, can get out of it, because Hashem in the Exodus from Egypt did this to everyone of us specifically. We are able to escape the deep pit in spirituality and physicality just as the Jewish people did from the 49 levels of *tumah* in the Exodus from Egypt,”¹⁶⁷. We are commanded to remember *yetzias mitzrayim* daily because it serves as a reminder to us that no matter how far we've fallen, no matter who we are surrounded by or where we are, Hashem has the power to take us out, and we have the power to redeem ourselves.

Rabbi Moshe Weinberger shared the following, something which is applicable for each and every person, regardless of their unique struggles.

“Over the years I have met with a number of addicts who struggle with a variety of substances and activities which threaten to destroy their lives. One of the most heartbreaking things is when someone tells me: I was clean for over a year. I began seeing how I could begin rebuilding my life. I began to feel that I had some hope of being something. But then one thing and another went wrong and I fell back into the lowest depths.

¹⁶³ Nesivos Shalom, Nesivei Teshuvah, Pesichah

¹⁶⁴ Zera Kodesh, Vayeilech

¹⁶⁵ Shemos 12:2

¹⁶⁶ Quoted from a shiur he gave on Zoom.

¹⁶⁷ Mevaser Tov, Vayeitzei, 5771

The hardest thing for someone in that position is not only the consequences of his actions. It is the feeling that all of the time he was clean was worthless. When someone crashes, he feels as if he had never left. So what was the point of that time under the chuppah; riding the wave; feeling that first embrace of goodness and normalcy?

My message to people when they are overwhelmed with that feeling is: That time did not go to waste. You may have forgotten what it was like to be healthy. But during that time, you saw what a normal, healthy, exalted life can be like. That was your bolt of lightning in the darkness. Now you can think back on the view you had before your fall. You now see that your goal is within your reach and you can achieve it again if you “get back on the horse” and work, one day at a time, to return to become the person you saw you can be,”¹⁶⁸.

Returning with Love

Elul, the month that prepares us for Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, in which our primary focus is *teshuvah*, is not about pointing out the bad within us. In the world today, there are enough people to show us where we went wrong. As Rabbi Erez Moshe Doron teaches, based on the writings of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, the only *teshuvah* for our generation is to find the *nekudos tovot*, the good points within us. This means that we must recognize that we are inherently good, that we are worthy of love and connection. *Teshuvah* as a scare tactic is not healthy, nor is it sustainable. *Teshuvah* from a desire to get closer to G-d, and as a result to our true selves,, now that's something we can all get behind!

The Zohar teaches that the only *teshuvah* that works for *pegam habris* is “*teshuvah* that is worthy of covering over all his deeds,”¹⁶⁹. Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin explains that this means *teshuvah m'ahavah*, which is a complete return to Hashem. *Teshuvah m'yirah* erases the sins - and according to our tradition, certain sins are not erasable. But *teshuvah m'ahavah* doesn't erase the sins, rather it fixes them, and turns them into merits¹⁷⁰.

The Kozhnitzer Maggid teaches a fundamental understanding regarding *teshuvah*. “A person should say in their heart to himself, as long as there is a Jewish *neshamah* within me, it is promised that my *teshuvah* will be accepted. Even if I did the

¹⁶⁸ Sparks: Pesach 5780, pg. 72

¹⁶⁹ Zohar HaKadosh, Vol. 2, 14b

¹⁷⁰ Tzidkas HaTzaddik, 242

worst evil in the eyes of Hashem, His mercy and truth will never abandon me,”¹⁷¹. No matter what we have done, no matter how far we may feel, we are always able to return, to come closer. It is necessary to remind ourselves that despite, or perhaps because of, what I did in the past I will never be abandoned, nor will I ever give up on myself.

¹⁷¹ Avodas Yisrael, Sefer Devarim, Parshas Shoftim

My Journey to and through Avodas Hashem

Letters, stories, Torahs, and thematic essays

All About Me- Nu, where are you going?

This question, based on the question that my parents were asked shortly before I was to go to kindergarten, has guided me throughout my life. My parents, both raised in what I would call traditional Conservative Jewish homes, made the decision to put me in Chabad preschool. At the end of my time there Rebbetzin Rivky Yarmush was slowly nudging my parents with the question, “where are they going after this?” Fortunately the answer to that was Jewish day school, but that was certainly not the plan. Nowadays, it is that question, “Nu, where are you going?” that I ask myself each and every day.

Introducing Me

I have been in the Jewish Day School system since kindergarten, first at Associated Hebrew Schools, and then at TanenbaumCHAT. Jewish education has always been a big part of my life. However, there are a lot of kids with the exact same education as me. They went to the same school I did, had the same teachers. Some of them still sit in the same classrooms as me, today. But they lead lives completely opposite to mine, based on a different set of values. How did that happen?

Having grown up in a Conservative Shul until shortly after Bar Mitzvah, and later becoming more observant, I’ve seen the best of both worlds. So who am I, and how exactly did I get to where I am today? Those are both questions I can’t fully answer yet, but I can at least try.

My story, like most Ashkenazic Jews, starts in Europe. Three of my grandparents emigrated from their home countries before the war. My maternal grandmother, Edie a”h was born after the war in Paris, France, where her mother was a member of the French Resistance, aiding in the fight against the Nazis. My parents got married at Beth Sholom Synagogue, the same shul I had my bar mitzvah, and as they say, the rest is history, well, not quite.

Before becoming involved with Aish HaTorah and NCSY in around sixth grade, I was very involved in Jewish life, or so I thought. After all, I led the davening portion of the Junior Minyan at my Conservative shul. Being a part of NCSY, hearing from and meeting some of the most incredible people in the Jewish world, as well as a member of the Aish Thornhill Community Shul, I have been continuously encouraged to grow and constantly re-invent myself. I found for myself that Torah and mitzvos are true. I recognize that those who share my background have not come to that conclusion, but at

least they have the opportunity. For some people, Jewish education is simply not a part of their lives. They do not know what Judaism means, let alone what it means to them. I will touch on this a little later on.

Hobbies and Outside Interests

Outside of my passion for Judaism, a constant since first grade, when I proudly stated that “I want to be a rabbi” on an assignment about “what I want to be when I grow up”, I had a few hobbies. Sports used to play a huge role in my life. Watching them, not playing them, of course. Curling, basketball, hockey, baseball, soccer, tennis, football, cricket. You name it, my twin brother, Jacob, and I watched it. Jewish learning has taken over that part of my life, but it was an essential part of who I was, or so I thought.

I was very entertained by musical theatre. In fact, with my brother, co-founded the Danilack Theatre club, a middle school club in which I wrote, directed, and produced a school play based on the story of *yetzias mitzrayim*, the exodus from Egypt. At TanenbaumCHAT I had the privilege of being a co-producer of our yearly school musical alongside my brother.

I certainly regret some of the things I spent my time on, what I said and did in the past, given the chance to do it all over again, knowing what I know now, I would. That being said, I’m happy saying to HaShem after 120, and reminding myself right now, that in the situations I was in, I couldn’t do or say anything differently. Have I done lots of wrong, absolutely! Do I need to do *teshuvah* and make it like it never happened, for sure. Yet, I can’t dwell on the past, or present failures.

2018

To me, every moment of life is a struggle for something. To pinpoint a particular struggle, a turning point in my life, is to say that there are times where there are no struggles, no challenges, no tests that make me doubt my belief or question my decisions. That being said, there are a few points in my life that stand out as particularly challenging, times when the decisions I made helped shape me to become the person that I am today. The prime struggle, what I struggle with on a daily basis, is simply to grow as a Jew. Since becoming involved with both NCSY and Aish HaTorah, I recognize that this struggle, the constant battle between the *yetzer hatov* and the *yetzer hara* is something that will not be over until I take my last breath.

The primary struggle, choosing authentic Judaism, is already behind me. During the December 2017-January 2018 winter break, I travelled to Israel for the first time with my family. This was exactly a year after telling my parents “I want to be religious,” the beginning of my growth in religious observance. After an amazing time touring Israel, a trip that began with my parents arranging a visit to Aish HaTorah to meet and hear from Rabbi Gavriel Friedman (Rav Gav) and Rabbi Yom Tov Glaser, I came back home to Canada, excited and eager to continue learning and growing. After all, it was almost two full months after starting to fully keep Shabbos; I was overjoyed. Then came a knock at the door. My Shabbos nap was interrupted by the news that my grandmother a”h was no longer with us. Sitting around, wandering my house, waiting for Shabbos to end, was agonizing. I tried to hold off on crying until after Shabbos, but I just couldn’t. It felt like a stab in the back from G-d, a terrible punishment instead of what, in my mind, should have been a great reward. Still, I resolved to learn more, to make my commitment to Shabbos and to Judaism stronger.

Then, May happened. Both my great uncle z”l and my great aunt a”h, who was like a grandmother to me when my grandmother could not be (due to mental health issues stemming from her childhood, being raised by Holocaust survivors), passed away. Three family deaths in less than six months! It was a difficult time for sure. Though I had many questions and few answers, I believed in the declaration of faith that I made to my parents a year and a half earlier. Still, there was my sister’s looming surgery, on Yom Kippur, to keep me doubting. In September of 2018, on Yom Kippur, my sister, Paige, who has Cerebral Palsy, had surgery on her left leg, in hope to ultimately ease some pain she had been having. With the incredible support of my community, my brother and I spent the day davening our hearts out in shul, in what stands out as one of the most impactful moments in my life. Even after a successful surgery, it was three months of her and my mother living in a rehabilitation hospital.

A few things I recognized through that year, through the pain of loss and the uneasiness of the unknown, is that to be a strong Jew, a leader, and a role model for others, it is important to recognize the plight of others, to be empathetic, to reach out when others may not. 2018 made me realize that not everything is in our control. As I said in a talk on my grandmother’s yahrtzeit: “Just because we are doing what we believe is right, does not mean we will see the rewards right away. Suffering is a reality; pain is a choice. In life, there are going to be those challenges, moments that get you down, moments that make you question who you are, and if what you’re doing is right. As Jews and as teenagers in a rapidly changing world, we have to know who we are, and what we stand for. We have to know that no matter what happens to us and around us,

we can and will overcome it. Each and every one of us can overcome the curveballs Hashem throws at us.”

Who I Am Today

Today, I am a yeshiva student in Yerushalayim. I am a brother, a son, a friend, a chavrusa, a volunteer, and I guess a maggid shiur in some ways too. That is only because I realized how many people have never learned about authentic Judaism before. Even the lucky ones, those that were given the gift of Jewish education are not so passionate. My observation, which has been substantiated by rabbanim, rabbeim, and educators today, is that today’s teenagers today are the *she’eino yodeia li’shol*, the child who does not know how to ask, that we speak of at the Pesach seder. Too afraid to approach rabbis and other educators with minute, everyday questions and challenges, the only option is to create communities of lifelong learners and spiritual seekers.

Today, I use the teachings of many gedolim and rabbonim of the past, as well as the teachings of current rabbonim and rabbeim, in North America and in Eretz Yisrael, to continue to motivate and inspire myself, which I then share with others any chance I get. I write and deliver shiurim, talks, speeches, and other Divrei Torah with the goal of bringing the Jewish people together, regardless of levels of observance and prior knowledge. It is my mission to change the Jewish people, to help people of all backgrounds find their unique place in Torah, one lesson at a time.

A Letter that Changed my Life- True Perfection

I received the following from a friend on August 19th, 2020. After months of lockdown and quarantine and after not seeing some of the successes of projects I had been working on, I was ready to step back, to take time off, and to give up on myself and everything I believe in. Thankfully, using the words of the tzaddikim we had previously learned and discussed, I was able to be re-inspired and reoriented.

I don't think Rebbe Nachman started anew with his friendships. The Rebbe also would purposely act silly to make people overlook him. People hated him! It seems confusing. Aren't we supposed to be striving for greatness? How could tzaddikim be okay with people thinking they aren't so great...?

It's not about seeming perfect and it's not about being perfect. It's about keeping on trying to get higher and not running from challenges, not trying to escape from the world until we can do everything perfectly. I think you have such a strong desire to grow. Because you've learned the Torah of Rebbe Nachman, you know you can get so high. Free will is so powerful.

It's hard to put this into words but this *mamish* hurts my heart and I'm so sorry. You aren't doing anything wrong and I don't think you, me, or anyone can do anything with pure intentions. Which is a contradiction! There's a reason we say *tachanun* and do *teshuvah* everyday. No one knows the names of the people who never sinned because they didn't accomplish great things. The goal isn't to be perfect. HaShem specifically wants us and you because we are imperfect. He wants to be revealed in the lowest place. So, in a way, not being perfect is perfect.

I know how much you love giving over Torah and I don't think a desire to be more perfect should stop you. We can't run away and then return when we're more perfect because then we'll never return. This is the world of action and we just have to try our best to keep doing as much as possible to tip the scales to Mashiach.

It's a hard balance between never being content with ourselves and also accepting that we can't be perfect. The Kotzker would definitely disagree with me, but I think, and you know this, that the world is in too dire a state to wait for perfect leaders. You just need to keep sharing and don't stop. While you share you can try to refine yourself, but I don't think we have the luxury of going into the forest for years. I think we just need to teach Alef even if it's from our imperfect state.

A Letter to a Friend- To the Person Who Changed My Life

After a year in yeshiva focused on my personal spiritual pursuits and growth, I had time to reflect on the people and circumstances that helped me to reach the places that I have. The previous letter was one of the first things that came to mind. Below is the letter of recognition and appreciation that I wrote after reflecting on the interaction almost two years prior.

I just felt the need to say thank you. Maran Rosh HaYeshiva, Rav Yitzchak Berkovits shlita, convinced me that I was ready and should share Torah with the world. You convinced me that I could. All of the big rabbonim and rabbeim that I have, that tell me that I'm their Rebbe, that's all because I was encouraged by people, mainly you, that I had something worth sharing. In the words of Rebbe Nachman based on Rashi in Parshas Noach, you showed me that I wasn't just a window that could reflect the light of others, but that I was a stone filled with light, worthy and ready to give over of myself. There are no words that can adequately express my thanks.

I can never thank you enough. I was *mamesh* ready to give up on myself and everything I ever dreamed of, at least momentarily. You really brought me out of that place and helped me reframe my personal Avodah and my mission in life.

Thank G-d, I still have that holy *chutzpah* and am connected to great Rebbes, Roshei Yeshiva, and true Gedolei Yisrael. That being said, the greatest connection I have is to myself and the people around me, and that's only because you believed in me and you pushed me to believe in myself. In fact, this project is really all because of you. Because of your support and encouragement, my shiurim and events have reached around 2000 people. I truly can never express my appreciation. Thank you, for everything.

I know I end with really brutal lines, so I'm not going with my usual *shpiel*. I just want to say that I recognize the incredible person that you are, just like you brought out the little bit of the *bechinah* of the tzaddik that's within me. The amount of people you've touched and continue to touch is enormous and I'm in constant awe. Keep growing yourself and keep changing the world. You really are changing and repairing lives.

The Beauty of Shabbos- Ani Mokir Shabbos

The following is compiled from the Torahs I shared on WhatsApp between January and August 2021.

Rav Noach Weinberg famously said that “the essence of Shabbos is to know and feel G-d's love.” The point of Shabbos is not to restrict or punish us. It's not to deprive us of our social status or make us stand out. The essence of Shabbos is, simply put, disconnecting to reconnect. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan so poignantly defined the diverging acts of Shabbos. As he wrote, “work, in the Sabbath sense, is an act that shows man's mastery over the world by means of his intelligence and skill... Rest, in the Sabbath sense, is not interfering with nature nor exhibit- mastery over it. It is a state of peace between man and nature,”¹⁷².

In Chasidic literature, Shabbos is called Beer Sheva, a seven-fold well. Shabbos is similar to a well, a source of life-renewing water for the seven parts of the personality. Shabbos energizes every spiritual part of the soul so that we might redouble our efforts to serve G-d in this world¹⁷³. The Slonimer Rebbe teaches: A Jew can attain *emunas halev*, emunah of the heart, with the power of Shabbos. The *neshamah yeseirah*, the additional soul of Shabbos, is from a very high source. It illuminates faith in the heart of a person. On Shabbos we merit *emunas halev* on a level that is impossible at other times¹⁷⁴. A great Jewish thinker described it best: "Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world,"¹⁷⁵.

Shabbos is a time to reflect on who we are, our values, and what's important to us. It is a time to connect to the Almighty and to our fellow Jews. Then, when we have that inspiration and motivation, we carry it with us for the week to come.

Rav Osher Freund told the following tale, a tale of Shabbos coming suddenly. A person was wearing a dirty shirt and he felt great pain and embarrassment; how would he enter into Shabbos like this, with a shirt like this? He went to a *chacham*, a wise person in the area, and said to him: "See! How can I enter into Shabbos in dirty

¹⁷² Sabbath: Day of Eternity, G-d's Rest

¹⁷³ Flames of Faith: An Introduction to Chasidic Thought, pg. 36

¹⁷⁴ Darchei Noam, Raava D'Raavin, Parshas Yisro, 5778

¹⁷⁵ The Sabbath, p. 22

garments?" The *chacham* held onto the shirt with joy and said: "How pleasant and how beautiful is this shirt for Shabbos." The man was very suddenly very happy, and went and accepted Shabbos with joy. Then, they brought him a different, clean shirt¹⁷⁶.

Like all of the *maasiyos* recorded from Rav Freund, this tale has layers and layers of meaning. In my humble interpretation, the man is each and every single one of us. Each week Shabbos creeps up on us suddenly. We are still sullied, wearing the dirty garments of our deeds and misdeeds of the past week. We feel unworthy and unable to connect to the light of Shabbos. In the end, we must realize that the garments we carry with us are beautiful, that no matter what we can tap into the power of Shabbos. When we live like this, not only will we be acting with true joy, but we will realize that we are given a new, clean slate.

Just as we believe in Hashem bringing us out of Egypt, so too we must believe that He has the ability to take us out of the exile that we are in. Even the one who is immersed in worldly pursuits can transcend and feel the sanctity of the Sabbath¹⁷⁷. Shabbos is the time to remember and focus on the miracles of creation, of the Exodus, and ultimately of the era of redemption and the World to Come. The Sefas Emes teaches¹⁷⁸, on Shabbos, the element of the Exodus is awakened as the Talmud teaches that one who rejoices in Shabbos receives an inheritance without constrictions, *meitzarim*¹⁷⁹. This allows us to hear and perceive the "*kol Hashem*" which animates our lives.

Throughout the week, we drag our feet through the mud, getting soiled by the week that was. When Shabbos comes, the world changes. All the fear, all the worry, all the anger, all the tears, they simply disappear. Hashem believes in us and we believe in Him. Even if it's hard. Shabbos relieves all pain of the week. No news, no nothing. Just HaKadosh Baruch Hu and us. Shabbos is the spiritual medication which allows us to live with pain.

The famous story of the Gemara of Yosef m'kor Shabbos¹⁸⁰ teaches us that when one gives to Shabbos, Shabbos repays him. By cherishing the Shabbos that we presently have, may Shabbos repay us with the ability to appreciate the beauty and sanctity of the day a little bit more.

¹⁷⁶ 68 Maasiyos, Tale 25

¹⁷⁷ Toras Avos, p. 94

¹⁷⁸ Sefas Emes, Yisro, 5634

¹⁷⁹ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Shabbos, 118a

¹⁸⁰ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Shabbos, 119a

Defining Chassidus- Clarifying the Path of the Baal Shem Tov

The following is compiled from a shiur I gave on May 26, 2020 via Zoom titled “What the Baal Shem Tov Means to Me”.

When boiling down the ideology, the way of life, the perspective of the world and of Judaism that the Baal Shem Tov taught, it all summarizes in the same way, as things that seem simple to understand but complex to internalize.

First off, we have to define Chassidus. It's not Kabbalah, though it is based off it. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan explained the difference: “The earlier Kabbalah tried to bring man into heaven. The main idea of Chassidus was to bring heaven into man.”¹⁸¹ “Chassidus encourages a perspective of life that sees G-d everywhere, guiding every personal experience and maintaining the existence of every physical item. The Kotzker Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk once said, “Where is G-d? Wherever you let Him in.” Over the centuries of the existence of Chassidus, thousands of devotees, from all walks of life, allowed G-d into every aspect of their lives. Their theology painted the world with dazzling new colours. Once you acquire their point of view, wherever you turn, you'll find infinite light.”¹⁸²

“One of the few pieces of literature written by the Baal Shem Tov is a letter he sent to his brother-in-law. In it, he related a dreamlike experience in which he ascended the heavenly ladder and met the soul of Mashiach. “I spoke to Mashiach and asked him, “When is your majesty coming?” He replied, “This is your sign: It will be at a time when your teachings become widespread in the world, and ‘your springs spread their waters afar,’”¹⁸³.

Rabbi Joey Rosenfeld explained the inner essence of Chassidus, the Torah of the Baal Shem Tov and his talmidim, with the following three-pronged explanation: “Chassidus took the prohibitive emphasis that defined certain trends of Jewish life and transformed it into joy. Chassidus encourages people to connect to G-d in their own unique ways, in ways that make them feel good. Chassidus takes the dark negativity and transforms it into light. Chassidus takes this world, which seems to hide the light of G-d, and forces us to reveal it.”

¹⁸¹ Chasidic Masters, pg. 4

¹⁸² Flames of Faith, pg. 26

¹⁸³ Chasidic Masters, pg.13, based on Degel Machaneh Ephraim, Beshalach, “ובני ישראל יוצאים ביד רמה”

As I try to give over in everything that I share, Judaism is not about rules and regulations. It is about developing a personal connection with the Creator of the world. Rabbi Avraham Tzvi Kluger taught: “If a Jew delves into *sifrei Chassidus* on the existence and greatness of G-d without a deep understanding in his soul of his greatness and value, he has lost the entire point,”¹⁸⁴. Chassidus is less elitist in the sense that people don’t have to feel guilty about learning *bekius* instead of *b’iyun*, or Tanach instead of Gemara, or for picking up a sefer with an English translation¹⁸⁵. The main focus of *penimiyus hatorah* is to make a person realize that their entire life- all their moments of difficulty, of challenge, of darkness, are really just moments of connection.

This point can be explained with the following two teachings. It is told over in the name of the Baal HaTanya, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, that Chassidus is for all those who have been to hell, places where they felt the absolute concealment of G-dliness, and wanted that connection to G-d, but it was not given to them. For that, they get the fortune of being reincarnated into this world, and when they come into this world they desire and yearn to the ultimate revelation of G-dliness¹⁸⁶. On the famous verse in Tehillim, “Even though I walk in the shadow of death,”¹⁸⁷, Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin comments: Stuck within that which I am stuck within, nevertheless I have no reason to fear, for You are with me. For Hashem reveals that even though we are stuck in the place [of darkness] of death, He is with us,”¹⁸⁸.

According to my humble and impoverished understanding, Chassidus emphasises the need to see G-dliness in every person, in every thing, in every place, and in every situation. On this point, Rav Chaim Volozhin, the head of the *misnagdim*, one of the leaders of the opposition to the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples, the author of the Nefesh HaChaim, argued strongly. He did not believe in the emphasis on divine immanence, the belief that G-d manifests Himself in the material world, that the Baal Shem Tov taught, that the Alter Rebbe teaches in the Tanya¹⁸⁹. He saw it as dangerous and as potentially dangerous to Torah Judaism. As Rabbi Shmuel Braun pointed out to me, based on a comment by a great Jewish thinker, what Rav Chaim Volozhin believed was so dangerous is exactly what the Baal Shem Tov wanted! That is that the centrality

¹⁸⁴ Korvah El Nafshi, Maamar HaShalom

¹⁸⁵ Jewish Action, 2014, Winter, Rekindling the Flame: Neo-Chassidus Brings the Inner Light of Torah to Modern Orthodoxy
<https://jewishaction.com/religion/jewish-culture/rekindling-flame-neo-chassidus-brings-inner-light-torah-modern-orthodoxy/>

¹⁸⁶ MiPi Chassidim (on the Baal HaTanya), pg. 48

¹⁸⁷ Tehillim 23:4

¹⁸⁸ Divrei Sofrim, 32

¹⁸⁹ Sefer HaTanya, Likutei Amarim, chapter 33

of Judaism would be to find G-d in every person, in every place, in every moment¹⁹⁰. As Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught in Likutei Moharan, it specifically in darkness, in the concealment, that G-d can be found¹⁹¹.

A prince once lay dying, and seeing that the doctors could do no more for him, the frantic king sent for a *tzaddik* known to be a master of medicine. The *tzaddik* told the king, “There is one cure that might help him. There is a rare precious gem that, if crushed and mixed into a potion, might cure your son. The gem can be found on a faraway island, but there is also one in the center of your crown.” “What good does my kingship serve me if my only child dies?” cried the king. “Take the gem from my crown and cure him!” This *mashal*, which comes from the Baal HaTanya, was offered in response to those who opposed teaching *penimiyus hatorah* in the open. The dying prince represents the Jewish people, languishing from lack of inspiration; the gem represents the inner light of Torah that can revive him.

The previous Slonimer Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky, in his sefer Nesivos Shalom, bring a *mashal*, an allegory, over and over again from the Saba Kadisha of Slonim, Rabbi Mordechai of Lekovitch from the *sefer* Toras Avos¹⁹². Imagine a person must clear a large forest of trees. He chops them down with his axe, one at a time. One, after another, after another. After a while, he realizes that he can never complete the job in his lifetime. He has another option. A controlled burn can clear a huge area of land in a small amount of time. He can light a large fire that can burn all the unwanted trees in one swoop. The Nesivos Shalom explains that it takes a fiery, passionate, and soulful Yiddishkeit to overcome the vast forests of filth and confusion that dominate our environment. That is what *penimiyus hatorah* and Chassidus is all about. As I heard directly from one of the leading *tzaddikim* of our generation, Rav Gamliel Rabinowitz, the essence of Chassidus, of *penimiyus hatorah* is *pashtus* and *temimus*, innocence and simplicity¹⁹³. It’s about getting to know G-d to the best of our limited abilities.

¹⁹⁰ Seeker of Unity, pg. 67

¹⁹¹ Likutei Moharan, 56:3

¹⁹² Nesivos Shalom, Vayikra, Tzav; Nesivos Shalom, Moadim, Pesach; etc.

¹⁹³ Heard in a Zoom shiur given on May 21, 2020

Explaining a chiddush of Chassidus- Learning and Feeling at Once

The following is compiled from a back and forth with a friend which took place on June 18, 2020.

Chassidus teaches that it is not enough to simply learn Yevamos, Chullin, and Menachos (tractates in the Talmud). Knowledge is not enough. We need to use our knowledge in a way that we see G-d in everything. Someone who isn't intellectually bright does not need to learn Kol HaTorah Kulah, the entire Torah, because he will not understand it and utilize it. Such a person needs to learn enough Torah to realize Hashem in all aspects of life, and to act accordingly. We can't know the "עצם", the essence of Hashem, because His essence is unknowable. The Torah (and Mishnah, Gemara, Rishonim, Achronim, Halacha, etc.) are all the pet peeves, the list of rules, the history of G-d, Hashem's medical report, so-to-speak. Chassidus teaches we have to strive to learn about G-d, but also to feel Him.

We cannot experience Hashem without knowing Hashem. It's an emotional connection, but it's nothing more than that. As an example, when Mashiach comes, the farmer will ask "what the heck is going on?" By virtue of the fact that he or she never really understood who they were connecting to, they will not be able to relate to them when they meet "face-to-face", so to speak.

Think of it like online dating. If you start talking to a person for hours on end about nothing, you may "fall in love", but at the end of the day, when the two of you meet, you will not know who each other really are. You spent so much time connecting, you forgot to ask his name, how old he is, where he lives, what he does, etc.

While the unlearned farmer can feel G-d, he does not know him in the slightest. The farmer feels Hashem, but it was just a feeling. He didn't know anything about him. He loved him. He spoke to him. But he didn't understand him! We can never get to the point of knowing Hashem. We strive to "know Hashem". That's what the Torah (and Mishnah, Gemara, Rishonim, Achronim, Halacha, etc.) comes to teach us. Yet, Chassidus teaches us that the more we "understand G-d" (through our Torah learning), the less we "know Him". That's why we need to simply speak to Hashem, to feel His presence, to connect to Him. Because we can never "understand" His essence on an intellectual level.

G-d's essence is contained within it. We do not and we cannot understand the essence, but we can and strive to understand the desires, goals, aspirations, permissions (that Hashem grants). The chiddush of Chassidus is to do both: attempt to learn as much as we can about Hashem, while trying to feel Hashem on a purely spiritual level because we recognize we cannot ever "know Him", meaning knowing His essence.

Acknowledgements- Thanking my Rabbeim

The Mishnah states: “Who is wise? One who learns from everyone,¹⁹⁴”. The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains: “Our Mishnah teaches us that every person has a uniqueness that is only found in him, and therefore it is possible to "learn from everyone." The Mishnah displays things from the perspective of "the learner". However, this basis also works in reverse, [the perspective] of "the teacher". Meaning, for every person there is what to teach others. The practical instruction from this [Mishnah is as follows]: No one is permitted to erase himself from the mission imposed on him- to influence others (with educating teenagers and the like), with the claim there there is nothing for him to teach. For, if another has something to learn from him - it is obvious that he has something to contribute to others,”¹⁹⁵.

With incredible *siyata d'shmaya*, I have been blessed to have learned from a wide variety of rabbanim and rabbeim who have constantly guided me. It is because of their inspiration and motivation, along with my parent's support, that I have the ability to learn and to share what I learn with others.

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Rabbi Glenn Black- My introduction to what a real Jewish leader and *manhig b'Yisrael* is. Your belief in the next generation, in the future of the Jewish people in an increasingly hostile and anti-Torah world

¹⁹⁴ Mishnah, Avos 4:1

¹⁹⁵ Likutei Sichos, Vol. 25, pg. 355

shines through in everything that you do, especially in the care and consideration for the unity and growth of so many NCSYers and their families.

Rabbi Mordechai Burg- My night seder rebbi on NCSY Kollel. You taught me that the Torah can and must be read compassionately, that Chassidus can serve as a basis for one's *hashkafas hachaim*, and that being a *ben Torah* is about what you do when you leave the walls of the *beis midrash*.

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