



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

Walking with God

Edited By
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דרכיה דרכי נעם

In Memory of Louise Held

The Held Foundation

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DEAN AND VICE PRESIDENT

IN THE GLORY DAYS OF THE MIDDLE AGES, TWO TITANS OF JEWISH THOUGHT, Rabbi Moses Maimonides (the Rambam) and Rabbi Moses Nachmanides (the Ramban) sparred. Their argument: was the obligation to believe in God one of the 613 commandments of the Torah, or was it the ground on which all the 613 commandments stood? Neither disputed that Jewish life flows from the fountain of faith, that connecting to God is a life-long journey for the seeking Jew and a pillar of Jewish life and religion.

Not only the Middle Ages, but the modern age affirms that same conviction. Conservative Judaism, in *Emet Ve-Emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism*, affirms, “We believe in God. Indeed, Judaism cannot be detached from belief in, or beliefs about God. ... God is the principal figure in the story of the Jews and Judaism.” In the brochure, *Conservative Judaism: Covenant and Commitment*, the Rabbinical Assembly affirms, “God and the Jewish People share a bond of love and sacred responsibility, which expresses itself in our biblical *brit* (covenant).”

It is to aid the contemporary Jew in the duty and privilege of exploring that relationship, of enlisting the rich resources of Judaism’s great sages through the ages, that the **Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University**, in partnership with the **United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism** and the **Rabbinical Assembly**, has compiled and published this adult education course focused on Jewish apprehensions of God. 12 essays and worksheets will open a wide range of insights and conceptualizations of the One who is beyond all words, beyond all conceptualizations, yet – paradoxically – who is as close as the human heart and who permeates all space and time. Typical of Conservative Judaism, these essays integrate traditional and academic insights and approaches, celebrate the pluralism of Jewish diversity throughout history, and insist that open-minded and critical study can energize a faith attained without blinders.

It remains our happy duty to thank the **Held Family Foundation**, and especially **Mr. Harold Held**, dear friend to the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies and the American Jewish University, and a philanthropic visionary, for making the production and dissemination of this remarkable tool possible. I’d also like to thank **Dr. Robert Wexler**, President of the American Jewish University for his steady support and encouragement of this project from its inception, and **Rabbi Jerome Epstein** and the **United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism**, and **Rabbi Joel Meyers** and the **Rabbinical Assembly**, for their partnership in producing the project. Thanks to Rami Wernik, Acting Dean of the Fingerhut School of Education, for his expertise as a pedagogue. And it is also a personal pleasure to thank my student and colleague, **Ms. Deborah Silver**, whose professionalism, insight, patience and diligence have produced a work of real excellence.

May the Holy Blessing One enliven your study, awaken your heart, and open your soul to the wonders of the Divine, and may the essays and worksheets which follow help you to walk the time honored path of Torah and mitzvot in a spirit of wonder, pluralism, openness, intellectual honesty, and strengthened faith.

B’virkat Shalom,

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

Dean, Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

Vice President, American Jewish University

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

INTRODUCTION

This book is the first in the Ziegler Adult Learning series. Our aim is to provide high quality, stimulating and challenging materials to enable adults to expand their understanding of the basic concepts and tenets of Conservative Judaism – and to expose them to the thinkers, texts and ideas which underpin our tradition. The audience we have in mind is the questioning adult congregant who might not be entirely familiar with Jewish sources.

The book will enable you to teach a series of twelve adult education classes on the subject of God. It contains twelve self-contained units, which are arranged chronologically. Eleven of these comprise:

- an essay
- a set of four texts, with questions
- a fifth text for further/creative study
- session suggestions

The final unit has no essay: instead, it provides an opportunity for participants to reflect upon and consolidate their learning.

RESOURCES

For each session you will need:

- the essays (for session 1, essays 1 and 2; for the rest, the essay for the subsequent session to hand out at the end)
- copies of the texts

It will also be useful to have copies of the Tanakh, in Hebrew and in English.

For the first session, you might also wish to provide every participant with a notebook. This will serve as a journal, in which the participant's own thoughts and insights can be recorded. If your budget will not accommodate this, it is nevertheless strongly recommended that participants be encouraged to bring their own resources so that they can journal, and/or for you to bring spare paper to every session. Busy congregants are unlikely to be able to keep these materials in their minds from session to session, and a journal will provide them with tangible evidence of their learning, as well as something to refer to after the course is over. You might also wish to provide a ring binder, or a folder of some kind, in which participants can keep the essays and texts.

SUGGESTED SESSION FORMAT

Below is a basic format, with timings, for a two-hour session. Please feel free to amend it as it suits you – you might wish to allow more time for chavruta and less for group work, for example.

INTRODUCTION (5 MINS)

Orientation – recap and consolidate what happened in the last session. Elicit the main points of the essay for today/issues/questions/problems the essay raises (we strongly recommend eliciting rather than 'teaching' – easier on you, and it involves the participants more. It will also be quicker and allow more time for chavruta.)

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

CHAVRUTA (30 MINS)

Study of texts in chavruta

GROUP WORK (35 MINS)

- Presentation from the chavruta groups
- Consolidation of what has been learned from the texts

BREAK (10 MINS)

- (If you use a text for part 2 of the session, you can hand it out here)

GROUP STUDY (40 MINS)

- Various options are provided: see individual session suggestions

CLOSEDOWN/JOURNAL (10 MINS)

- What did we learn?
- How does what we learned today sit in the context of previous sessions?
- Journal entries
- Hand out the essay for next time.

A FEW POINTS TO NOTE:

- We recognize you are busy! The session notes have been designed to enable you to prepare your teaching quickly and easily, so you might want to read them even before you begin to prepare the essay and texts. Basically, if you read the essay & have some answers to the questions on the chavruta texts you will be ready to run the session.
- Four chavruta texts are provided per session, with questions to help guide the study. The idea is that you split your participants into four chavruta groups. Initially, give each group one of the texts. When the time comes to report back, give every group all of the texts so that they can study them as their colleagues report on them, and take them home. This technique enables a lot of learning to be covered in a comparatively short time, and has the added benefit of empowering participants to teach each other. Then again, the sessions are packed and the material is rich, so you might want to be selective.
- You may wish to use only two, or only one, of the texts for chavruta. The session has been designed to work whatever you decide. We only have one plea – please let the participants interact with the actual texts. Even when they are complex – and some of them are – there is a magic in people studying together which invariably means that precious insights arise and are shared. If you wish to change the questions at the bottom of every text to help focus the discussion, please feel free – they are only suggestions.
- It is entirely up to you what you do with the second part of the session. You can use the fifth text, or come up with something of your own – we give some ideas in the session outlines. We have sometimes made the fifth text one with which the participants might already be familiar so they can look at it with new eyes.
- Finally, please do not feel limited by the texts we have provided. There is a huge amount of material outside this book which could be used, and which, for reasons which include copyright and space limitations, we have not been able to include. Popular song lyrics, for example, are a rich resource.

GOD IN HASSIDUT

REB MIMI FEIGELSON

INTRODUCTION

Leit atar panuy minei u-melo kol ha'aretz k'vodo.

These two statements, which mean, “There is no place vacant from Him”¹ and “The whole world is filled with His glory” provide a starting point for observing how God reveals Himself and functions within Hassidic thought. This God is an immanent God, a God who dwells within the world and is always present and accessible to all.

It is impossible to speak of the Hassidic conception of God without taking into consideration the divine tradition Hassidism inherited from its predecessors, particularly from kabbalah. To ignore that inheritance would be like talking about a person without taking into consideration that they were born into a particular family and underwent a particular upbringing and education. The dictum of *Massechet Avot* (Ethics of our Fathers), “Know where you come from and where are you going to” pertains to the realm of thought just as much as to the life of any individual - even if the place one is “going to” may turn out to be dramatically different from the place of origin. This is particularly true of the relationship between Hassidut and the Lurianic kabbalah created by Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (the “Ari”) in sixteenth-century Tzfat.

In the Lurianic understanding of creation a catastrophe occurred in the Divine realm – one which manifested in the shattering of the divine vessels that contained God’s light. This led to the falling of the shards of these vessels, which subsequently actualized in the material/physical world we experience today. The residue of the light that the shards held is our means of experiencing the Divine in this world. For the Lurianic mystic, creation was a disaster that needs to be set right, and hence the mission of one’s life is to elevate these shards back to their supernal source. The completion of such a mission would lead to the obliteration of the physical world and the restoration of the primordial Divine universe.

Yet the Hassidic God has a very different account of the events of creation. The teachings of the founder of the Hassidic movement, Rabbi Eliezer Ba’al Shem Tov (known as the Besht)² as evolved in the Beit Midrash of his student and successor, the Maggid of Mezritch³ present a God yearning for revelation and relationship. For this God, the “shattering of the vessels” was not a regrettable mistake, but, rather, an intentional act. The fracture which took place at creation was deliberately intended by the Divine, in order to enable His manifestation. The broken shards, which are embedded in the core of all that is visible to the human eye, are both the source of the immanent God and the means to encounter the Divine in every aspect of the human experience.

The ramifications of this reinterpretation are multi-faceted and inform the very foundations of Hassidic thought. In this essay we will focus on some specific areas in which the Hassidic God reveals himself differently to the way which was previously perceived.

ABANDONMENT OF THE “NEUTRAL ZONE”

The Rabbinic tradition divides our lives between the religious/devotional and the mundane. In fact, the reality is three-fold – there is a realm of *mitzvah* (whether a negative or positive commandment) and a realm of *aveirah* (all transgressions). Between these two is a ‘neutral zone’ – all that which is neither an explicit mitzvah nor an explicit aveirah. In the pre-Hassidic world it was clear that God actively resided in the first tier, was impartial to the middle one, and was removed from the third.

¹ In this essay, God will be referred to using the masculine singular pronoun. However, this should not stand in the way of our shared understanding that God transcends gender definitions.

² The acronym ‘Besht’ means ‘Master of the Good Name’. The Besht lived from 1700-1760.

³ Rabbi Dov Ber, d. 1772, also known as Ha-Maggid Ha-Gadol – The Great Preacher.

GOD IN HASSIDUT

In the fourth chapter of his pivotal work, the *Tanya*, Reb Shneur Zalman of Liadi⁴ likens the observance of mitzvot to hugging a king. The only way a king can reveal himself to the masses is by virtue of leaving his palace completely garmented. But it is clear to all that when a person hugs the king, their interest is not in the king's garments, nor even in the king's body. Their arms may sense the fabric of the king's robes, or even perceive the king's heartbeat, but it is really the essence of the king, rather than the king's physical body, that the person wants to touch.

Reb Shneur Zalman would ask of us no less when addressing the mitzvot. The mitzvot are the King's garments, the means by which God reveals Himself to us. They are necessary in order for us to be able to embrace the Almighty. We are asked to embrace the King, while never letting go of the vision that it is the King's essence, cloaked by the garments/mitzvot, which we actually yearn for. Hence, we adhere to the mitzvot while continuing to aspire to ascend to that which surpasses the boundaries of the human experience. For the God of the Hassidim, then, the mitzvot are a temporary necessity brought about by the limitations of the human condition.

We could challenge this interpretation by asking Reb Shneur Zalman about the King's intimate relationships. There will be those who will only see the king in formal garb, but some will see him in informal attire as well. His queen and his personal servant may even see him naked. I believe we could present to Reb Shneur Zalman the possibility of the servant of God, perhaps the mystic, aspiring to encounter the King beyond the veil of garments/mitzvot. Cleaving to the King (*d'vekut*) and the union of the King and Queen (*yichud*) could be perceived as transcending the realm of mitzvah.

Another re-formulation of the 'neutral zone' is found in the teachings of Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev⁵ in his monumental work, the *Kedushat Levi*. He states that according to the halakhah, a sefer Torah (Torah scroll), must be complete in order to be able to fulfill the obligation of reading from a sefer Torah. There can be no words missing, not even a letter or part of a letter. Reb Levi Yitzchak asks, why is it if two letters are stuck together the Torah scroll is also rendered incomplete?

He answers by explaining that there is the Torah of the black letters and the Torah of the white spaces. Currently we live a reality dictated by the Torah of the black letters, but time will come when we will actually read and live the Torah of the white spaces. If two letters are stuck together though, that Torah is incomplete! Yes, we should adhere to the Torah of the black letters, but simultaneously we have an obligation to maintain the integrity and wholeness of the Torah of the white spaces. By doing so, and by not crowding the words, letters or spaces, we hold on to the vision of the time to come. While there are those who choose to limit their current religious life to the Torah of the black letters, Reb Levi Yitzchak would beg of you to embrace the Torah of the white letters as well.

We are now able to see another reading which sanctifies that which is perceived as "other" – neither mitzvah nor aveirah. If God resides in all, there is no space that is vacant of His presence. It follows, then, that God is present in all three realms simultaneously and equally! This might be understood to mean that there is no difference between the three realms, which could be perceived as an invitation to enter into the realm of sin. Nonetheless, the Hassidic movement *has* maintained its adherence to halakhah throughout the generations. Perhaps this is why Reb Shneur Zalman did not take the next step posed to him by our challenge. Instead, the Hassidic movement used this understanding as a means to sanctify things which have no apparent halakhic status rather than abandoning the halakhic endeavor.

The abandonment of the neutral zone – the gap between mitzvah and aveirah - operates to transform everyday living itself into a religious act based on one axiom – the power of the human mind and intention. God is available and present in any moment. The Besht is quoted as saying, "A person is where their mind is." Therefore if a person's consciousness is aligned to being in the presence of God, indeed that moment is transformed into a holy moment!

⁴ The founder of Chabad. He died in 1812.

⁵ d. 1809. Reb Levi Yitzchak allows us to observe the fusion of a Hassidic master (a non-geographic charismatic leader) and a local rabbi (a geographic rabbinic leader). He will at times embrace halakhic paradigms to embrace spiritual questions.

⁶ The Seer of Lublin, known as the 'Chozeh'. He died in 1815.

GOD IN HASSIDUT

DEMOCRATIZATION

This principle also lends itself to the notion of democratization. God is no longer the inheritance of the learned, pious and scholarly. Rather, since God dwells equally in all, God belongs equally *to* all. The center of religious life shifts out of the Bet Midrash – particularly, away from the pages of the traditional Jewish texts – and is placed instead with the masses who go to work every day and engage in the mundane. God becomes a partner in *all* human actions, no longer in only the designated religious ones. God no longer exclusively dwells in the midst of the Torah scholars. It is in the stories of the wood-choppers, the water-carriers and the social outcasts who are engaged in unknown acts of lovingkindness (*hesed*) that our new heroes are created. They are now the ones who befriend the Almighty and represent His will on earth.

MIRACLES

The God of the Hassidim also challenges us to address the realm of miracles. In Martin Buber's novel 'Gog and Magog' he describes how in the courtyard of the Rebbe of Lublin⁶ miracles would roll under the table! The world does not progress in a linear manner. Nor, for that matter, does reality. Time is not linear. God, as manifested in the Hassidic teachings, is not limited to what the eye can see or the mind can perceive. Our consciousness is what on the one hand determines the scope of our experience of the Divine. Nonetheless, it does not limit the possibilities of the Divine to reveal Himself in the world. God has a will that needs to be actualized in the world. It is our choice whether or not to align ourselves with it.

A PERSONAL GOD

For the majority of the Hassidic Masters, God is a personal God. He has an individual and unique will in regard to each and every individual. Every person was planted in the world to fulfill a specific mission. In the same manner that God has multiple names and each one of these names is a prism in which God reveals Himself, we would have to say that every person is a manifestation of God, embodying a uniqueness which cannot in any way be replicated. One might ask, "Is this a mission that is affixed from the moment of conception?" and would have to answer, "Yes, this is what I was sent into the world to do." One might ask, "Can one's mission change throughout their lifetime?" and for that, too, one could answer "Yes".

I have heard (following the Hassidic tradition, in which teachings were transmitted orally long before they were printed) a Hassidic teaching from my Teacher and Rebbe, in the name of the Komarno Rebbe⁷. The Komarno Rebbe is known for his mystical and Kabbalistic teachings. He left us with 16 books, among them a commentary on the Zohar and a journal of his mystical dreams. He asks, 'Why is it that it is so hard for people to know what it is that they were sent to the world to do?'

To this he replies:

"It is taught that at Mount Sinai there were 600,000 core souls. As history unraveled, chips of these core souls descended into the world. In the past every Jew's soul was a chip of one of these core souls. It used to be that the soul of each separate individual would be constituted from a single chip, and their soul would be required to actualize one single mission in the world. As we progress towards the end of time, souls are sent down into the world as configurations of multiple 'soul-splinters', no longer one distinguishable chip."⁸

⁷ Yitzhak Isaac Safirin of Komarno. He died in 1874.

⁸ Note that he does not read the verse as being about 600,000 males over the age of twenty, which is its literal meaning in Torah.

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This would explain why some people are drawn simultaneously in multiple directions, each seemingly a viable Divine-oriented calling. It may be that in different chapters of our life different “soul-splinters” will take prevalence and dictate our daily life and decisions. Our life choices will continuously be perceived as Godly, though, if they are a representation of our aspiration to serve the Divine.

DARKNESS

There is one more realm where the God of the Hassidim is often perceived to reside – the realm of the Darkness. This is often described in terms of *Mitzrayim* (“Egypt”), as a metaphor for a contracted consciousness.

For a moment we need to return to our Lurianic heritage. According to the Kabbalah of the Ari, in order for the world to be created God had to vacate Himself from Himself in order to create a “*chalal panuy*” (a vacant space) so that Creation could occur. The Hassidic masters have understood this model in two different ways. The first says that the world was originally all God, and He vacated Himself into Himself, hence creating a space where He was not. Into that space, a world manifested.⁹ This is my understanding of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov’s¹⁰ reading of creation.

Rabbi Nachman’s reading suggests a deep theological depression and darkness. If God created the world in a space that He vacated of Himself this means that our primordial memory of God is one of absence! Rebbe Nachman is continuously wrestling with a paradox: his desire is to encounter a Divine entity that needs to remove Himself in order to reveal Himself! For Rebbe Nachman, darkness, absence and abandonment are true states, preconditions of human reality in the world.

If we wish to embrace this paradigm, we need to remember that the darkness and abandonment are precisely the states which ultimately enable God to manifest in the world. They are enabling factors of a greater good. An interesting metaphor to make this paradigm more concrete is to think of a dance. The dynamic of an ecstatic dance is that there is a moment where both feet are in mid air, a moment that creates a vacant space between the dancer and the dance floor. In that moment, the void is what defines the dance. In this understanding of the ‘*chalal panuy*’, then, God danced the world into existence.

An alternative reading that has been posed in Hassidic teachings talks of God retracting Himself into Himself until the point of manifestation. The realm of ‘supernal ideas’ descends gradually from the most ethereal until it finally manifests as something concrete¹¹. When embracing this reading we witness a reality in which we return to the phrases with which I opened this essay: *Leit atar panuy minei* and *melo kol ha’aretz k’vodo* – “There is no place vacant from Him” and “The whole world is filled with His glory”. God is in all places and there is nowhere, anywhere, which is void of the Divine presence. We are called upon to maximize our intellectual capacities when attempting to embrace God, even as we experience our sense of absentness. For God is never absent.

A Hassidic voice that articulates this condition of experiencing darkness, absence and abandonment in multiple sites throughout his teachings is Reb Menachem Nachum.¹² In the *Ma’or Einayim* (“Light of the Eyes”), which is a compilation of his teachings, primarily teachings about the Torah portions but also on sections of the Talmud, he adopts phraseology such as “Ya’akov” (versus “Yisrael”) and “Mitzrayim” (versus “Eretz Yisrael”) to suggest a state of contracted consciousness, a state in which an individual no longer feels the presence of God or can see the value of their uniqueness.

Reb Menachem Nachum’s teachings hark back to the notion of *nefila* (“falling”) which is an intrinsic part of the Lurianic understanding of creation. However, instead of the Divine shards falling into this world in order to enable God to reveal Himself, he understands the “falling” to refer to the lapse of a person’s state of God-consciousness. In this moment of darkness, when we do not experience God’s presence, what can we hold on to?

⁹ This interpretation lends itself to a more Aristotelian understanding of creation, in which the leaps between pairs of “form” and “matter” create vacant spaces and therefore gaps in the presence of God.

¹⁰ 1772 – 1810. He was the great-grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov.

¹¹ This is similar to the Neoplatonic understanding of creation

¹² Reb Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl, also known as the ‘Chernobler Rebbe’, 1730 – 1797.

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There are two pegs that Reb Menachem Nachum offers us to hang on in these moments. The first is to have faith in the notion of *Leit atar panuy minei u-melo kol ha'aretz k'vodo*. No matter where a person is, no matter how far and distant they feel from God, God is there. Not only is God there but in the deepest depths of darkness only God can rescue us. Paradoxically it is in this most devastating state of being that one can experience the ultimate connection with God.

The second peg avails itself to us in less critical conditions. Here, Reb Menachem Nachum teaches us that there are moments that we 'fall out of grace,' so to speak, not for any mishap on our behalf but in assistance of someone else. Over and over again Reb Menachem Nachum teaches that at times we find ourselves in locations that are so foreign to us that we cannot begin to imagine why we are there. The feeling of foreignness can be geographic, psychological, intellectual or spiritual. Reb Menachem Nachum will tell us that there are Divine sparks which fell at the moment of creation which are waiting there for us to lift them up. He teaches, using a similar understanding to that of the soul clusters that we encountered in the Komarno Rebbe's teaching above, that the sparks are connected to our soul-root. This being so, we are the only ones who can descend to raise them up. In this reading our descent, which challenges us, is in fact harnessing us in the service of the Almighty, and in our falling we are doing holy work.

CONCLUSION

It is important to remember that the Hassidic movement, with its plethora of masters and teachers, communities and traditions, shares the truth *B'chol d'rachecah da'ehu* – "in all your ways you are to know Him."¹³ All ways are legitimate and eligible for encountering and serving God. Hassidism is not monolithic in its practice, theology or perception of the Divine. However, the movement shares a fundamental truth – the belief that cleaving to God is not only the labor of the mystic but the gift of every single yearning individual.

As told in the name of multiple Hassidic Masters, God - not only the Hassidic God, but God, as God - dwells wherever we allow Him to dwell.

Ashrei yoshvei bey'techa! – Blessed are all those that dwell in your Home.

¹³ Proverbs 3:6

GOD IN HASSIDUT – TEXT 1

מאור עיניים פרשת יתרו

והנה צריך האדם שגם בנפלו ממדריגתו יתאמץ לעלות אל ה' באותו מדריגה שהוא עכשיו כי צריך להאמין שמלא כל הארץ כבודו ולית אתר פנוי מיניה ואפילו במדריגה שהוא עכשיו יש גם כן השם יתברך כי לית אחר פנוי מיניה רק שהוא מצומצם מאוד וזהו (תהלים קי"ג, ג') ממזרח שמש עד מבואו וגו' שהצדיק נקרא שמש כמאמר עד שלא שקעה שמשו של עלי זרחה שמשו של שמואל וכו' הרי שהצדיק נקרא שמש וזהו ממזרח שמש דהיינו שהמוח שלו בהיר וזך ודבוק בהשם יתברך עד מבואו דהיינו כשמתלק הבהירות ונפל ממדריגתו ולעולם צריך להיות מהולל שם ה' ולהתאמץ לעלות אל השם יתברך באותו מדריגה שהוא עכשיו:

...ובמה יבוא להשם יתברך כשנפל ממדריגתו שהרי ניטל ממנו המוחין והדעת אף שהשם יתברך הוא מלא כל הארץ כבודו דהיינו אפילו במקום שהוא כל הארץ שכולו ארציות שהוא רק חומר עב אף על פי כן מלא כבודו יתברך והנה השם יתברך נקרא חיי החיים דהיינו שכל החיים שבעולם בהמות חיות ועופות ומין האדם החיות שלהם הוא השם יתברך וזהו חיי החיים שהוא יתברך החיות של כל החיים ויחשוב כשנפל ממדריגתו הלא חי אני ומי הוא החיות שלי הלא הבורא יתברך ונמצא יש כאן גם כן הוא יתברך אך שהוא מצומצם מאוד:

MA'OR EINAYIM, COMMENTARY ON PARASHAT YITRO

So, even when a person falls from their level¹, they must nonetheless strive to ascend to Hashem from whatever level they are now at. Because one must believe that *the whole earth is full of His glory and there is no place vacant from him*. Whatever the level at which a person currently finds themselves, Hashem's strength (may He be blessed) is there, since *there is no place vacant from him*; it is just that He is very much condensed [*metzumtzaam*]. This is what it means when it says [Psalm 103:3] 'From the rising of the sun until its setting' – the *tzaddik*² is called the sun, since his mind is clear and pure, clinging to Hashem (may He be blessed) until its setting – that is, when the clarity disappears and he falls from his position. Yet he must strive to make God's name praised, and make every effort to ascend to Hashem (may his name be blessed) from the level at which he now finds himself...

...and with what can a person come to Hashem (may he be blessed) when he has fallen from his level? Because his consciousness and knowledge will have been taken from him. But *the whole earth is full of His glory* – and so Hashem (may he be blessed) – which means, even in a place which is the whole earth – all earthliness, merely crude matter – even so, it is *full of His glory*. And Hashem (may He be blessed) is called the 'Life of all Life' – that is, He (may He be blessed) is the life force of all the life in the world. He is the life force of wild beasts, and animals, and birds, and the human species. Their life force *is* Hashem. And this is the 'Life of all Life' – that Hashem (may he be blessed) is the life force of all life. Hence when a person falls from their level, they can think: Indeed, I am alive! And who is my life force? Is it not Hashem (may He be blessed)? And so he will find that even here [at the level where he is], there *is* Hashem (may He be blessed) – it is just that He is very much condensed.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What is to be learned from falling, according to the Ma'or Einayim?
- Can a tzaddik also fall? How?
- What should a person do when they have fallen? How?
- What does the Ma'or Einayim mean by saying 'God is their life force'?

¹ The Hebrew word here is *madrega*, which also means 'a step' (in a series of stairs) or 'stage', or 'state'.

² Note that for the Ma'or Einayim a *tzaddik* is anyone who chooses to live a life of devotion – not necessarily a great Hassidic master or scholar (which is what the term comes to mean later in Hassidut)

GOD IN HASSIDUT – TEXT 2

מאור עיניים פרשת יתרו

והטעם למה צריך ליפול ממדרגתו הוא כך דהנה יש נשמות נפולים יש שנפלו מששת ימי בראשית ויש שנפלים בכל דור ודור ומתגלגלים והם נע ונד ואינם יכולים לבוא אל השם יתברך כי אין להם במה לבוא שבחיים חיותם עסקו בהבלי עולם הזה ולא עשו כלום וכשהצדיק נופל ממדרגתו ואחר כך קם כמאמר (משלי כ"ד, ט"ז) שבע יפול צדיק וקם וכשקם ועולה אל השם יתברך מעלה עמו אותם נשמות הנ"ל והנה אינו יכול להעלות אלא אותן נשמות שהם משרשו ולכן צריך כל אדם ליפול ממדרגתו כדי להעלות נשמות שהם משרשו והבן:

MA'OR EINAYIM, COMMENTARY ON PARASHAT YITRO

And the reason a person must fall from their level is as follows: there are fallen souls. Some have been falling since the six days of Creation; others fall in every generation and are reincarnated – they wander about and are unable to come to Hashem (may He be blessed). They have nothing to enable them to do so, since during their lives they squandered their essence on the vanities of this world and achieved nothing. Yet when a *tzaddik*¹ falls from his position and after that rises up again (as it says [Proverbs 24:16] “A *tzaddik* can fall seven times and rise up”) – when he rises up again and ascends to Hashem (may He be blessed), he raises up with him those [fallen] souls. Note, though, that he can only raise up those souls which belong to his soul root². This why every person must fall from his position – so as to raise up the souls from his soul root. And understand this!

STUDY QUESTIONS

- How does this passage explain the difficult moments in our lives?
- What does this passage say about the shared responsibility we have for each other?
- What is the role of the *tzaddik*?
- Who has been a *tzaddik* in your life and picked up your fallen soul?

¹ Note that for the Ma'or Einayim a *tzaddik* is anyone who chooses to live a life of devotion – not necessarily a great Hassidic master or scholar (which is what the term comes to mean later in Hassidut).

² According to some mystical traditions there were 600,000 “soul roots” which stood at Sinai. Every person is a manifestation of one facet of a “soul root”. Therefore we each have not only a biological family but a ‘soul root’ family.

GOD IN HASSIDUT – TEXT 3

קדושת לוי פרשת וישלח

ויאמר לא יעקב עוד שמך כי אם ישראל כי שרית עם אלהים ואנשים ותוכל. הענין, כי יש אדם שהוא דבוק תמיד בהבורא ברוך הוא אפילו כשהוא מדבר עם בני אדם ויש אדם שהוא דבוק בהבורא ברוך הוא בעת שעוסק בעבודתו ובתורתו ובמצותיו אבל כשמדבר עם בני אדם אינו יכול לדבק מחשבתו להבורא ברוך הוא והבחינה הא' נקרא ישראל, כי הוא אותיות ישר אל וגם לי ראש והבחינה הב' נקרא יעקב יו"ד עקב. וזהו לא יעקב וכו', כי אם ישראל כי שרית עם אלהים, כלומר שאתה דבוק באלהים אפילו כשאתה מדבר עם בני אדם וזהו עם אלהים ואנשים, ותוכל לדבק מחשבתך תמיד להבורא יתברך:

KEDUSHAT LEVI, COMMENTARY ON PARASHAT VA-YISHLACH

“And he said: thy name shall be called no more Ya’akov, but Yisrael, for thou hast contended with God and with men, and hast prevailed’. [Genesis 32:29] The point being made here is that there are people who are constantly cleaving to the Creator, blessed be He, even when they are talking to other people; and there are people who are cleaving to the Creator, blessed be He, when engaged in His service and His Torah and His *mitzvot*, but when they speak with people, they are unable to cleave their thoughts to the Creator, blessed be he. And one level is called “Yisrael”, for it is the letters of “*Li Rosh*” [my head], and the second level is called Ya’akov “*Yud Ekev*” [yud, the heel]. And this is “no more Ya’akov but Yisrael, for thou hast contended with God” – meaning, that you are cleaving to God even when you speak with other people. And this is “with God and with men and hast prevailed”, to cleave your thoughts always to the Creator, blessed be He.

(Translation by Reb Mimi Feigelson)

STUDY QUESTIONS

- According to this passage, what are the two different ways of being connected to God?
- Which is better? Why?
- What, according to this passage, do Jacob’s two names mean?
- How does this challenge us in our everyday lives?

GOD IN HASSIDUT – TEXT 4

תניא פרק ד'

כך התורה ירדה ממקום כבודה שהיא רצונו וחכמתו יתברך ואורייתא וקודשא בריך הוא כולא חד ולית מחשבה תפיסא ביה כלל. ומשם נסעה וירדה בסתר המדרגות ממדרגה למדרגה בהשתלשלות העולמות עד שנתלבשה בדברים גשמיים ועניני עולם הזה שהן רוב מצות התורה ככולם והלכותיהן ובצדפי אותיות גשמיות בדיו על הספר עשרים וארבעה ספרים שבתורה נביאים וכתובים כדי שתהא כל מחשבה תפיסא בהן ואפי' בחי' דבור ומעשה שלמטה ממדרגת מחשבה תפיסא בהן ומתלבשת בהן.

ומאחר שהתורה ומצותיה מלבישים כל עשר בחי' הנפש וכל תרי"ג אבריה מראשה ועד רגלה הרי כולה צרורה בצרור החיים את ה' ממש ואור ה' ממש מקיפה ומלבישה מראשה ועד רגלה כמ"ש צורי אחסה בו וכתוב כצנה רצון תעטרנו שהוא רצונו וחכמתו יתברך המלוכשים בתורתו ומצותיה..

ומתלבשת בהקב"ה ממש דאורייתא וקב"ה כולא חד. ואף שהתורה נתלבשה בדברים תחתונים גשמיים הרי זה כמחבק את המלך ד"מ שאין הפרש במעלת התקרבותו ודביקותו במלך בין מחבקו כשהוא לבוש לבוש אחד בין שהוא לבוש כמה לבושים מאחר שגוף המלך בתוכם. וכן אם המלך מחבקו בזרועו גם שהיא מלוכשת תוך מלבושיו כמ"ש וימינו תחבקני שהיא התורה שנתנה מימין..

From the Tanya (chapter 4)

And so the Torah came down from the place of her glory at the will and wisdom of the Holy One, Blessed be He. And the Torah and the Holy One, Blessed be He, comprise one entity, which human thought is incapable of grasping. But from there, she journeyed through the 'secret places of the stairs'¹, from level to level, through the interconnected chain of the worlds until she became arrayed in material things and worldly matters – the mitzvot of the Torah, and the laws relating to them, and the combinations of actual letters written with ink on a scroll [which became] the twenty-four books of the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings, so that human thought could grasp them. Even speech and action, which are on a lower level than human thought, are capable of grasping her and being clothed in her.

And since the Torah and her commandments clothe the ten qualities of the human soul and all of its 613 organs, from head to foot, the whole soul becomes truly 'bound up in the bundle of life' with Hashem, and Hashem's light envelops it and clothes it from head to foot – as it says, 'My rock, in whom I shelter'...

Torah is truly dressed in Hashem, since Torah and the Holy One, Blessed be He, are one and the same. For although the Torah is clothed in lower, material things, it is as if one was embracing a king – that is, it makes no difference to the closeness and intimacy with the king whether the king is wearing one robe or many robes during the embrace - it is still the king who is inside them. And it is the same if the king embraces a person, whether his arm is clothed with garments or not, as it says 'his right hand embraces me' – that is the Torah, which was given from God's right hand...

STUDY QUESTIONS

- According to Reb Shneur Zalman (the author), why did the Torah descend?
- What, according to him, is the purpose of the mitzvot?
- Torah is one of the 'king's' robes – do you think there are others? What are they?
- Has there been a time when you felt yourself embraced by, or embracing, God?

¹ A quotation from the Song of Songs (2:14) – the word for 'stairs' in Hebrew is "madrega" and is translated here as 'level'. It can also mean 'stage' or 'state'.

GOD IN HASSIDUT – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

The *Bat Ayin*, R' Avraham Dov of Avritch, was one of the Hassidic leadership who made aliyah to Israel in 1777. One day a stranger entered his *Chazter* [courtyard] in the city of Tzfat and the Rebbe, R' Avraham ran to greet him. The Hassidim couldn't hear what they spoke of, but as soon as the stranger left, the Rebbe returned to his study and did not emerge for three weeks. The Hassidim were puzzled – who was that person, what did he and the Rebbe discuss, and why did the Rebbe lock himself in his study for three weeks? Their puzzlement grew when the Rebbe finally emerged and commanded his Hassidim to prepare the most amazing *Tish* [a Rebbe's table].

The Hassidim did as they were told. They ate and drank and sang and danced. But the whole time, all they really wanted to know was - who was the stranger? What did he and the Rebbe discuss? Why did the Rebbe lock himself in his room for three weeks and why he finally emerged from his study?

At last one of the Hassidim mustered up the courage to ask the Rebbe “WHY???”

The Rebbe silenced the song and dance and began: “Many years ago, while still in Avritch, I would always sit for hours with anyone that came from Eretz Yisrael. I would question them about the Holy Land and what it was like to live there. One day a *Shaliach D'rabbanan* (a charity collector) showed up and we talked endlessly. When he stood to leave I begged him, “Please, tell me more!” He said to me, “I've told you everything.” But I insisted, “Tell me more!” He said to me, “What more can I tell you. When you stand at *Ma'arat Hamachpelah* [the cave of Machpelah] along with the Patriarchs and Matriarchs you will know.” And he turned to leave. I begged of him, “Please, tell me more!” He said, “What more can I tell you? When you stand at *Kever Rachel* [Rachel's tomb] and cry with her, you will know.” And again he turned to leave. I continued to beg, “Please, tell me more!” He said, “I've told you all I can. When you get there you will see for yourself, even the stones are precious stones. Even the stones are made of emeralds and rubies and diamonds!” And with this he left.

“So you see,” the Rebbe turned to his Hassidim, “when I arrived, everything was exactly as he said it would be. Everything... but the stones... they were regular stones, they weren't precious stones at all! I could never understand why he lied to me. Why the last thing he told me was not true.

“Three weeks ago, he walked into the *Chatzer* and despite the passage of 20 years, I recognized him immediately. I ran to him and said, “Everything you told me was true, but the stones! Why did you lie to me? Why did you tell me they were precious stones when they are not?! He looked at me and said with dismay and surprise: “What? They're not?”

“So I locked myself in my study and I began to cry. Every day I would cry and look out at the stones. Today, finally, while looking out of the window I realized that every stone was precious. Every stone was an emerald or a ruby or a diamond!”

The Avritcher Rebbe had to cry in order to transform his sight. And you? Will the transformation happen through joy? Through prayer? Through dance? Through learning? What will it take for you to sign yourself in the Book of Life?

SESSION SUGGESTIONS – GOD IN HASSIDUT

In this session the group will consider how God is presented in various Hassidic texts. The concepts are quite complex and may require some translation. The questions in the chavruta texts have been carefully selected to help guide the discussion and open up the texts and the concepts they contain.

INTRODUCTION

Briefly remind people of the content of the essay. Some questions to generate a brief recap might be:

- What is the 'neutral zone' and why does Hassidic thought abandon it?
- What does Hassidism understand by the idea of a 'personal' God?
- What is the function and symbolism of darkness in Hassidic thought?

TEXT STUDY

Split the class into [up to] 4 chavruta groups and hand out the texts. They are quite complex and the groups might wish to refer to the essay as well while working.

Allow each group to report back on their understanding of the texts and their answers to the questions, and then draw the discussion together. Each set of questions about the texts has a personal aspect – this is to set the groups up for the second part of the discussion. You might also wish to ask participants whether there has been a moment in their lives when they felt God's presence or absence, and what 'level' they consider they are currently at – are they falling or rising?

GROUP STUDY

Text based: the story is a traditional vehicle for Hasidic teachings. Use the story here to give participants a springboard for exploring how they might 'transform their sight' and encounter God in a new or different way.

If you want to be more creative, there are a number of options. Based on participants' personal experiences, see if they wish to create a story, or a prayer (some wonderful prayers can come out of the experience of having fallen). Or you might wish to bring a favorite Hasidic tale of your own to share.

CONCLUSION

Allow participants time to journal. Hand out the essay for next time and conclude the session.

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