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Walking with Life

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LIVING IN THE DREAM

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INTRODUCTION

There is wisdom to be gained from the popular TV series *Dexter*, whose protagonist leads a dual life as both a blood-splatter analyst for the local police department and a serial killer. When Dexter is asked how he deals with all the gore he responds, “I’m good at compartmentalization.” What is “compartmentalization,” and is there a related lesson to be learned for Jews who work?

While typical daily work is not as gory as Dexter’s, messes do occur. And the struggle to maintain focus and purpose amidst the chaotic, unending flow of information and projects in a given work-day perhaps only intensifies when we get home. We shift from “professional” to “person,” but perhaps we check our work email just one more time or hold onto our cell-phones “just in case someone needs me.”

Compartmentalization is but one response to the strain that occurs when we transition from one sphere of our lives into another. But compartmentalization can be very dangerous. It bifurcates our souls in the name of survival. Marines have spoken about this coping mechanism for psychologically preparing for battle, temporarily storing away all of their feelings, fears, anxieties, anger, and sadness into little “mental boxes” or “psychological compartments.” This might be useful during battle, but is it a healthy work ethic? When I return home from work, should I be trying to confine my work-head to the back of my mind as I conjure up my home-head? Can I live like that?

It is true that compartmentalization can allow a professional to limit occupational stress. But I suggest that not only is it not really possible for a person to “disintegrate” themselves in this way, but the tradition considers that it is actively unhealthy for a human being to do so. It is no accident that the hero of *Dexter* is dangerously psychotic. There is a sacred alternative to the extremes of compartmentalization peeking out from within the troves of Jewish thought. Indeed, as we shall see, the tradition has a good deal to say about how to achieve balance and tranquility in our lives.

DELEGATION

One pattern we can discern in the tradition, from the Torah onwards, is that of delegation. When Moses is overwhelmed with questions, his father-in-law, Yitro, admonishes him that if he does not delegate, he will wear himself out and the consequences will be disastrous for all concerned. Yitro even suggests a system for delegating – a hierarchy whereby each problem is assigned to its appropriate level, leaving Moses free to deal with the “big picture” issues.¹

A similar way the ancient rabbis proposed for achieving balance was suggesting that “a wise one...speaks on the first point first and on the last point last.”² Every issue has its time and needs to be addressed in its own realm. Whereas compartmentalization is the disconnect from setting to setting, or from emotion to emotion, this rabbinic text suggests that all things exist in a continuum, and that as we navigate our transitions from moment to moment, we would do better to respond the moment in which we find ourselves instead of responding to an earlier experience. This advice is, of course, easier said than done: but if we consciously make an effort to delegate and to prioritize, we might begin to feel the benefits of a clear space in which to take a breath and consider what we want to do next. And this brings us to the second aspect of the tradition.

TAKING TIME TO PAUSE

There is a tremendous tradition of frenzied motion in Jewish tradition, which finds its voice in the haste with which the Israelites escaped Egypt. There is so much to do, so many people to coordinate. How can I ever find a moment to pause? The very moment that the Israelites become trapped in their motion, dizzied by the urgent need to become liberated, can also point to a possible Jewish response to this question.

When the Israelites stand at the edge of the Red Sea, their oppressors on their heels, they turn to Moses in fear, who instructs them to “stand still”³ in order to “move forward.”⁴ This seemingly ordinary combination of phrases is actually

¹ *Exodus 18:13ff*

² *Mishnah Avot 5:10*

³ *Exodus 14:13*

⁴ *Exodus 14:15*



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quite telling. It is precisely in the “standing still,” the pausing to formulate a plan of action, that productivity (a liberation of a deep kind), increases. If I continue on a path I’ve been determined to follow, and am not any closer to success, perhaps pausing is a strategy worth considering. Who is to say that the current plan is the only one that holds promise? When there are multiple paths, taking that step back makes all the difference.

Think of the *Havdalah* ceremony which marks the end of Shabbat. When I smell the spicebox, I am actively caring for my soul in the re-entry to the work week. This ritual delineation of time reminds me that I am fortunate to have one day of four as a time outside of time, an opportunity to pause before taking a next step forward. Shabbat is yet one more Jewish tradition that encourages us to stand still in order to move forward.

There is a wonderful story of Sarah who, when she returns home from work, is observed by her neighbor David as she stands in her driveway, gesticulating elaborately. David asks Sarah, “What are you doing with your arms? I see you do this strange thing every day when you return from work.” To which Sarah replies, pointing to the air next to her car, “This is my worry tree. Every day I come home, I stand before my worry tree and take my worries off of my body, and hang them on the tree before I enter my home.” Is the ritual of the worry tree extreme compartmentalization? Or is it a ritual of pausing, of knowing that this space we call home is somewhere different?

INTEGRATION

Consider the Torah’s imperative in Leviticus 18:

You shall follow my rules, keep my statutes and walk in them: I am the Holy One, your God. Keep my statutes and my rules: if a person does so, they will live by them: I am God.⁵

The tradition comments wryly elsewhere that we should understand the text to mean, “live by them: do not die by them!”⁶ We could also understand, though, that the injunction to “live by them” is expressed in the plural to tell us that we should not be trying to separate Torah from life, but instead, they are part of the same thing. In other words, the tradition would have us find ways to integrate rather than disintegrate.

Yet so much of our lives are taken up by the task of simply keeping up. Keeping up with the demands of work, of family, of paying the bills. We are so busy, moving so quickly that even if we delegate, prioritize and pause, we rarely take stock of ourselves, our bodies, our souls, our dreams. What dreams did we once have that have faded? Is there enough of us left to dream? Can we learn to nurture our oft-neglected souls? Because if we can – we might be able to find the way back to integration.

In the Torah the most famous of dreams are Pharaoh’s who, upon waking from visions of cows and wheat, experiences an agitated soul, interpreted to mean that “his spirit rang inside him like a bell.”⁷ This ringing experience is connected through midrash⁸ to the dream of another king, Nebuchadnezzar, who wakes with a similar sensation.⁹ The suggested difference between the two experiences is that while Pharaoh remembered the details of the dreams and did not know their interpretations, Nebuchadnezzar had a dream and knew its interpretation; but he forgot both the details and the meaning of his own dream, only remembering that he once dreamt. And there is a legend that when Adam lay dreaming, God whispered in his ear all the secrets of creation. When Adam awoke, he only dimly remembered, but God’s voice was still manifest in his dreams.

The distinguishing characteristic of Moses was that God spoke to him “face to face”¹⁰ and not through dreams, the more conventional pathway for prophecy.¹¹ The later tradition interprets that whereas Moses saw God through a clear

⁵ *Leviticus 18:4-5*

⁶ *Babylonian Talmud Yoma 85b*

⁷ *Genesis 41:8 and Rashi ad.loc.*

⁸ *Midrash Rabbah Bereishit 89:5*

⁹ *Daniel 2:1ff.*

¹⁰ *Exodus 33:11*

¹¹ *See Numbers 12:6,7*



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lens called an *aspaklaria*, the other prophets saw God through a muddy lens.¹² Perhaps we could learn from this that Moses remembered his dreams, while the other prophets simply remembered that they had dreamt.

Freud believed that dreams are a direct connection to our unconscious, that our hidden desires and motivations control our dreams. But what if we didn't assume that our hidden desires were unworthy? What if we believed, instead, that our hidden selves, our souls, were Centers of Light shining with Godly potential which nourished our dreams? What if we believed that waking with dreams ringing in our ears, our only memory being fuzzy recollection, was actually God inspiring our souls?

I'm a rabbi's son who, as father to three rabbi's children, is frequently torn by both the call from within to reach beyond and by the experience of being a Jewish professional's child. I am a "preacher's kid," who, despite having almost every dinner and breakfast with my father, simply wished for more, more of him, more time with him. And yet, as I've begun traveling more, the ability to learn, teach and focus without children is precious. Still, I ache for them. When I come home and feel surrounded by their love, I know I'm in the right place. But soon enough, I ache to be "out there" again, answering both the needs the world exhibits, and my own need to respond.

The prophets were the first professional Jews/Jewish professionals. Every prophet rejected the call but was ultimately compelled to an inescapable destiny, a commanding dream. A world of indifference, coupled with a mystic's call, penetrated every last personal boundary until the prophet was one with the call, fully engaged in the task of infusing the world with the Divine.

Can we, today, see ourselves as prophets? Must we, in every moment, be "on call" for "the Call"? Perhaps our question should be: "What call matters most in *this* moment?" There are many moments in which the world can turn without us. *But there are also moments in which it might not.* We need to have the capacity to distinguish between what matters, and what does not. And in order to create and preserve that capacity, we need to look after ourselves, even at the times when we are striving to make our place in the world.

Our energy is necessary. But the healthy selfishness that leads me both to and from my family is only healthy because it's so inextricably mixed with a serious dose of selflessness. A great text comes to mind, from *Masekhet Berakhot*:

Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Yossi bar Zimra: If a person assumes his prayer depends on his own merit, Heaven makes it depend on the merit of others; and if a person assumes it depends on the merit of others, Heaven makes it depend on his own merit.¹³

The idea that my success as a professional is due entirely to my work forgets that sometimes the universe cooperates too help me achieve more. Sometimes a comment from a colleague or the reassurance of a friend, or the barista at the coffee shop can change my entire inner life, impacting my day's work with an added measure of motivation and confidence. But the opposite is also true. There are days where, even though the stars in my personal constellation are aligned, I am called to remember my own responsibility for my work. Without a supportive environment and a determined spirit, success will likely remain elusive.

But we need to beware, once again, of compartmentalizing. We might think that self/selfless is a "me or them" dynamic – but the tradition teaches that is not so. It is a continuum. And the key to being in that continuum is, once again, our capacity to dream. In the dream world, the barriers are down; boundaries cannot be imposed and our self becomes a soupy composite. There are no limits: our personalities, our working lives, our families, our memories, our tradition all merge to bring us back to the people we truly are. Our sacred authenticity ultimately lives in the dialogue

¹² *Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 49b*

¹³ *Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 10b*



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we conduct with ourselves. We do not forget who we are as we imagine who we might one day be, and it is reflective, mindful visioning that retains the authenticity of our choices and gives depth to our dreams.

CONCLUSION

What if we aren't ever *supposed* to feel like we've got the balance settled? What if we make a concerted effort to be in touch with our integrated selves and yet, still, never manage to balance our diaries? I want to suggest that the very tension we sense in the competing loves for our families and our people that can help to make us the ecstatic, emphatic, prophetic professionals that we need to be.

There is hope. We can be filled with the zeal of prophets without losing ourselves. I am as truly me when I teach as when I tuck my children into bed. If I answer the call on my cell phone I miss the sacred call in their eyes. Who am I worried about disappointing more? Yes, I am torn sometimes. But I am sometimes whole. I work to cultivate practices that allow me to dream big while remaining healthy.

In the end, I suggest, it all comes down to one question: Are you one of the people you are called upon to serve?

A PRAYER FOR HEALTH

God, may my work feel redemptive even when an ocean of need feels like it will pull me down.

May I feel the supported when I feel alone in my work.

O God, remind me when I fail that I can learn, and that my life is more than my work.

O God, remind me when I succeed that I can learn, and that deep success requires the efforts of many.

May I remember that going home is a crucial part of the dream.

God, help me to remember that I am one of the people I am called by you to serve.

May I feel undivided as I transition from sphere to sphere, a whole person within Your world.



LIVING IN THE DREAM – TEXT 1

שמות יח:כג

יג ויהי ממחרת וישב משה לשפוט את העם ויעמד העם על-משה מן הבקר עד הערב: יד וירא חותן משה את כל-אשר הוא עשה לעם ולאמר מה הדבר הזה אשר אתה עשה לעם מדוע אתה יושב לבדך וכל-העם נצב עליך מן הבקר עד ערב: טו ולאמר משה לחותנו כי יבא אלי העם לדרש אלהים: טז כי יהיה להם דבר בא אלי ושפטתי בין איש ובין רעהו והודעתני את חקי האלהים ואת תורתיו: יז ולאמר חותן משה אליו לא טוב הדבר אשר אתה עשה: יח נבל תבל גם-אתה גם-העם הזה אשר עמד כי-כבד ממך הדבר לא-תוכל עשהו לבדך: יט עתה שמע בקולי איעצך והי אלהים עמך הנה אתה לעם מול האלהים והבאת אתה את-הדברים אל-האלהים: כ והזהרתה אתה את-החקים ואת-התורות והודעת להם את-הדרך ילכו בה ואת-המעשה אשר יעשון: כא ואתה תחזה מכל-העם אנשי-חיל יראי אלהים אנשי אמת שנאי בצע ושמת עליהם שרי אלפים שרי מאות שרי חמשים ושרי עשרות: כב ושפטו את-העם בכל-עת והיה כל-הדבר הגדל יביאו אליך וכל-הדבר הקטן ישפטוהם והקל מעליך ונשאו אתך: כג אם את-הדבר הזה תעשה וצונן אלהים ויכלת עמך וגם כל-העם הזה על-מקמו יבא בשלום:

Exodus 18:13-23

The next day, Moses sat down to judge the people, and the people stood up against Moses from the morning to the evening. Moses' father in law [Jethro] saw all that he was doing with the people, and said to him, "What are you doing with those people? Why do you sit all on your own, with all of them standing up around you from the morning to the evening?" Moses replied to his father-in-law, "The people come to me to seek the Holy One. When something is the matter, they come to me, and I judge between a person and their neighbor, and I tell them the Holy One's laws and instructions." Moses' father in law said to him, "This thing you are doing is not good! You will wear out entirely – both you and this people with you – because this matter is too heavy for you and you cannot do it alone. Listen to me, now, and I shall advise you, and the Holy One be with you! You, be the representative of the Holy One for the people; bring their matters to the Holy One. You be the one to warn them about the laws and the instructions, and tell them the way in which they should go and what they should be doing. But look out from among the people men who are able, and who fear God, who are truthful and hate ill-gotten gain; appoint them as leaders of thousands, and of hundreds, and of fifties, and of tens. They shall be the people's regular judges; any small matter they can solve themselves, but they should bring any large [difficult] matter to you: and your burden will lighten, since they will bear it with you.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What is Moses doing wrong at the beginning of this passage?
- Why can't Moses solve the problem himself?
- What is Jethro's system for resolving the problem?
- How is this text relevant to our working lives today?



LIVING IN THE DREAM – TEXT 2

בראשית א:א-ח

א בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ: ב וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתְּהָ תֵהוֹ וְבָהוּ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם: ג וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהי־אֹר וַיְהי־אֹר: ד וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ: ה וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים | לְאֹר יוֹם וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ קָרָא לַיְלָה וַיְהי־עֶרֶב וַיְהי־בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד: ו וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהי רְקִיעַ בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּיִם וַיְהי מַבְדִּיל בֵּין מַיִם לַמַּיִם: ז וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַרְקִיעַ וַיַּבְדֵּל בֵּין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מִתַּחַת לַרְקִיעַ וּבֵין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מֵעַל לַרְקִיעַ וַיְהי־כֵן: ח וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לַרְקִיעַ שָׁמַיִם וַיְהי־עֶרֶב וַיְהי־בֹקֶר יוֹם שֵׁנִי:

GENESIS 1:1-8

At the beginning of God's creation of the heaven and the earth, the earth was without form and void; there was darkness over the abyss, but God's spirit hovered over the waters. God said, "Let there be light!" and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and separated the light from the darkness. God called the light, "Day" and the darkness "Night" – there was evening and then there was morning, one day. God said, "Let there be a firmament in the water, to separate water from water." God made the firmament and separated the water below the firmament from the water above it – and so it came to be. God called the firmament "Sky" – there was evening and then there was morning, a second day.

מן הסיודור

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מְלֹךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַמַּבְדִּיל בֵּין קֹדֶשׁ לְחוּל, בֵּין אֹר לְחֹשֶׁךְ, בֵּין יִשְׂרָאֵל לְעַמִּים, בֵּין יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי לְשֵׁשֶׁת יָמֵי הַמַּעֲשֶׂה. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, הַמַּבְדִּיל בֵּין קֹדֶשׁ לְחוּל.

FROM THE *SIDDUR*

Praised are you, Holy One our God, sovereign of the universe, who separates holy from ordinary, light from darkness, Israel from the nations and the seventh day from the six days of making. Praised are you, Holy One, who separates holy from ordinary.

– from the *Havdalah* service

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What different kinds of separation are evident from these two texts?
- How does the act of separation relate to the act of creation?
- What benefits might the act of separating confer? Why?
- How are these texts relevant to our working lives today?



LIVING IN THE DREAM – TEXT 3

משנה אבות ה:י

שְׁבַע דְּבָרִים בְּגִלְמֵי וְשִׁבְעָה בְּחָכְמָה. חָכָם אֵינוֹ מְדַבֵּר בְּפָנָיו מִי שֶׁהוּא גָּדוֹל מִמּוֹנוֹ בְּחָכְמָה וּבְמִנְיָן, וְאֵינוֹ נִכְנָס לְתוֹךְ דְּבָרֵי חֵבְרוֹ, וְאֵינוֹ נִבְהַל לְהַשִּׁיב, שׂוֹאֵל כְּעִנְיָן וּמַשִּׁיב כְּהִלְכָה, וְאוֹמֵר עַל רֵאשׁוֹן רֵאשׁוֹן וְעַל אַחֲרוֹן אַחֲרוֹן, וְעַל מָה שֶׁלֹּא שָׁמַע, אוֹמֵר לֹא שָׁמַעְתִּי, וּמוֹדֶה עַל הָאֱמֶת. וְחִלּוּפֵיהֶן בְּגִלְמֵי:

MISHNAH Avot 5:10

There are seven traits of an unformed person, and seven of a wise person. The wise person [a] does not speak before one who is wiser than they are; [b] does not interrupt the person they are speaking to; [c] does not rush to answer; [d] asks questions which are relevant, and answers appropriately; [e] deals with the first thing first and the last thing last; [f] if they did not hear [= know] they say, “I have not heard” [= “I do not know”]; [g] they acknowledge the truth. And the opposite is true of the unformed person.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Why is the opposite of the wise person called “unformed”?
- Can you think of further traits that characterize a wise/unformed person?
- What can we learn from this text about prioritizing?
- How is this text relevant to our working lives today?

¹ The general rule is that a civil case is to be decided by three judges.



LIVING IN THE DREAM – TEXT 4

יואל ב:כא-ג:ב

כא אל־תִּירָאֵי אֲדָמָה גִּילֵי וּשְׂמָחֵי כִּי־הִגְדִּיל יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת: כב אל־תִּירָאוּ בְּהִמּוֹת שָׂדֵי כִּי דָשְׂאוּ נְאֻזוֹת מִדָּבָר כִּי־עָצָן נִשְׂא פְרִיָו תֵּאֵנָה וְגַפְנוֹ נִתְּנָו חֵילָם: כג וּבְנֵי צִיּוֹן גִּילוּ וּשְׂמַחוּ בִּיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם כִּי־נִתְּנָו לָכֶם אֶת־הַמּוֹרָה לְצִדְקָה וַיִּנְרַד לָכֶם גֶּשֶׁם מוֹרָה וּמִלְקוֹשׁ בְּרֵאשׁוֹן: כד וּמִלְאוּ הַגְּרָנוֹת בָּרֶךְ וְהַשִּׁיקוּ הַיְקָבִים תִּירוֹשׁ וַיְצַהֵר: כה וּשְׂלַמְתִּי לָכֶם אֶת־הַשָּׁנִים אֲשֶׁר אָכַל הָאֲרָבָה הַיֶּלֶק וְהַחֲסִיל וְהַגְּזֹם חִילֵי הַגְּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר שְׂלַחְתִּי בָכֶם: כו וְאֶכְלַתֶּם אָכּוֹל וְשָׂבוֹעַ וְהִלַּתֶּם אֶת־שֵׁם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה עִמָּכֶם לְהַפְּלִיא וְלֹא־יִבְשׁוּ עַמֵּי לְעוֹלָם: כז וַיִּדְעֶתֶם כִּי בִקְרֵב יִשְׂרָאֵל אָנִי וְאַנִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְאִין עוֹד וְלֹא־יִבְשׁוּ עַמֵּי לְעוֹלָם: א וְהִיָּה אַחֲרֵי־כֵן אֲשַׁפּוֹד אֶת־רוּחִי עַל־כָּל־בֶּשָׂר וּנְבֹאוּ בְנֵיכֶם וּבְנֹתֵיכֶם וְקִנְיֵיכֶם חֲלָמוֹת וְחֲלֻמוֹן בְּחֻזֵיכֶם חֲזִינֹת יֵרָאוּ: ב וְגַם עַל־הַעֲבָדִים וְעַל־הַשִּׁפְחוֹת בְּיָמֵים הַהֵמָּה אֲשַׁפּוֹד אֶת־רוּחִי:

JOEL 2:21- 3:2

Land, do not fear: be glad and rejoice, for the Holy One has done great things!

Fear not, beasts of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green,

The tree bears its fruit, the fig and the vine have given their yield.

Be glad, children of Zion, rejoice in the Holy One your God,

For he has given the early rain to vindicate you,

He has poured abundant rain down upon you -

Early rain and late rain, as before.

The threshing floors shall be filled with grain,

The presses shall overflow with wine and oil.

I shall repay to you the years that the swarming locust ate,

The hopper, the destroyer and the cutter,

My great army which I sent among you.

You shall surely eat, and be satisfied,

And praise the name of the Holy One your God, who has done wonders for you,

And my people shall never be shamed.

You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel,

That I am the Holy One your God, and there is no other,

And my people shall never be shamed.

After that, I shall pour out my spirit on all flesh,

Your sons and daughters shall prophesy,

Your old men shall dream dreams,

Your young men shall see visions.

And even upon manservants and maidservants, in those days,

I shall pour out my spirit.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- In what context do the 'dreams' of this text take place?
- What is the place of the dreaming in that context?
- Who prophesies, who dreams? Why?
- How is this text relevant to our working lives today?



LIVING IN THE DREAM - TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

The soul is a faculty of the most reclusive of our sensitivities, an almost secret receptivity to the presence which it knows and for which it longs, though all the world deny that it exists. The soul often therefore seems to sleep beneath the other senses. But at the speech of its invisible companion it wakes, as the vibrant silence of that being which at once inheres in all things and transcends them all. There is no sound more immense than the great rushing, and the vast stillness, of this silence...

...The soul requires the constant sustenance of vital relationships. The issue is not with whom; such connections are possible with everything, animals, people, silence, the wind and the sea. The question is to what depth. Deprived of nourishment, the soul first yearns, then mourns and finally withdraws, contracting itself into a recess of the consciousness where it sleeps, concealed as if it had ceased to exist. But the soul never dies within us. It lies, like a dehydrated seed in parched earth, like the rose of Jericho in the desert, inert, without stirring, even for many years. Yet when the rain falls it unfolds in a moment; it comes alive in an instant and matters more than all that seemed to matter more than it.

– Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg, *The Silence of Dark Water: An Inner Journey*, Robin Clark Limited & Joseph's Bookstore, London, 2008, p. 100





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