

human by choice

a kabbalistic path to self help



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Introduction

Not long ago, as I was leading a discussion group for Jewish students at a university, a young woman felt compelled to inform the group as to why she lacked even the most basic knowledge of Judaism, the Torah, and Jewish history. She revealed that her entire Jewish education had consisted of the movies *The Ten Commandments* and *The Rugrats Passover Special*. Well, it's no wonder that the level of interest in Judaism is so low these days. I guess Chucky just doesn't cut it as the role model for truth, morality, meaning, and spiritual depth.

Nowadays, many feel that Judaism has nothing to offer them in terms of spirituality or personal growth. People go through the motions of the Passover Seder for tradition's sake, and torture themselves at synagogue on Yom Kippur "just in case." Meaning and fulfillment are long gone for most Jews. And it seems that for many, Madonna has replaced the Rabbi as spiritual icon.

For those of us who are searching for meaning — whether we are on a spiritual journey, a search for truth, or looking for a certain "feeling" that goes beyond — we want

something that takes us past our five senses to something more transcendent and universal, yet in a highly personalized way. Like the burning bush, we have a fire inside, but we have difficulty finding the means to bring it out in a practical and transformative way — in such a way that it consumes our very being.

The true Kabbalists teach us that with each successive generation, humanity's focus on the external and superficial will increase and the internal and meaningful will be forgotten. The only thing that will bring the world out of this materialistic funk will be the teachings of the inner dimensions of Torah, which we call the Kabbalah.

Kabbalah is related to the Hebrew word *makbeel*, which means “parallel.” One of the foundational secrets of Kabbalah is that everything in the physical world is merely a parallel of the spiritual reality. By studying the physical with the proper tools, knowledge, and guidance, we can get past our usual superficial understandings and delve deeper into ourselves, the world, and reality.

That is the purpose of this book — to explore this ancient Jewish wisdom as it applies to daily living in a lucid and down-to-earth style, in an effort to coach the reader to a happier, more meaningful existence.

In the book, the reader is taken on a 5-step personal journey:

1. Ascertaining the value of the individual.
2. Developing principles of personal growth, character advancement, and meaning in life.
3. Implementing these principles in a way that will lead to personal accomplishment.
4. Embodying these principles in interactions with others and in relation to one's surroundings.
5. Sorting one's place in the grand scheme, such as the world's purpose and global interdependence.

I am certain that, with God's help, one who takes on the path prescribed in this book will experience rapid personal growth. However, there is one condition. The prerequisite upon

which everything in this book rests is that the reader be open to receiving and implementing the ideas that lie herein. If one simply reads the book without *applying* the outlined techniques, he won't achieve much more than a fleeting burst of inspiration.

As you learn the principles in this book, take note of your change in perspective. Underline a phrase that touches you, or jot something down on a piece of paper or in a notebook that you carry with you. Refer back to it on an ongoing basis to solidify the changes that you are experiencing.

This is the prerequisite for the study of Kabbalah. The word Kabbalah literally means “receiving.” We are receiving the deepest teachings that have been passed down through the generations from teacher to student. And to truly grasp these teachings, we cannot simply go *out* and learn them. Rather, we must open up a place *inside* ourselves where they can be received and become a part of our very being.

This may not always be comfortable — but neither is weightlifting. However, it is pushing ahead with the task in the face of adversity that ultimately builds strength — physical strength *and* strength of character.

It is my hope and prayer that this book will help those interested in a meaningful and purposeful life to get their feet wet in the wellsprings of all that Jewish wisdom has to offer and supply the reader with theoretical perspective, along with practical tools, with which to approach everyday and not-so-everyday life issues.

UNIT 1 — INDEPENDENCE

Individuality

Discovering Personal Value

With all of the laws associated with traditional Judaism, people often ask where the individuality is in Judaism. How can I find my place in its world? Are we all supposed to be robots programmed by the factory of Judaism? Or does Judaism believe me to be a unique individual with something special to contribute?

Stars

In Genesis, the Bible relates to us how God took Abraham outside and told him, *“Look at the heavens and count the stars if you can; so will be your children.”*

Traditionally, the stars are seen as a metaphor God used to inform Abraham of how numerous his children will be. However, there are many things in this world that are numerous — why choose stars as the metaphor? There must be more to this analogy.

Additionally, we find the stars being counted again in Psalms: *“Count the number of the stars; to each [God] gave a name.”* Here again, the stars are being tallied up, only

this time they've been given names. So what is God trying to tell Abraham about his kids via their association with stars and names?

If we were to think about what we give names to throughout our lives, we'd find that we only give a name to something we view to be an independent entity that has value to us. We don't name a broom or a telephone, but we do name our children and pets that we love. If there is a herd of cows waiting to be slaughtered, you can be sure they haven't been named by the ones doing the slaughtering. In fact, the Nazis — by putting numbers on people's arms — were attempting to take away their independent value. The Kabbalists teach that each star has a name because each star has independent significance. There is something that each star brings to our world, without which the world would be a completely different place.

Astrology

In the aforementioned story from Genesis it says, "*God took Abraham outside.*" According to Kabbalah, this verse teaches us that God actually took Abraham completely outside of the natural world in order to show him that, while it may seem that the natural world acts upon him, he actually has the potential to act upon the natural world as well. Instead of being controlled by nature, he actually holds nature in the palm of his hand.

In the system that God set up, that which God wants to come into the world enters by way of the stars. Therefore someone who can accurately read the stars can predict what will happen with tremendous accuracy. What Abraham was being taught was that just as the Divine energy affects our world from "above," man's actions affect our world from "below." That is to say, if we get caught up in stargazing, we will eventually come to think that what is in the stars is set in stone; that there is no hope of changing it. However, according to Judaism, man's actions in this world *do* change what the future will bring. Even if it has already been written in the stars "above," we are granted the ability to affect the stars from "below." By taking Abraham "outside," God is saying to him, "Don't think you are confined by nature. You can act outside of nature. You are greater than nature."

What's in a Name

Similarly, when God tells Abraham that his children will be like the stars, it is a message that just as each star has independent significance, shining its own unique effect into the universe, so too, each of Abraham's descendants will have his or her own special reason for being in the world. The Kabbalists teach that the specific name that each star has been given relates its unique purpose, and the same holds true for Abraham's descendants.

Our Sages taught, "*If I am not for me, who will be for me?*" At first glance, this appears to be a statement of motivation, as if to say, "Get out of bed! Don't be lazy! If you don't take care of yourself, no one else is going to do it for you!" However, when we apply the Kabbalistic principle that each of us have been given a name reflecting the special gift we potentially bring to the world, this statement takes on a whole new layer of depth. Not only is it a motivational speech, but a statement of essence. It now reflects the uniqueness of each of our potential. It teaches that there is something each of us is here in the world to accomplish, in order for the world to gain completion. From this, we learn that there is something each and every one of us can do that no one else can do. This is powerful because it says that you and I have something to do for this world that Moses himself did not achieve.

Naming Names

The book of Numbers begins with a directive to the Jewish people — to count all the Jewish people *by name*. This means that names are a real concept. One may have thought that names were a man-made invention; that we invented the concept of names for the practical purpose of trying to get someone's attention in the midst of a crowd. However, since there is a specific Biblical directive to count the Jewish people *by their names*, it must be that there is something more to a name, something of deeper spiritual significance.

There is a classic teaching in the Kabbalah that God looked into the Torah and created the world; that the Torah itself is the blueprint of creation. It is as if God is a construction worker and builds the world based on these blueprints. This implies that the concept of the Torah preexisted creation. And if the Torah preexisted creation, so did the

building blocks of the Torah — the Hebrew language. This is why the Hebrew language is referred to as the Holy Tongue. It is the language that is rooted beyond this world, yet is the source of this world.

If you've ever cracked open the Book of Genesis, you may have noticed that the model throughout the creation story is: God spoke and that thing came into being. It wasn't that God created something and then decided what to name it afterwards. The Kabbalistic approach to creation is that it is as if when God speaks, the word materializes to become a physical manifestation of its spiritual self (i.e., "*God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light*" —Genesis 1:3).

It's kind of like looking at microfilm through a projector. While the projection looks big and impressive, it would not exist were the microfilm to be removed. In the end, while the projection is physically more impressive, it has virtually no existence when compared to the microfilm — this is the relationship of the physical world to its spiritual core, the word of God.

According to Kabbalah, this concept — that the spiritual word of God is actually the thing itself in its deepest sense — applies to all things. This is why the Hebrew names of all things describe their essence; because the speech actually is the thing and the thing is a manifestation of the speech. A dog in Hebrew is called a *kelev*, which can also be read as *kilev*, meaning "like the heart" — man's best friend. The most physical and brute animal, the donkey, whose lot is to simply carry a physical burden on its back, is termed a *chamor* in Hebrew, which is closely related to the Hebrew word *chomer*, meaning "matter" or "physicality." Judaism teaches that this concept applies to each individual's name as well. One's name gets to his or her essence and purpose in this world. Each of us was created to carry out a certain mission in this world, and it is all hidden within our names.

"The World Was Created for Me"

The Talmud teaches that this individualized outlook is what we are supposed to approach the world with every day. We are to get up in the morning, take a good look in the mirror, and say, "The world was created for me." Now, obviously this does not mean that if I see someone with a chocolate bar I can take it from him because, after all, "the

world was created for me.” What it means is that each of us is to have the perspective that everything that happens to us in our lives — whether it be the parents I had growing up or the person I sat next to on the bus today — is specifically designed for me, based on the nature of my soul and what I need to accomplish in this world.

Now if everything that happens to me is set up with the intention of me achieving my purpose in this world, it must be that all that occurs in my life is for my ultimate best. Every trial and tribulation, every success and failure — all is here as an arena set up personally for me by God in order that I blossom to my fullest potential and accomplish my personal purpose. It follows then that one of the Ten Commandments is not to *covet* other people’s possessions. If the Torah would only tell us “*Thou shalt not steal*” and leave it at that, we would miss the point. By going further and telling us that we shouldn’t even *desire* something which is not ours, God is teaching us something more pivotal. God is showing us how we should view our role and our lot in this world: Each of us is given exactly what we need to succeed in our life’s mission — to have anything more, less, or different would be harmful. If we’d truly take this lesson to heart, we’d never desire anything outside our orbit, and we would never be jealous.

Once I know that all that I experience and don’t experience was designed for me, the question is how do I choose to respond under the conditions that I’ve been given. In this life, we were not given the choice of who our parents will be, the time, place, economic status, or what we will look like. We were not even given the choice of whether or not to be born. But, as in a “Choose Your Own Adventure” book, we are put in the world and given a number of options. We make a choice, and that leads to another set of options. We make another choice, and that sets up yet another set of options, and so on. Then, at the end of our lives, we are the totality of the choices we have made.

The Human Being

This ability to choose reflects the difference that sets the human race apart from the angels and the animal kingdom. Angels’ potentials are always in their fulfilled states. They are in the world of truth and reality, and they are purely spiritual. Therefore, they would never make a choice counter to reality. Animals, too, are in their realized state because they do not have a potential for elevation on their own. This is indicated by the

Hebrew word for animal, *behaymah*, which breaks down into the Hebrew words *bah mah* — “in it, what is there?”

Human beings are the only creatures who, on their own, need to bring out their unique potential. We do this through our free will choices. Some people deny that man has the capacity for free choice and believe that all of man’s actions are beyond his control; that they are based solely on his biological makeup and the conditioning he received from his parents and his society. We see, however, that nobody actually believes this when it comes down to it...

Free Will

Imagine a professor who preaches this theory of human conditioning. For a full semester, he explains to an eager group of students yearning to shirk any sense of moral responsibility how man is simply the result of the sum total of all his experiences; how, although society must protect itself, an individual cannot be blamed for his actions or their consequences. Now suppose the professor comes home early one day and finds his wife in bed with his best friend. Consider this professor’s reaction. Is it passive acceptance and tolerance, or does he react as most do — with shock, anger, and the desire to seek revenge?

According to the professor’s own theory, both his wife and his friend were simply responding to stimuli. If the professor were to truly believe that man has no control over his responses, he would never react to betrayal with hate. A person only reacts in this manner when the one who hurt him acted with intent, by choice, or with negligence. Only when, in your opinion, a person should have or could have acted differently, are you upset with him. Disappointment and anger directed at another are clear and outright testimonies to one’s conscious or subconscious acknowledgement that the other makes decisions.

A Unique Invention

Human beings are creatures created in a duality. When compared to all else that exists, the unique feature of humanity is man’s capacity for free will. The root of this duality can be seen with a deeper look into the name of the first person, *Adam*. In

Hebrew, the word *Adam* is made up of the first letter of the alphabet, *alef*, and the word for blood, *dam*. In Kabbalah there is a basic understanding that each of the Hebrew letters has a numerical value. Obviously, the first letter symbolizes the number one. In Judaism, the number one always alludes to the One Infinite God. So, the name *A-dam* hints to a coming together of God and blood. If we break down Judaism's understanding of a person, it is just that: flesh and blood with a spark of Godliness, a soul.

In addition, the name *Adam* comes from the Hebrew word for "earth," *adamah*. As we have made clear, the name always teaches about the essence of the person or thing. The first human being is called by a name connected to the word meaning "earth" because Adam was created from the dust of the earth. Advancing this idea, we find that the essence of the earth is to have a potential for the bearing of trees and fruit; this potential needs to be worked on in order to be brought out and actualized. This is the same feature we find in the human being. Man has a potential to bring forth, and it is only through the labor of working on himself that he will yield the fruit of self-actualization.

The Pinnacle of Creation

Going further, before man was created God said, "Let *us* make man." The obvious questions here are: With whom is God talking and why does He need their help? The Kabbalists explain that God is talking to all of His creations. Since they lack the possibility of ever moving closer to God because, as mentioned, they are created in their actualized form, God tells them to put a bit of themselves into man, and based on his choices they will have the capacity to ascend through the part of him that is actually them. This is the essence of man. Man stands in the middle of the heavenly and earthly spheres, and all are dependent upon him.

Within this framework, each one of us is a unique soul here to bring something to the world; to fix it in a way that no one else can. In order to achieve this unique potential, we all come with circumstances that have been custom designed, tailored specifically to our unique soul and its unique mission. This is all reflected in one's name. According to the Talmud, when parents name a child, they experience a minor degree of prophecy. This is because within the name of a person lies the essence of who we are and what we are here to accomplish. Our infinite significance is realized in our fulfilling this mission

through making the choices we need to under the exact circumstances that we have been dealt.

Freedom versus Slavery

Achieving Personal Independence

Today, many see Judaism as a collection of rigorous laws and traditions that are outdated and meaningless. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, the only answer the Jew has for holding onto his Judaism is “Tradition!” It is obvious the author felt there to be a general consensus that Jews do not know why they do what they do. Some believe that Judaism was invented in the desert to manipulate the masses: Murder was outlawed in the desert because everyone was needed to produce for the community at large; the dietary laws are there for health reasons; and the family purity laws were based on some primitive taboo. People feel enslaved by these statutes they believe to be man-made, and want their independence and freedom from this meaningless and overbearing burden.

Taking this a step further, how ironic it is that on Passover we celebrate leaving the slavery of the land of Egypt to go to freedom — but the next step in the journey was receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. Clearly the Torah also involves a considerable amount of restriction to our freedom! And many of the classic commentaries on the Torah state that the main purpose of our exodus from Egypt was in order that we come to receive the Torah. Why bemoan the slavery of Egypt, yet celebrate the slavery of Sinai? After all, even a believer would have to admit that there is a serious loss of freedom and personal determination through one's adherence to a traditional Torah-oriented Jewish way of life. How does Judaism, which puts such an emphasis on man's making free will decisions, approach the issues of slavery and freedom?

The Tablets

There is a classic Talmudic source which flips this whole notion of the seeming conflict between freedom and Torah on its head.

When the Torah describes the Tablets at Sinai, it says that God's writing was engraved on the Tablets. The Hebrew word used by the Torah to mean "engraved," *charut*, is the same word in Hebrew as the word for "freedom," *cherut*. This is no coincidence. The Torah is trying to express to us that there is a deep connection between God's engraving the Tablets and freedom in its truest sense. The Talmud declares the connection: *There is no freer person than the one who is involved in the study of the Torah.*

Now, that's definitely not what we expected to hear. Who do the Rabbis think they're kidding? If anything, it would seem that people involved in religion have the least freedom! You mean to tell me that the guy who goes to synagogue on Friday night has more freedom than the guy who goes out to the movies?!

Western Freedom

There are many freedoms offered to us by Western society. We are free to eat to our hearts' content, watch as much TV as we want, and smoke three packs a day if we choose. But is this the true meaning of freedom?

My wife Chana has a friend named Rebecca. Rebecca started smoking when she was eleven. She began by occasionally stealing cigarettes from her mother. At first she didn't like the cigarettes, but she and another friend thought it to be a taste they must acquire. So they continued sneaking smokes, as her unsuspecting mother never caught on. Years later, Rebecca now tries to quit all the time. As a matter of fact, almost anyone you know who smokes has attempted to quit at one point or another. I once heard someone say, "Quitting smoking is easy — every smoker does it at least once a month."

But what if Rebecca's mother would have been able to stop her from smoking? What if, in a positive and productive manner, Rebecca's mom could have restricted Rebecca's access to cigarettes? Surely, at the time, Rebecca would have felt that to be an impingement on her freedom. She may have argued, "I have the right to choose to do whatever I want." But is she choosing to do what she wants to do now? Every time she lights up another cigarette, is it a clear expression of her free will? I think it is clear that while in her younger years she chose the cigarette, now she is enslaved by it. In effect, if in her younger years Rebecca had taken it upon herself to live a more restricted lifestyle, she would actually be freer today.

Defining Freedom

There is a fundamental point for consideration here: How do we define freedom? Is it simply to have the ability to do what we want when we want? To have no restraints? To be in a situation where no one can interfere with us? Or is there something missing from this definition?

We see from Rebecca's story that "what we want when we want" cannot be the full definition of freedom. We see that this way of life can actually result in a loss of freedom and autonomy. Instead of attaining freedom and independence, Rebecca has become a slave — a slave to her body. To live in a state in which we do whatever we feel like, is not to live in freedom. That is to live in slavery. That is slavery to one's every whim.

Imagine a person who, for his whole life, always made sure to do what came naturally to him. Imagine that after a long life of doing whatever came naturally, he passes away and goes up to God, where he is asked, "So, what did you do with your

life?” Of course he proudly answers, “I always did what I felt like doing when I felt like doing it. No matter what it was, whatever came naturally to me, that’s what I did.” What do you think God’s response to this is? “Uh, I think you belong over there with the donkeys — that’s how they live!”

On the other hand, the Sages teach: “*Who is the strong person? The one who conquers his inclinations.*” True freedom is when **you** are calling all the shots. If your utopian vision is an existence in which you are unhindered from fulfilling your every passion — while it may feel good at the time, it is not true freedom. You are not the master of your domain. You are not in control. And if you are not in control of what you are doing, certainly this is not true freedom. This is a form of slavery.

Along these lines, Kabbalah teaches that the human soul is manifest primarily in the brain. People are often surprised to hear that. Most assume that the heart is the aspect of the body that best reflects the soul. However, it should be apparent by now that the concept of spirituality has its source in the brain as opposed to one following every whim of his heart’s desires.

This is what is meant by the phrase “*there is no freer person than the Torah scholar.*” When one makes the **conscious decision** to live in a certain manner and stands by it no matter what the cost, he is exercising and actualizing his free will capabilities. He is the truly free individual. He who builds his inner-strength of character to **choose** to take control of the body and not to be governed by it, is the truest model of freedom there can be.

“Freedom From” versus “Freedom For”

While Western thought is involved in “freedom from,” the Jewish approach is “freedom for.” Westernism teaches that freedom means that nothing gets in our way. But that can sometimes lead to a lack of freedom. Furthermore, what purpose would freedom serve if all it meant was that nothing stands in my way? Is there a purpose to a life spent doing what I feel when I feel it? After seventy years of that, what strength of character have I exhibited in the world? Where have I truly stepped up to the plate and applied myself? Has my life not been a chain of events in which I was a puppet being played by desires? Where is the assertion of the “I”?

The Talmud teaches that the letters of the Tablets actually floated in midair — that they were elevated from physical attachment. This is the secret to the freedom that is Torah. True freedom means applying one's capacity for free choice. When a person, *out of his own volition*, chooses to live a Torah-oriented lifestyle, it is the truest expression of freedom that there can be. This person goes outside of himself to choose the path of reality instead of what his body or his society tell him to do. He becomes a free entity through independently applying his mind over his matter, just as the letters of the Tablets were free of any attachment to physicality or external influence.

Unit 1 Conceptual Visualization: INDEPENDENCE

Who am I and what am I made of?



UNIT 2 — DIRECTION

Conscious Living

Beginning a Spiritual Journey

The story is told of a person who was traveling through Europe. He came across a town in which there lived a very well known Kabbalist. The traveler figured he would take advantage of his short time in the town, and would make a point of visiting with this Kabbalist. When the traveler entered the house of this great mystical sage, he was astounded. All that was in his house was a table, a bed, and some books. Nothing more. He asked in amazement, “This is all you have here? How do you live like this?” The Kabbalist answered him, “What about you? All you have is those few things that are in your bag.” The traveler responded, “Yes, but I am only on a journey, temporarily passing through.” The Kabbalist replied, “I am also only on a journey, temporarily passing through.”

If we want to understand what it truly means to take a spiritual journey, we can learn a lot from the first documented spiritual journey in all of human history: the journey of Abraham.

Abraham's Journey

The first time God makes a prophetic appearance in Abraham's life, God tells Abraham: *"Go, to yourself, from your land, and from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you."*

If we take a close look at this verse, a number of things don't seem to sit right. First of all, the verse begins with a very strange phrase: *"Go to yourself."* What does that mean and what can we learn from it? Furthermore, God tells Abraham to leave his land, his birthplace, and his father's house. Why list all three? Couldn't God get the message across with "Hey Abe, it's time for you to leave your land"? After all, his birthplace and his father's house are included within his land. Is God just trying to rub it in and make it more painful? And even if God wants to list all three of them individually for whatever reason, why in that order? Isn't it backwards? Should the verse not read *"father's house, birthplace, land"*? When I took God up on this verse and moved to Israel, I initially left Teaneck, New Jersey, then the New York/New Jersey region, and then the United States of America. The way this verse appears, it is as if God said to me, "Eliyahu, leave the USA, the New York area, and your house in Teaneck." Why tell me to leave New York or Teaneck if I'm already out of the country?

Unique Potential

The Kabbalists teach that this verse can instill within a person a deep sense of individuality. As mentioned, all that happens to us and all that we are born with has been custom designed to our unique soul in order that we make choices in life under those specific conditions. Some people are born into wealthy families; others are born into poor families. Some are born into a more religiously observant environment; others are born into a completely secular surrounding. Some people grow up in stable, healthy homes while others grow up in broken dysfunctional ones. Each one of us is given exactly what we need to be given in order to achieve what we need to achieve through making the

choices we need to make under these specific circumstances. The idea of “*go to yourself*” mentioned in the Torah means to go towards one’s unique potential — the reality of who you can be.

Getting a Foot *Out* the Door

How do we get there? How can we succeed in actualizing the potential that is hidden within us? God’s message to Abraham is that the prerequisite to getting to one’s inner potential and purpose is to first leave “from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s house.” The meaning of this, teach the Kabbalists, goes much deeper than the physical land, birthplace, and house we grew up in. It means that in order to get started on our true spiritual path, we must first gain a sense of clarity and objectivity. The only way to do that is to do whatever is necessary to uproot from within ourselves any form of subjectivity and false beliefs about the world and ourselves we may have acquired up until now.

Recently, my wife and I were running a Shabbat program for fifty 20-something Jews with minimum exposure to Judaism. In one of the sessions, I discussed with them the idea of taking a step back from preconceived norms and beliefs to ask oneself, “Why do I believe this?” After the session, a girl came to talk to me. She explained that since she grew up without any religion, when she studied the different religions in university, she was doing it as a “clean slate.”

Besides making the fundamental point to her, that if she wants to really hear what any religion has to say she ought to go to a believer and not a professor, I proceeded to list off a number of different beliefs that I knew she’d hold (i.e., “Do whatever you want as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone else”; “Democracy is the only legitimate brand of government,” etc.) and asked her why she believed in these things as universal truths. Her reply to me perfectly portrayed the point I was trying to make. She said that her beliefs were simply natural and obvious. Herein lies the problem.

What is “natural and obvious” to this Florida born-and-bred 20-something in the year 2006 was not nearly as “natural” nor as “obvious” to the Florida born-and-bred 20-something of the year 1006. This leads us to one conclusion. Neither the beliefs of the 1006-er nor the beliefs of the 2006-er are necessarily “natural and obvious.” If we have a

feeling that something is naturally correct, it can be because it is in fact spiritually intrinsically true, or because we have been conditioned to the point that we feel that way. The important thing is to find out.

Nature versus Nurture

Modern psychology speaks of “Nature versus Nurture.” It turns out the Torah talked about it long before the phrase was coined in the twentieth century. The mystics understand the leaving “*from your land*” to be a leaving of one’s culture, and the leaving “*from your father’s house*” to be a departure from the modes of behavior that have been taught to you there. These, of course, constitute an overall distancing from one’s “Nurture.” This is especially relevant today due to the high level of social conditioning prevalent in the world’s societies. Advertisers are paid to know how to manipulate us into buying their product. The media, movies, and TV have more to do with forming our opinions than anything else. It is obvious, then, that if it is clarity and spirituality that we seek, we must first leave the illusions, conditionings, and falsehoods of the world in which we live.

The Kabbalists further explain that leaving “*from your birthplace*” refers to rising above one’s genetic predisposition, one’s “Nature.” Each one of us has been born with certain character traits and desires that are ingrained in our minds, bodies, and genetics. If one wants the path of the spiritual journey, one must first take control of his Nature, and not the other way around. We must break out of these limitations and boundaries that we have been born with.

Leaving Egypt for the Desert

When Abraham left these three forms of confinement to journey towards spiritual truth, he led the way for the generation of Jews who left Egypt to do the same. The word for Egypt in Hebrew is *Mitzrayim*, the same word as *metzarim*, “constraints.” When Egypt had a hold on the Jewish people, it wasn’t just a physical hold that it held on them. It was a spiritual hold as well. Before the Jewish people could come to receive spiritual truth at Sinai, they needed to break out of the grasp that Egyptian society had on them. Once the Jewish people left the constraints of Egypt and arrived in the desert, only then

could they truly come to clarity and begin to journey spiritually. Only then could they receive the Torah.

The Torah was given in the desert because the desert is a place of nothingness. It is barren. When a person has not properly dealt with the multitudes of conditionings and manipulations he has undergone in his life, he has no capacity for the clarity necessary to properly begin the spiritual journey. Only when he has left his personal Egypt, can he come to his personal desert. In this desert there is no world-generated static or lack of control of oneself. There is nothing. So there is nothing to get in the way. Only by uprooting the interfering preconceptions that have been instilled within him through his Nature and his Nurture, can a person come to a point of objective clarity and truth from which he can start his journey. Only once a person makes himself desert-like by leaving the constraints of his land, birthplace, and father's house, can he receive the Torah and use it to fulfill his unique potential and ascend "*to the land that I will show you*" — to being the person he didn't even know it was possible for him to be.

Remember to Dream

Self-Identification and Determining Direction

In sports it is common for coaches to tell their athletes to dream of their sport day and night. Indeed, there is a Jewish idea that relates to making use of the mind in order to breed a desired result — only with something a little more meaningful than basketball.

Towards the end of Abraham’s life, the Bible tells us, “*Abraham was old, and he came with days.*” At first glance, this seems repetitive: If he was old then obviously he had days, and if he had days, is it not clear that he was old?

Bursting Inspiration

You may have noticed that the nature of human beings when they experience something new and inspirational is to jump into action. They were moved and now they get moving. They start making phone calls, assembling their “troops,” and strategizing. They are ready to make a difference! They are ready to make a change!

However, it’s not long before they hit a block, and things start to slow down. Then another dead-end causes things to move slower. Thoughts of the inspirational blast-off experience just don’t seem to arouse those same passionate feelings as they once did.

Eventually, they run out of gas. The burst of energy was great, but now that's something of the past. The inspiration has become stale, causing the motivation to dry up. Those ideas, once full of life and zeal, have turned old and rusty.

Abraham, however, was old, yet came with days. He accomplished the feat of keeping his moments of inspiration new and fresh. He was constantly appreciating, re-experiencing, and getting inspired by every day he ever lived. Truly, this is the way a person should strive to live — always remembering every inspirational and motivational moment he has been granted. And just as the Jews of the Bible are told not to forget the awesome sights that their eyes had seen at the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, so too we are not to forget our personal Sinaic experiences — those events that have given us a moment of clarity in our own lives.

Picture This

In Jewish thought, everyone is created in a duality. On the one hand, people have an inclination towards good and to rise above — that is thanks to the Godly soul. On the other hand, a person has the opposite inclination, to fulfill his every whim and to take the path of least resistance due to his animal side, the body. The Hebrew word for inclination, *yetzer*, is closely related to the Hebrew word for painting a picture, *tziyur*. In a sense, this is what our inclinations — good and evil — are involved in. Both are working around the clock, flashing colorful pictures of what life will be like if only we'd buy their product.

A few years ago, there was an advertisement claiming, "Image is nothing." It would seem today that the opposite holds truer: "Image is everything." As the Talmud warns, "*The eye sees; the heart desires; and the parts [of the body] finish [the job].*" At the source of every action and effort is a picture of the perceived potential outcome of that act. For example, how does a medical student get through eight grueling years of medical training? There must be some vision or thought he keeps coming back to when he is swamped with work, something that inspires him to continue. It can be the thought of starving children in Africa or the picture of a white coat with his name tag on it. But you can be sure that there is an image that keeps him going.

By focusing on the end-point, one is reminded of the meaningfulness of one's goal, thereby making the process of getting there more tolerable. Each time my wife was

in labor with one of our children, when the pain became more intense, she got tremendous comfort when the birthing coach reminded her, “Think about seeing that baby for the first time.”

Similarly, it is taught in modern psychology that often one’s actions follow one’s self-perception. That is, whatever we think of ourselves will incline us to act in that way. If I think I am worthless, I will relate to others as if I am worthless. Of course what happens next is that they view me to be worthless and that strengthens my already negative perception of myself. Therefore it is imperative to our spiritual development that we train ourselves to paint the appropriate pictures —1) of ourselves, and 2) of the direction in which we want to go.

1) Who am I?

In Jewish thought, depression and despair are portraits painted by one’s evil inclination. To combat this, the Torah teaches that man was created in the image of God, and therefore possesses a capacity for the Infinite. One is to focus and meditate on this idea — to study what it means and what its ramifications are. To the extent that a person clarifies these concepts for himself and lives by them, he will not be depressed (excluding, perhaps, an individual with real medical issues).

At this point, I’d like to ask you to answer the following two questions:

- 1) Do you have a soul?
- 2) What do you see when you look in the mirror?

To the first question of “Do you have a soul?” most people will answer “yes” or “I’m not sure.” To the second question of “What do you see when you look in the mirror,” almost always the answer given is “me” or “myself.”

According to Judaism, there is a fundamental problem with *all* of these answers. Let’s delve into the story of the very first human beings, Adam and Eve. With the proper wisdom and analysis of the first sin, we will enable ourselves to spot where many of us

are off in our fundamental understanding of ourselves and our relationship to the world around us, and hopefully facilitate rectification of these misperceptions.

The Blurring of Reality

The Bible tells us that Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden. It says that although they were naked, they did not *know* that they were naked. However, immediately after they ate from the “Tree of *Da’at* (Knowledge) of Good and Evil,” they had an epiphany, realized they were naked, and covered themselves up. It is clear that there was something about eating from this tree that led them to realize they were naked.

In order to understand this in depth, we must first understand the Hebrew word used here for “knowledge,” *da’at*. According to Kabbalah, the true meaning of *da’at* is: *a coming together of two opposites through which a new understanding is born*. For example, when the Bible wants to describe a sexual encounter between a man and a woman, often it will use this term, *da’at* (as they say, “knowledge in the Biblical sense”). So, when Adam and Eve eat from this “Tree of ***Da’at* of Good and Evil**,” there is a mixing together of good and evil in which truth and falsehood become blurred. At this point humanity loses its original level of consciousness and clarity, and what’s left in its stead is a distant plane — one that is removed from God and the blatant awareness of Him. By eating from this tree, Adam and Eve have created the concept of a “gray area” — a state of lack of absolute clarity.

Now, imagine you were to travel back in time to visit Adam before the sin, and you were to ask him, “Hey you’re naked — why don’t you put some clothes on?” What would he answer you?

If we understand that before the sin Adam saw the essence of himself and the world as they truly are, he would say back to you, “I’m not naked. That’s not me, that’s just my body!” In other words, before the sin, Adam knew, not that he *had* a soul, but that he *was* a soul. When Adam looked in the mirror he saw his body the way we see our cars — a vehicle that takes us around from place to place, enabling us to do what we need to do. So, of course he appreciates his body, and takes care of it. He gives it the food it needs to keep running and takes it for yearly inspections to make sure there is nothing wrong with it. But he does not make the mistake of thinking that what is in the mirror is

him. Imagine a person looking at his car and thinking that the car is him! Such a person might be wheeled off to a mental institution. But the truth is that we all do this. When we say, “I don’t feel well today,” “I’m hungry,” or “I look good today,” we are making the mistake of identifying our bodies as ourselves. And then we say, “I *have* a soul” — as if it is a possession of ours, but not the essence of who we are!

Searching for Myself

There is a well-known rabbi in Jerusalem who says that from the time of Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden, there have been two kinds of people in the world: those who are crazy, and those who are crazy but know they are crazy. In our quest for self-realization, each of us must grapple with this concept of self-identification, because it gets down to the core of who and what we truly are.

People have so much baggage — emotional and psychological garbage — piled on top of them, blocking them from pursuing the fulfillment of their true selves. A way to remove this baggage, the Kabbalists teach, is to remind a person of his root source. We must understand that we do not *have* a soul, but that we *are* a soul. The Torah is here to give us as much sanity as we can take from it. It is here to help us gain clarity about what we are, who we are, and where we can be going... if only we take time out from our insane world to hear what it has to tell us.

2) Where do I want to go?

In the Middle Ages, there was a rich and powerful king who had a son whom he loved. Every day he spent quality time with his son, and brought in the wisest and most refined teachers to educate him and teach him all sorts of physical and mental skills. As the boy grew older, he started to become arrogant, disrespectful, and unappreciative of all that he had been given. After a while, the king decided that the best thing to do for his son’s development would be to strip him of any sign of royalty and send him out of the palace into the “real world” with nothing but peasant’s clothes on his back. He assured

his son that he loved him and would send for him when the time was right. And with that, the prince went off into a land he had not previously known.

The king missed his son dearly, but knew that this was the right move for the time being. The king received constant updates on his son from people loyal to him throughout the kingdom, and the months began to pass.

Two years later there was an exciting event in the kingdom. Every seven years the king would cut a small hole in one of the walls of his chariot. He would ride in the chariot through every village in the kingdom. The villagers would write their requests on pieces of paper, stick the papers on arrows, and attempt to shoot the arrows into the little hole. On the rare occasion that someone succeeded in doing this, the king would grant his wish.

The king went from town to town, but no one succeeded in shooting an arrow into the moving chariot. As the chariot moved toward the town that his son was in, the king's anticipation grew, hoping that his son, with the royal training provided to him, would take a shot at communicating with his father. And so it was. While the chariot was in the middle of the town, an arrow flew in. The king was overtaken with emotion at the thought of seeing what his son had written as his request. He took the note off the arrow and immediately recognized his son's handwriting as he opened it. He looked at the note and read what his son had written him: "I'd like two thick blankets and a new pair of shoes."

The king began to cry. His son could have asked for anything. He could have asked for his own chariot and driver. He could have asked for a furnace. And, most importantly, he could have asked to return to the palace. The prince had become so used to the way he'd been living, that he had forgotten who he really was. He had forgotten that he was a prince, the heir to a great kingdom. And he had forgotten why he was sent out of the palace in the first place.

Getting Stuck in Exile

This is what often happens to so many of us as we get stuck in our day-to-day affairs. We create our own personal matrix in which we become like robots, performing

errands and taking care of what needs to get done, with no zest and without any feeling of fulfillment. We forget what we are doing it all for.

This is what the Chassidic masters call “Personal Exile.” We leave what it is we really *want* to be doing — meaningful and important pursuits — to take care of that which we feel we *have* to be doing, ***and then we get stuck in it.***

There are two phases to exile: Exile of the Body and Exile of the Soul.

At first, we are aware that we are going into a state of exile for a certain amount of time in order to take care of something that needs to get done, even though we’d rather be doing something else. This is Phase 1, Exile of the Body. The soul is aware and pained that the body has taken a detour off the path to its exalted goal.

However, then we often make the subtle transition to the second phase of exile, which is much more severe, Exile of the Soul. In this phase we lose sight of the fact that we are even in exile in the first place. We become complacent, losing sight and feel of our ideologies, our spirit, God, and our potential. For this reason, the Hebrew words for “darkness,” *choshech*, and “forget,” *shachach*, are made up of the same letters. The inability to see within the *darkness* of our physical world is a reflection of what it means to *forget* the spiritual world. To forget these things is to walk around in spiritual darkness: to be lost; have no direction; to forget the reality of the world — what it’s all about and what your role in it could be. When one falls into this pit of darkness, one forgets his source, and one forgets his Source.

There are all sorts of possibilities as to how this transition from Exile of Body to Exile of Soul can take place within a person — from despair to affluence. At different stages of the Jewish people’s time in Egypt, they got caught in Phase 2 exile, Exile of Soul, for the following reasons:

Citizens in a Foreign Land

At the beginning of the Jewish people’s stay in Egypt, all was going well — perhaps a little too well. The verse states that the Israelites “*grabbed onto [the land],*” meaning that they took root there. When a person takes root in a particular land or community, that’s always a sign of belonging or wanting to belong. He is planting himself there, and he plans on staying. If we contrast this with Abraham’s prophecy of

the Egyptian exile, we see that God had a different plan: “*Your children will be foreigners in a foreign land.*” If we are in exile — national or personal — there is a reason for it. There is something we need to accomplish or change while we are there, and when the gates of exile open and we have the opportunity to go home — whether it be to a Homeland or a return to one’s purpose in life — the person who feels he’s in an exilic state goes, whereas the one who has made exile into home will stay.

A similar, yet surprising, thing occurred at the end of the Israelites’ time in Egypt. Note the redundancy in this verse (Exodus 6:1): “*God said to Moses, ‘Now you will see that which I will do to Pharaoh because with a **strong hand** shall he send them, and with a **strong hand** shall he divorce them from his land.’*”

Why the seeming repetition with the hands?

Rashi, the most noted commentary on the Torah, explains that the first hand mentioned in the verse is the “hand” of God that will “push” Pharaoh to send the Jews out of Egypt. The second hand mentioned in the verse is Pharaoh’s — Pharaoh himself will have to push the Jews out of Egypt. He will have to force them to leave ***against their will***.

Indeed, this is often what happens to each of us when we get into our Phase 2 Exile mentality. We become complacent. We forget who we really are, what we are here for, and how we got here in the first place. At first you got into the job to support your family. Now your family “gets in the way” of you doing your job. This is exile at its worst, because you don’t even know you’re in exile.

Calling a Spade a Spade

How do we make sure we do not slip into Phase 2 Exile? How can we avoid the mistake the Jews of Egypt made? The answer is hidden in the verse that follows the Israelites’ desire to become engrossed in Egyptian culture.

The verse states: “*And **Jacob** lived in the Land of Egypt seventeen years...*” Jacob had two names. He was called “Jacob” from birth. And he received the name “Israel” when he wrestled with Esau’s angel (Genesis 32:29). Ever since that wrestling match, there are times when the Torah refers to him as Jacob and times when it refers to him as Israel. We find that the name Israel is used when all is going well, and Jacob is used in

instances of sadness. From the fact that the verse telling us that Jacob lived in Egypt refers to him by the name “Jacob,” we can infer that Jacob was sad about being there. He understood he was in exile. Unlike the generations that followed him, Jacob had the mindset that he is in Egypt only to dwell there temporarily — always feeling that he is on a journey, temporarily passing through. Jacob realized that, yes, God wanted him to be in exile, but no, he was not supposed to feel comfortable and settled there.

When in the midst of a temporary personal exile from spirituality and development, in order to ensure that we stay consciously aware of our exilic state, while keeping our eyes on the true prize, we can use a method I call “Prioritization and Categorization.”

Prioritization

In an attempt to define what it means to be a spiritual person, I once heard the spiritual adviser to a top Jewish Study Hall in North America compare a person’s life to a box. Everything the person does goes into that box. You put in family, job, recreation, hobbies, spirituality, volunteering, etc. Then he said something I was not expecting to hear. He said that this is the path of the person who is truly *not* spiritual. The true pursuer of spirituality is the one for whom the box itself *is* spirituality, and anything else that comes his way — if it fits in with one’s spiritual life it can be placed into the box, but if it counteracts it, it remains outside.

Similarly, there is a teaching of the Sages which states: “*Make your Torah [spiritual development] permanent, and your [financial occupation] temporary.*” Another teaching tells us how: “**Designate times for Torah.**” The Sages are trying to convey to us how to get a handle on life. They are telling us to set aside a specific time in our day for what life is really all about. Even though most of your day might be taken up with the means to that end (Phase 1 Exile), don’t lose sight of the end while dealing with the means. Make sure to have an untouchable time in each day to be directly involved with what really counts — a meaningful conversation with your spouse, quality time with each child, and time for introspection and God.

Categorization

When our priorities are clear, we can categorize our activities and learn how to view them in the proper light. There is an idea in Kabbalah that many things in the world and body consist of a “main” and a “sub.” The sub always comes to serve the purpose of the main and, in turn, assumes the identity of the main through its association with it. For example, eyelids are a sub to the eye. They serve the purpose of the eye through their protection of it, and gain their identity through that role. Hence, we call them **eyelids**. The same principle can be applied to fingernails, orange peels, and many other things.

Going further with this idea, in Judaism it is taught that that which is holy, its container is also holy. Since the whole purpose of the container is for its use with holiness, it also attains that status to some degree. For example, a *tefillin*, phylactery, box has a status of holiness because it is here solely for the purpose of protecting and carrying *tefillin* — one of the most sacred items in Judaism. Therefore, one should not put even the boxes of the *tefillin* on the floor. Similarly, one’s body has an aspect of holiness because it is here solely for the purpose of carrying the soul, and so it follows that the body, according to Jewish law, should not be purposefully damaged or mistreated.

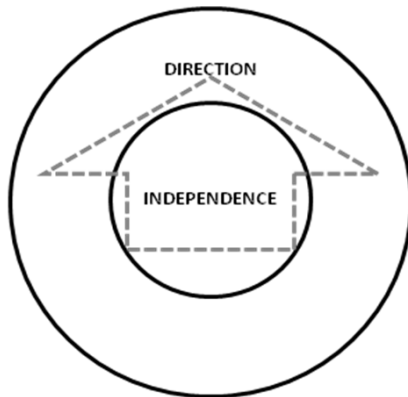
In each of these examples, what makes the sub holy is not the object itself, but its designated purpose. Similarly, if we focus on our priorities in life as our “main” and our means to support ourselves as we strive to get there as our “sub,” we can infuse all our sub activities with the meaningfulness of the main. If we are conscious of what we are shooting for and how the means will help us get there, the means themselves take on the meaningfulness of the ends. In Kabbalah, this process of getting involved with the means for the sake of the ends is referred to as “*Descent for the sake of ascent.*”

In Torah times, the Jews went through a bitter stint in Egypt, but emerged capable of receiving the Torah. Sometimes in life there are certain means we must take on in order to achieve our desired result. The key is to Prioritize and Categorize. First, to assess what is really important. Second, to calculate the means necessary in order to get it. And third, as one is involved with the means, to be continuously conscious of the priorities ***through being involved with them in a meaningful way on a daily basis.***

Unit 2 Conceptual Visualization: DIRECTION

Who am I and what am I made of?

What am I about and how do I get there?



UNIT 3 —
IMPLEMENTATION

Spiritual Stubbornness

Following through on Your Principles

Arguably the best basketball player to ever live is Michael Jordan. He has a highlight reel that could go on for hours and more than a handful of championship rings. However, the interesting thing is that if you were to look at statistics on the most points scored in individual performances, you'd find that Jordan is not at the top of the list — he's not even close! So what makes him in the eyes of so many the best there ever was? Was it just his acrobatics on the court?

I think there are three fundamental factors: 1) excellence, 2) consistency, and 3) stepping up in big situations.

We can learn from this the relatively small emphasis given to the individual with one miraculous game as compared to the guy with ongoing great performance. There is a

certain value bestowed to this disciplined consistency in the world of sports, and we will see that it applies in spirituality as well.

A Stiff-Necked People

After the Jews perform the sin of worshipping the golden calf, God tells Moshe of His plans to annihilate this “stiff-necked people.” God’s complaint is that after all He has done for them and all they have seen with their own eyes, how can they take to idolatry? Now hear Moshe’s response in defense of the Jewish people in an attempt to get God to rescind: “*They are a stiff-necked people*” — that’s not a typo, nor is Moshe attempting a Biblical version of an insanity plea. Moshe is saying that although the Jews messed up, the mess-up came from a good spiritual source: stubbornness.

Of course when a person is wrong he must acknowledge it and change his ways, but the capacity to stick to one’s guns in the face of adversity, to have a clear path and follow up on it no matter what gets in the way — this is a spiritual trait. Living a life in which the physical obstacles do not affect your reaching the place truth leads you is to live above the physical; to live beyond its grasp.

Moderate Extremism

To use stubbornness in the correct way means to act in accordance with your principles and beliefs even when you don’t feel up to it; to act spiritual even when you’re not inspired and not in the mood. The person who acts in an elevated manner only when he feels high is not far above the slave we spoke about in the previous chapter. He acts on a whim and when that whim is gone, so is he.

This idea is made practical in an 800-year-old article focusing on personal change frequently read before Rosh Hashanah. The author writes that it is better for the development of one’s self-control to leave over a bit of one’s appetite at every eating occasion than to fast one day per week. Again, we see that working on oneself in a reserved but consistent manner does more for one’s growth than taking on extreme yet sporadic initiatives.

“No Exceptions”

It has been my observation, however, that as small as the advance one is making is, consistency itself must be taken on in the extreme. This means No Exceptions. Sometimes a person will “decide” to change, yet somehow manage to explain away every situation that comes up as being an exception to the rule. Even if it is “justified,” there has still been no movement on the ground. The point here is that if one wants to act differently, then act differently. If not, then don’t. But don’t convince yourself you are different when things somehow manage to stay the same.

This reminds me of an interesting Jewish idea. It is taught that a situation in which you *may* have sinned is worse than the situation in which you *definitely* sinned. This is because if you definitely sinned, you know you have to ask forgiveness, through which you will receive atonement; whereas, in cases of doubt, we often rationalize that there was no wrong committed, and we end up never apologizing or receiving atonement.

This fundamental principle of “No Exceptions” was my advice to a student who decided to take upon herself to start keeping kosher. If you are going to switch something in your life that will define you differently — whether it is going from a person who doesn’t keep kosher to a person who does keep kosher, or going from a person who yells to a person who doesn’t yell — the only way to do it is with the rule of “No Exceptions.” If there are exceptions then you cannot define yourself as a person who doesn’t yell. Maybe you are a person who yells less, but you’re not a person who does not yell.

Now, there may be mess-ups. We are not perfect. But a mess-up and an exception are not the same thing. A mess-up is after the fact; an exception is before the fact. And so, once one has committed (meaning “No Exceptions”) to enhancing his behavior, one of the main areas of concentration is to be conscious of one’s commitment, thereby averting the mess-up.

Committing to Our Children

The “No Exceptions” principle is one of the most important things to be aware of when it comes to raising children. If you want to demonstrate a desired behavior to your kids, though you follow it up with action most of the time, if you make room for exceptions, the child sees that the rule is not written in stone — and, to the child, if it’s

not in stone it's not a rule, rather a suggestion. And just as you have come up with your own set of priorities as to when to apply this desired behavior and when it can be overridden, the child comes up with his own set of priorities. Now, you may ask why your child's policy of application does not mirror yours? The answer is that it does. Just as you choose to break your own rules when you feel like it, the child does the same. Just as you get overcome by the situation because you have a big business deal and the family members are bugging you about something you feel is miniscule, and you yell, march off, and slam the door, so too when you are trying to get prepared to go to a family wedding but the child has an important cartoon episode to watch, he will get overwhelmed and do the same.

The principle is: If you break the rule, the rule is not you.

I was once a guest at a large Shabbat meal where the host, a successful life coach, made the following guarantee to everyone present: If you never say "no" to your child, your child will never say "no" to you. His point was not that parents should give their child whatever they want; rather, that parents shouldn't snap back at their kids with a simple "no." His claim was that, while the child may not always agree to do whatever you say, just as you refrain from lazily shouting "no!" to your child in an attempt to avoid dealing with a mess or having to give him an explanation, so too the child will not respond to you with an abrupt "no!" when you make a request of him. The end of the story is that I can personally attest to the success of this theory. Just as my wife and I refrain from saying "no" as if it is a four-letter word, it is simply not in our daughter's system to use it. Try this method and I assure you it will make the "Terrible Twos" a lot less terrible.

Again, the key here is consistency to the extreme. We are not talking about fasting twenty-four hours straight once a week. We are talking about actions that are less extreme, but consistency that is completely extreme. We are talking about a non-stop commitment to a principle that overrides anything that will come our way.

National Independence

We find this independence of constraints demonstrated in the concept of matzah, the unleavened bread eaten on Passover. The Passover Haggadah refers to it as "Poor

Man's Bread," yet the reason given by the Torah for eating it is "*because you left Egypt in a hurry.*" So, is matzah the Bread of Freedom or the Bread of Poverty? The answer is that they are both precisely one and the same. Poverty is the exemplification of freedom. The concept of poverty is that it is just the person alone and independent — nothing is attached. If we could put the state of poverty in a freeze-frame, it would be a pure unobstructed individual, without any wealth or possessions. The Jews leaving in a hurry paints this picture of unhinderedness as well. It is an attempt to not live under the foothold of time; to try to live beyond its grasp; to demonstrate the free spiritual individual living above the limitations of the physical. The wearing of a white robe on Seder night is a similar idea — no color is mixed in, no external influence. This is what it means to be truly independent. Pure simplicity, the essence of spirituality and freedom.

Willing Strength and Strengthening Will

Living a Choice-Based Life

For most of his life, my grandfather smoked a pipe, and his whole family hated it. However, my uncle also smoked here and there, and so he became my grandfather's de facto family ally. Around my grandfather's fifty-eighth birthday, he started smoking more heavily. Even his "ally" started to get concerned with this latest increase. So while my grandfather was reading his newspaper and smoking his pipe, my uncle went over to him and said gently, "Dad, I think it's getting to be a bit much." My grandfather looked up from the newspaper, looked him in the eyes, put down the pipe, and went back to reading his paper. He never picked that pipe up again for the rest of his life.

The Kabbalists teach, "*Nothing stands in front of the will.*" All along my grandfather knew smoking wasn't good for him, but when he willed it — it was like

something clicked — and after forty-five years of smoking, he put the pipe down for good. This is what the Sages referred to as true strength when they taught, “*Who is the strong person? The one who conquers his inclination.*” Psalms 90 states, “*The life of man is seventy years; and if he is strong eighty years.*” My grandfather lived to the age of eighty.

The Kabbalists have always taught that the mind is the source of all pleasure and pain. Therefore if we get our mind and our perspectives in order, everything should flow from there.

Making the Point

However, while our philosophy determines what we *know* we should do, our will does more to determine what we *actually* do. The Hebrew word for “will,” *ratzon*, and the Hebrew word for “source,” *makor*, have the same numerical value, thus emphasizing the connection between the two — that the source of all of a person’s actions lies in his will. Similarly, the Torah states, “*And you should know today [that there is One God], and you should return [this knowledge] onto your heart.*” According to this verse, a person can figure out that there is an Infinite Creator on any particular day. The ongoing spiritual work, however, is in taking this knowledge and infusing it into one’s heart. To know is a good start, but if one only knows it and he doesn’t feel it, it will often be difficult to act on it. We have all experienced this in some aspect of our lives. We know what the right thing is to do, but in order to act on it we need the point driven home to us. We have to really feel it.

Once a girl came to me who had been dating a guy on and off for a while. It was a rocky relationship, and she didn’t know what to do with it. She said she loved him and couldn’t imagine life without him. So we talked about all the issues for a while. It seemed that this relationship was an attachment or addiction rather than true love. And I proceeded to explain to her point by point why I thought the relationship would not succeed and why she needed to end it so she could move on with her life. However, most people can’t handle this kind of directness, especially when it comes to affairs of the heart. So I asked her to picture a close friend of hers — one who she really cared about and had been close to for a very long time. Then I said to her, “Imagine that she came to

you looking for help and advice, and she told you exactly what you just told me. What would you tell her to do?" She looked down. Then she looked up at me again. She knew what had to be done.

Time and again, we object to advice on the basis of, "You don't really get it because you're not in my shoes," but more often than not it is precisely the fact that they are not in our shoes that preserves their objectivity over ours.

Personal Miracles

The truth is that, according to Kabbalah, for a person to choose to act with his mind (rational) over his heart (emotional) is in itself miraculous. When we speak of miracles, we are talking about occurrences that override the natural law. The same can be said for a person who acts to override his "nature." As we elevate ourselves by making these mind-oriented choices, our humanity becomes apparent — this is the Godly side of ourselves that distinguishes us from the animal kingdom. Hence, one's soul rules over one's baser nature, utilizing the power of the will. This is what it means to be spiritual in its truest and most basic sense. And this is the point at which self-realization begins — when acting human and thereby actualizing one's human potential.

A Kosher Chronicle

It is said that one who breaks his own nature in this manner will see that God will break nature for him. Last year, my wife and I were teaching a girl who had suffered from Crohn's Disease for the past six years. This illness is very disruptive to one's day-to-day life, affecting the stomach and one's diet among other things. Although she looked like your average, happy-go-lucky college student, this girl had been in and out of hospitals for two years when she was in high school, had had a number of operations on her intestines, and was taking twenty-three pills a day — that's not a typo. She could not eat fruits or vegetables and she was more-or-less restricted to fast foods. Her favorite restaurant was McDonald's, and if someone were to offer her the choice between a gourmet meal or a Big Mac, she'd have gone with the latter.

One day while we were learning together, we came upon the topic of eating kosher. I thought to myself about two concepts: First, the idea we are discussing here —

if you break your nature, God will break His; and second, it would seem there is a connection between keeping kosher and the stomach. So I asked her, “Would you make a deal with God that if He takes your Crohn’s away, you’ll go kosher?” Without flinching, she snapped back with a “Yes.”

“Be careful now, you’re cutting a deal with God here,” I said.

“There’s no question about it. For sure I’d keep kosher if it means no more Crohn’s.”

Apparently I had underestimated the hell that is Crohn’s.

“Are you sure? That means no more McDonald’s. No more Big Macs — ever.”

After explaining to me for a few minutes that there’s no cure for Crohn’s, she said, “It’ll be tough, but I’d do anything to get rid of it.”

“Okay. This is it then. Me and God are your witnesses. If and when you’re cured, you go strictly kosher.”

“Okay,” she said seriously but skeptically, and we went back to our learning. We didn’t speak of it again until...

Now, you have to understand that usually this works the opposite way — first the person breaks his nature, and only then does God do His part. But would she commit to kosher purely on what she’d view to be some kind of long-shot at best? And also, who am I to semi-guarantee somebody that God would do something for them? Plus, there’s something wrong/not healthy with someone taking on a mitzvah half-heartedly in the faint hope that God may perform some sort of miraculous physical benefit for them.

Three months later, when we met up for our weekly Torah learning, we sat down and she told me that she had some news. She began to review her last few months with me. She told me that ever since around the time we had had our kosher-Crohn’s conversation she had been feeling better. No stomach pain. No stomach issues. She explained that she hadn’t wanted to say anything because she didn’t want to “jinx it.” She revealed that two days previously she had eaten a plum. Today she was planning to eat an apple. And up next after that was my wife’s famous Shabbat salad, something she had never been able to eat before.

This true story is another illustration of the previously mentioned principle that the spiritual is the root of the physical. Demonstrated here is the power of a choice and

commitment towards the spiritual. As you may have guessed, this young lady keeps strictly kosher today and is pill-free.

Choosing Who You Are

There is a well-known contradiction: In Ecclesiastes 1:9 it is written, “*There is nothing new under the sun.*” Yet, the Men of the Great Assembly put forth that God “*renews His goodness every day, constantly — the act of creation.*” How are we to resolve this seeming contradiction? Is nothing ever new or is everything new all the time?

An answer put forth to this question is that the sun, which seems to us as being at the top of our natural world, is often used as a way of referring to the natural world itself. And, while nature seems to us as a constant circle of life, if you go beyond the sun — beyond the natural world — and you look at things from a deeper perspective, then you will see that everything is actually in a constant state of renewal. God doesn’t get old, and He is involved in everything at every moment. It is all just as fresh now as it was on Day 1 of Creation.

The same concept applies to every individual. To the extent that we simply follow in the path of our natural base desires — physically, emotionally, and psychologically — to the extent that we follow whatever we feel like doing when we feel like doing it, we are imprisoned in our own personal circle of life where, indeed, there is nothing new. Life just seems to continue automatically. We become like a machine — turned on in the morning, going through the motions throughout the day, and then shut off at night. But, if we live above natural inclinations and go beyond genetic predispositions, we empower ourselves to live a choice-based life and find ourselves capable of achieving a state of constant renewal.

This is one understanding of what the Kabbalah means when teaching us that “A person is a miniature world” — just as the external physical aspects of the natural world accomplish nothing “new” on their own, independent of their Source, so too man has a physical side that on its own will tend towards physicality and instant-gratification, but we have the ability to elevate above that by choosing to act on a higher plane — the plane of the soul.

The Year in Review

People tend to focus and reevaluate their lives (and of course this has its root in one's will) at the beginning of a new year. People make resolutions for the new year, and especially in Judaism, there is a strong focus on personal improvement and strengthening one's commitment to the more important things in life. The word in Hebrew for "year," *shannah*, has the same root as the words for "repeat," *shoneh*, and "change," *shinui*, because when we come to a new year, we all have a choice to make: "Will I be the same person as I've been the past year, or do I want to make a change?"

God provides advice for us as to how to best answer this question through His Holy Tongue: The Hebrew word for "sin," *averah*, has the same root as the Hebrew word for "past," *avar*, indicating that we ought to leave the sins behind and look ahead to a brighter future. In the Torah, the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, is referred to as "A Day of Remembering," hinting at the idea that the resolutions we take upon ourselves on this day should be remembered each day of the year. Of course (with God's help), the end-all-be-all factor in attaining such results is one's will. "Do I really *want* to find truth? Do I really *want* to live up to what I believe? Or would I be more honest in saying that I'm desperately trying to escape it?" At the end of the day, the choice is in your mind before it ever makes it into your hands.

Fear of the Known

An obstacle that some face is a fear of responsibility. People are afraid to live choice-based lives because what if they fail? Then *they* are responsible; it was their choice, and therefore they have no one to blame — that can be a scary thought.

A few days ago, I was in the car with my wife, Chana, and we drove by someone delivering fruit to a fruit store, when he suddenly dropped a crate of watermelons all over the street. Immediately, his facial expression turned into one of being upset at someone else, and he looked up and around, but there was no one there. Chana quickly observed, "That's the way we all are — always looking for someone to blame."

Indeed, it takes a lot of consciousness and self-awareness to climb out of such habits and programming and take responsibility. However, Judaism makes it easy. The simplicity of the Jewish approach may at first seem harsh, but when you look deeper you

see that it is the sweetest approach there can be. The Talmud tells of a calculation that was done and the conclusions that were drawn: “Better off is the person who was never created.” Although Judaism views life as the greatest gift, the Sages were saying that most people don’t live up to what that gift is all about; that more often than not, people act irresponsibly and with negligence thereby squandering life away. The Jewish approach to fear of responsibility is to simply say as follows: You are already responsible.

If an individual were to truly internalize these words — that his being responsible is a given and a foregone conclusion — that would be the end of his fear and the beginning of his life. He would see the world in a whole new light. He would skip through the streets doing cartwheels and back-flips!

A few years ago, I ran a unique program in Israel called Executive Jewish Fellowship. In this program, I taught Jewish philosophy in English to Israeli university students all over the country and offered other enriching trips and experiences. At first, there were those who said that it could not be done in a serious way — to try to have an impact without speaking in the students’ mother tongue can be a big strike against you. Accordingly, I did not want to go out and raise big bucks for this project straight off the bat, nor did I want to get it taken over by an umbrella organization, until I had tested the waters to see the responses of the students. What if it failed? I’d have wasted people’s money and people’s time.

I decided to start small. I spoke to a couple of people who I know well who agreed to fund the fledgling project, and I ran the whole thing from my apartment to cover costs. After a successful year, I thought to myself, “Okay. Thank God it’s going well. Time to take it to the next level. Time to try to get the program taken over by an umbrella organization to help with funding.” At first, I felt good about it, but as things got more serious, I started feeling uneasy about the whole endeavor — the same feelings I had before I had tested the program out! “What if it fails *this time*? I will have wasted people’s time and money.” Then, I realized I could successfully run this program for thirty years and, when presented with the option to expand it, I’d still have those same thoughts in the back of my mind. If I were to continue to listen to this fear of responsibility, I’d never really live.

This example shows fear of responsibility in light of a “business” venture, but the truth is that it applies to everything in life. If you would take to heart that you are already responsible, you can now start accomplishing because you have nothing to lose. The key is to internalize that it is not a question of whether or not to play the game — you are already in the game. The only question is whether you will win or lose.

Once this attitude is achieved, we can begin to look at our negative instincts and genetic predispositions as obstacles rather than limitations. As a matter of fact, when we come to terms with the fact that the game is on and begin to act accordingly, it is our limitations themselves that become the purpose of what this world is all about. Without them to work on, personal growth as we know it would not exist. Think about it. If I have not expanded my abilities, myself, and my limitation-capacity beyond their original levels, what have I accomplished as a human being? What have I done with my seventy years?

The Parent Trap

With this Game-On perspective, we can now also see our parents as part of the game that has been designed for us to play, rather than making constant use of them as an excuse to keep oneself on the sidelines. We see this clearly in Kabbalistic sources as well as *halachah*, practical Jewish law. In *halachah*, when discussing honoring our parents, we are told to do it because God said so — not because they are deserving. The intent here is clear. It is anticipated that there will be those who will attempt to exempt themselves from the obligation to honor their parents on the grounds that their parents were such jerks that they do not deserve to be honored. The Jewish response to such claims is that we do not always understand the full picture, and if God set up a world in which you had jerks for parents, there is a reason. Therefore, even if they do not “deserve” honor in your eyes, you should honor them anyway, because the obligation to honor parents is not between you and your parents nearly as much as it is between you and God.

For most, this idea that honoring parents (and interpersonal commandments in general) is not merit-based is a radically new perspective. However, when we look in the sources, we see that this is the classical approach! Even more difficult for people to

swallow, in Kabbalah it is taught that we actually chose our parents, and not the other way around! A lot of people have a problem receiving this message. Since so many of us are used to consciously and subconsciously attributing our shortcomings to our parents and the way in which we were raised, when we hear such a claim it shakes the theoretical ground we stand on.

However, when applying our Game-On perspective, we find that not only is blaming our upbringing self-defeating, it is false. One who rises above these fears, excuses, and obstacles goes beyond his base-reactive inclination to fall back into what is comfortable. However, in order to apply the soul and assert oneself — instead of being dragged into a life of least resistance — one must start with the will. And in order to achieve willing it, one must will will itself.

Willing Will

To truly will something is not to do it half-heartedly, but to do it with zeal. When we ask our spouses to do something for us, of course it is good that they do it even if they don't understand why, but we are really hoping that through their appreciation of where we are coming from, they will fulfill our wish wholeheartedly — as opposed to simply doing it in order to pacify us.

In the same vein, often when we make a request of God, instead of asking God simply to do something, we appeal with the phrase, “May it be [Your] **will**...” We don't want God to simply *do* an action for us. We want God to **will** to do it because, if God wills it, it is a complete action from its root core onward.

In order to reach higher levels of self-realization, one must will will. And this is what King David exemplified when he beseeched God, “*Open up Your hand, and satisfy every being [with] will.*”

Preparing to Receive

Achieving Self-Realization

Torah literally means “instructions” — instructions for life and instructions of reality. The Sages teach that this infinite instruction manual was given with three things: ***fire, water,*** and in the ***desert.*** The Kabbalists explain that just as the Torah was initially given with these three things, so too we need to attain the qualities represented within them if we are to truly receive the significance of Torah on a personal level.

(I thought it particularly relevant to bring up this teaching in this book, because the messages we take in daily from our Western societies are diametrically opposed to these three points.)

Judaism with a Passion

Nowadays, when everybody is working for the weekend — when the ideal is to lay on the beach and do nothing — it is often difficult for people to imagine actually being passionate about anything, let alone what they are busy doing. Conversely, in Judaism, the very first line of the *Shulchan Aruch*, the book of codified Jewish law, states that we should wake up in the morning “*like a lion*.” We are supposed to be psyched up and energized for the opportunity at a new day! New opportunities to give, to love, to grow, and to connect to God. If a person woke up one morning with a map that could lead him to a pot of gold, he would jump out of bed. If this person didn’t jump out of bed, it would be clear that he doesn’t understand what it is that he has in his possession. Torah is that map. It is our diagram of reality leading to self-realization and connection to God.

Fire symbolizes passion. We must be “on fire” about our search for truth and our desire to be a part of it. Passion is important in Judaism in that it reflects our appraisal of the Torah and our feeling of its relevance to our lives. In any personal relationship that one holds in high regard, there is a strong desire to understand what will be good for the relationship and what will hurt it. And, of course, to the extent that the participants truly desire to advance the relationship, they will try to follow up on this understanding. The same applies to our relationships with ourselves and God: if we are here to perfect ourselves and to connect to God — and the Torah is the instruction book that tells us how — we are going to be thrilled to have the opportunity to crack it open, delve into it, and put it into practice. The more we take this understanding with us in our hearts, the more we will exist in a constant state of renewal and passion for life, for spirituality, for Torah, and for a new day.

If one isn’t driven naturally, a good way to achieve this passion is to jump into it. This doesn’t mean blind faith, and it doesn’t mean all at once. But if a person standing on the outside feels nothing, chances are he won’t feel anything new by continuing to stand on the outside. The most difficult part of exercising is getting started, and the longer you haven’t done it, the more difficult it will be. Most likely, this is a physical reflection of a spiritual reality: If you are thirty-five years old and have never worked your spiritual muscles, unless you are gifted from birth, chances are they’re pretty weak. If your mind consents to start working out, but your heart doesn’t yet feel it — following the

Kabbalistic teaching that the external affects the internal — it's best you just start. Learn, introspect, pray, and do — and hopefully you'll get your spiritual blood flowing.

Keeping an Open Mind

Water will always flow down to the lowest point, and so it is a lesson in humility. Humility, in our day and age, is a foreign concept. It is equated with dressing in rags and a hood and standing in a corner hunched over. Really, according to Judaism, these outer appearances have no bearing on whether one is humble or not.

At the end of the Torah, God tells us that Moses was the most humble person to ever live and also the greatest person to ever live. It would seem that there is a connection between the two. Now, did Moses not know he was of the highest caliber? Of course he did. But he also knew that for every moment he existed it was because God willed it, and all the awesome choices that he made were what he was created to do. So on the one hand we have capability to be great through the choices we make; but on the other hand, for every moment we exist, it is due to God pumping the sustaining energy into us to keep us around. In Judaism, the concept of humility is expressed solely through one's understanding that we are completely dependent on God for our existence and sustenance.

In a world where age is synonymous with “out of touch” instead of experienced; and in a world where we grow up on idols who slam dunk and scream into the camera “I'm the man,” to achieve any sense of humility is going to be a difficult task. However, it is a necessary one for the person who truly wants to understand what the Torah, or anything else that is foreign to him, has to say. A person must go from challenging to inquiring.

So often I have people who ask me a question about Judaism, and just after I've begun my answer, they'll cut in with, “Well I think...” How much does this person really care about what Judaism has to say? Certainly, he won't take anything I have to say to heart. He wants my answer to be what he is comfortable with, and he wants Judaism to be a document of bullet points outlining Western values. If not, he doesn't want to hear about it. This person is not humbled by a search for truth. He is simply looking to be comfortable right where he's at.

However, in Judaism we are not looking to be comfortable — if anything, we are looking to be uncomfortable. Our objective is to improve in every arena in life. You could say we're comfortable being uncomfortable. In order to receive what the Torah has to say, a person must be "big enough" to realize that maybe God knows a little more about truth and morality than I and my society do. Sadly, for a lot of people, especially those lost in the post-modern paradox where no truth is the truth, this is too tough a task.

Psalms teaches, "*Truth sprouts from the ground.*" That is, the ground, symbolizing humility, is the place a person must come to in order to do a serious search for truth. Conversely, the Torah tells us of one of the side effects of arrogance: "*Your heart got high and you forgot [about God].*" A prerequisite to Torah and any form of open-mindedness is a sense of humility, as the Sages teach, "*Who is the wise man? The one who learns from every person*" — meaning, don't be too "big" to learn from someone "smaller" than you. There is something you can learn from everyone.

Living It Down

Since there is nothing in the *desert*, its lesson for us is to be content with a little; to be non-materialistic. In our "Keeping Up with the Joneses" society of today, we find the exact opposite is what actually takes place.

A friend of mine was recently in town. He was telling me about the wedding of an old buddy of ours, so I inquired about some other friends who were there as well. He told me how sad it made him feel that all they were talking about was "How much money are you making?" and "I got a Lexus... He drives a BMW."

Imagine you were to suggest to a female friend of yours that she let you set her up with one of your guy friends. If she were to ask, "Is he successful?" what is the first thing that would come to your mind? Obviously, you'd think money. And of course that is exactly what she is asking about.

If our focus is on materialism, of course we can never truly value the Torah appropriately. After all, the Torah's primary purpose is spirituality, not materialism. In Kabbalah, the purpose of the material is that it be used towards the spiritual. The material world is to be seen as a means to a spiritual end, but never as an end in itself.

As a matter of fact, the Kabbalists teach that wealth is a *tougher* test in life than poverty, because psychologically it is more difficult to come to God if you're comfortable. After all, the rich guy feels he's got nothing to worry about, whereas the poor guy is wondering where his next meal is going to come from — who do you think is more likely to turn to God? Obviously, the one who feels in need. On the flipside, however, we do pray for wealth and prosperity because, practically and ideally, the fact remains that with comfort it would be easier to be involved in spirituality and Godly pursuits.

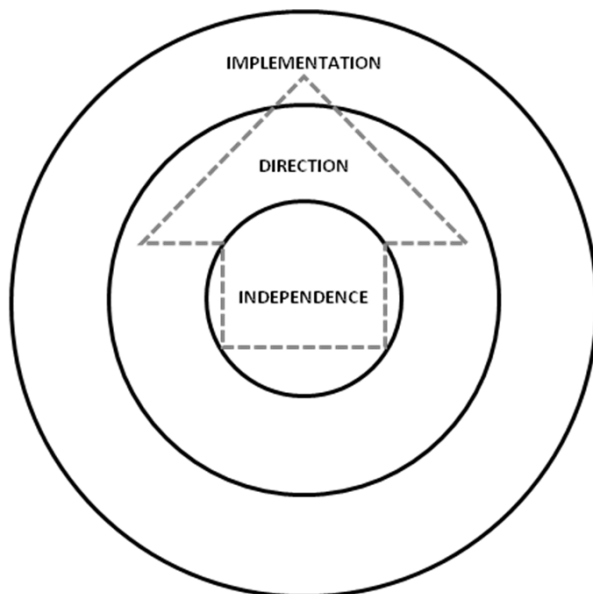
It seems that in truth Judaism is neither for nor against material things. It all depends on your mindset and how you use them. Is the material thing the end, or is it the means to achieving a higher end? Today, if we take our spiritual life seriously, we have to be very wary that the materialistic world will take over. This is the lesson of the desert — to be as non-reliant on the physical as possible. A relative of mine said it best: “My luxuries are my kids’ necessities.” To be able to live a spiritual life while enjoying the physical world is a balancing act, and if we are not constantly aware of that we will surely fall off.

Unit 3 Conceptual Visualization: IMPLEMENTATION

Who am I and what am I made of?

What am I about and how do I get there?

Am I being real with myself and do I really care?



UNIT 4 — AMPLIFICATION

Materialism

Turning Quantity into Quality

Anyone who has ever been exposed to any Jewish culture quickly becomes aware of the emphasis put on food within Judaism. When asked why we celebrate any particular holiday, the uneducated Jew tends to answer, “They tried to kill us; we were saved; let’s eat!” We find within Judaism that almost all religious accomplishments have a festive meal attached to it. What is the meaning of this and what is the Jewish approach in general to the materialistic world?

Judaism’s Obsession with Food

It is not a coincidence that when we take a look within the Torah, we find that the original commandment God gave to man was food-based: “*Of all the trees in the Garden [of Eden] you shall surely eat, except for the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.*”

Before Adam messes up, we find that he is naked — he does not identify with his body. He knows he is a soul, and the body is simply a vehicle through which he — the soul — can accomplish. It's only when he treats food as a goal in and of itself that he has his identity crisis. He turns the body into an end, and only then do his eyes open up to the idea that “he” — the body — is naked.

The Jewish understanding of food is that it is the glue that keeps the soul in the body; without food the soul would leave the body and return to its Source. Since we are here to achieve our complete potential, food is obviously a pivotal means of getting to that end. For this reason we find food to be so deep-seated within Jewish thought. We eat at religious functions to demonstrate that the whole point of eating is to keep us alive in order that we grow and achieve spiritually; to show that the growth-oriented religious accomplishment *is* what we are living for. Unfortunately, this idea has been hijacked in our modern materialistic era, and now, instead of having a nice meal to demonstrate that we are living for the spiritual, we use spiritual achievements as an opportunity to throw lavish affairs.

The Value of a Dollar

Similarly, just as food is a means to achieve the spiritual, so are all things physical a means to achieve the spiritual. This is exemplified when we look at the Jewish concept of money. The essence of money is in its potential. Money on its own is simply paper with a funky design. The greatness of money is not in what it is, but only in what you can trade it for.

In the Torah and the writings of the Sages, we find a number of words for money and other “valuable” items. More often than not, these words hint to their own limited and unfulfilling natures. Words for money include *zuz*, *ma'ot*, and *mammon*. *Zuz* can also mean to “move” because money moves from one person to another; *ma'ot* can also mean “just for the time” because money does not stay with a person forever; *mammon* breaks down “*ma mon*” meaning, “what are you counting?” (i.e., you only count things that are important, and wealth is not what this world is all about, nor does it last, so why are you counting it?).

The words for “silver” and “gold” are *keseif* and *zahav* respectively. *Keseif* is from the word *niksaf*, which means “yearned for,” because a person with silver always yearns for more — we are never satisfied by the amount we have. And *zahav* is a combination of the words “*ze hav*” meaning, “give this,” because the person who sees wealth in front of him will say, “Give it to me!” In addition, the word in Hebrew for “possessions” is *nechasim*, which can also mean “hidden,” because possessions are easily hidden from one person and revealed to another. Unlike wisdom and strength, which have more of an attachment to a person, the nature of possessions is that they are easily lost.

Besides seeing in all this the beauty of the Holy Tongue — the language spoken by God to bring about creation — we can also take from it the idea that, often, the more possessions one has the more worries one has. For example, with the luxury of a car comes the burden of a car. Besides the money factor, a car breaks down, gets stolen, gets a flat tire, needs to be taken to tests, you scratch someone else’s car, etc., the list is endless. Without a car one does not have to deal with these issues. Personally, I advise against getting a car unless a person really needs it — especially if one lives in the city, where public transportation is more accessible.

Living on a Prayer

This question of materialism arises in prayer as well. A great Jewish leader, Nachmanides, wrote a letter to his son when his son became Bar Mitzvah. It is commonly studied by Jews the world over. In it, Nachmanides advises his son, “Cast all worldly matters from your mind when you pray.” At first this sounds like good advice — in order to maximize focus and meditative experience, block out the physical world. However, upon further analysis, a question arises: In prayer, we find ourselves asking for health, wealth, prosperity, freedom, and peace. How can we cast worldly matters from our mind while we pray if the prayers themselves involve worldly matters?

One explanation is that when we ask for these things, we are not asking for them as ends in themselves, but as a means with which we hope to achieve a spiritual end. We don’t want health for the sake of health; while that’s more comfortable, it’s not meaningful. We ask for health in order that we can use our healthy state to achieve a meaningful existence — one of learning, growing, and doing good acts.

The truth behind money and materialism is that we pray thrice daily that our needs be taken care of, and then some. Ideally we want to be comfortable *in order* that we can focus our attention and efforts towards personal and spiritual development. Instead of becoming engrossed in the physical and drowning in the material, we use the physical to catapult us to growth and spirituality.

Mundane or Meaningful?

Turning Down-Time into Up-Time

Recently, I was walking in Jerusalem, and, as often happens, I bumped into someone I know from way back when. This time it was a friend of my sister. We spoke for a bit, and when I asked her what she was up to, she answered that she was about to start teaching English in the high school she had graduated from a number of years earlier.

Jokingly, I responded, “Sounds like you’re really moving up in the world.”

I saw from the facial expression that followed that she was not a fan of my humor nor was it all that original. I felt bad about it, and we continued to talk for a bit. Then I explained to her, “You know, those who feel the need to ‘move up’ in business are not moving up where it really counts — in their heart and soul. After all, where are the ‘climbers’ moving up to? Okay, they have a bigger house and a nicer car, but now what?”

And if they continue to ‘move up,’ so then what? What has truly been accomplished in all this?”

The purpose of one’s job is to support oneself (and one’s family) materialistically. If your job does that without bringing you down in the important areas of life, you will *not* feel the need to “move up” in business. You simply wouldn’t use business as your measuring stick to determine whether or not someone is “moving up in the world” — all the more so if your job is dedicated to a cause you believe in and you feel your role to be an important factor.

Light and Darkness

It is only when a person forgets about his Source, essence, and purpose that he redefines the meaning of the word “growth” to mean a promotion at the office. As mentioned, it is no coincidence that if you rearrange the letters for the Hebrew word for “forget,” *shachach*, you get the Hebrew word for “darkness,” *choshech* — to forget one’s who, what, and why of life is to be living in spiritual *darkness*.

On the other hand, the Hebrew word for “light,” *ohr*, reflects what it means to live a life of light in the spiritual sense of the word. The word *ohr* is spelled with three Hebrew letters: *aleph*, *vav*, *reish*. *Aleph* is the first letter of the alphabet and, having the numerical value of one, hints to the **One God**. *Vav* in the Hebrew language is used to **connect** sentence fragments into one longer sentence (similar to the English words “and” and “or”). *Reish* means “**head**” in Rabbinic literature. So, if we put this all together, we find a deep hidden meaning in the Hebrew word for light. We see that light, in a deeper sense, means: “*God connected to one’s head.*” In other words, to live in light — to be able to see clearly — means to live a life of God-Consciousness.

Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?

Now, many people may say, “I know there is a God. I am aware of it.” But there is a big difference between simply knowing there is a God and living with God-Consciousness — they are worlds apart.

Imagine a person wins the lottery. The winner has all of his thoughts set on this. From the moment he is informed till the week is through, the winner gets up in the

morning thinking about it and throughout the day and night his mind is constantly on the fact that he just won the lottery. He walks in the street and thinks about it. He sits at work and can't get anything done because he is so excited (why he is still going to work I'm not exactly sure). When he lies down, he can't fall asleep because he can't stop thinking about the big win he just scored. Now, suppose there's another fellow. This person did not win the lottery but he knows who did because he heard the name of the guy on the evening news. How much of his time is occupied thinking about the lottery and its winnings? Not much.

Let's understand the difference between these two individuals. They both know clearly who the winner is. However, the winner is completely engrossed by this piece of information, whereas the loser is not occupied with it. This is the difference between the God-Knower and God-Conscious. The God-Knower is aware of an Infinite Being, but not attached to his knowledge, while the God-Conscious is totally enveloped by it. The God-Knower may philosophize about God but the God-Conscious is seized by God, thereby infusing this knowledge into everything in his life.

Movin' On Up

I have a cousin who was working as a mover in Israel. Every day he would take people's couches, ovens, beds, and refrigerators and move them into their new home. He quoted an early twentieth-century Kabbalist when saying that sometimes what you're doing can be almost totally dependent on your outlook. He said, "One can look at my job as just a job, something that I get money for so I can put food on the table; but my view is that every day I go out and take part in the mitzvah [commandment] of inhabiting the Land of Israel."

I heard an analogous story told by a rabbi in New York about his wife. Before she went to change an especially dirty diaper, she preceded it with a Kabbalistic prayer: "Behold, I am ready and prepared to fulfill the positive commandment of 'Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself...'" Again we see, that something that is often looked upon as a routine chore can be infused with Godliness, spirituality, and meaning — one need only be conscious of it.

A Little R & R

Similarly, instead of treating a little R & R as if it were a break, we have the capacity to live with the consciousness that the necessary down-time, such as sleep and the like, is for the sole purpose of strengthening us for the up-time. We thereby attach and transform the down-time itself into up-time. The physical and neutral is made spiritual—even when we are asleep!

An example of this translates into one of my favorite days of the year, the day before Yom Kippur. The Talmud teaches that when one eats a lot the day before Yom Kippur, it is as if he fasted two days. Now, despite the fact that anything having to do with eating in Judaism sounds typical, this still seems quite strange. Why would eating get a person “credit” for fasting an extra day? An answer to this question can be seen in the principle being discussed in this chapter. When one eats *in preparation for* his Yom Kippur fast, he attaches his otherwise neutral actions (eating) on an otherwise neutral day (the day before Yom Kippur) to the holiness of fasting on Yom Kippur. He thereby elevates the spiritual quality of a neutral act on a neutral day to receive an aspect of Yom Kippur holiness!

A Nation of Priests

This concept of turning the down-time into up-time is a foundational Kabbalistic teaching and is literally at the heart of what the Jewish people are all about. In general, the group that is most directly involved with spirituality is the Levites. They are financially supported by the nation to work in the Temple and teach the nation. Let’s take a closer look at the word meaning “Jewish people,” *Yisrael*. When we spell out the word, we get: *yud-shin-reish-aleph-lamed*, and if we spell out the letters themselves, the middle letters of each of these spelled-out letters are the same letters that spell the Hebrew word *Levi'im*, meaning “Levites.” Just as the God-oriented Levites are at the “center” of the Jewish Nation, the same principle should apply for each individual: At the heart of everything we each do should be a connection to what our life is all about. Just as God did not create anything at random, so too we strive to connect everything we do to our ultimate purpose. If our life is all about achieving the spiritual, then everything that we do should be impassioned with a God-Consciousness at its root.

Timing Is Everything

Being Opportune with Our Opportunities

One moment of returning to God and good deeds in this world is more beautiful than all the moments of the World to Come; and one moment of spiritual bliss in the World to Come is more beautiful than all the moments of this world.

(Ethics of the Fathers 4:22)

It is teachings such as these that have kept the Rabbis in business all these years. Is it the World to Come that we should be looking forward to, or is our world the place to be? Obviously this statement begs an explanation.

If we were to split up the two teachings, the second half is easily understood: One moment of spiritual bliss — one moment of unlimited barrierless basking in the light of the Infinite — is greater than the sum-total of all the limited pleasures this world has to

offer. The first half of the teaching is what is hard to grasp. The supremacy of the ultimate spiritual experience that takes place in the World to Come just having been noted, how are we to understand *one moment of returning to God and good deeds in this world is more beautiful than all the moments of the World to Come?*

Growing Pains

One way of looking at this is to ask any loving mother the feeling she had right after she gave birth. Certainly, she will tell you that it was a surreal moment of ecstasy. At conception, the child is but a microscopic seed. It grows and develops inside her, and after a long nine months, she finally gets to meet her baby. The child comes out looking the way it does — with all the body parts and organs that it has — only because of the days, weeks, and months it spent growing and developing while in the womb. Of course, there is still growth for the child after the womb. But this does not take place at nearly the same rate nor is it subject to the same level of sensitivity as when the child was a fetus in the womb. So, there is an unparalleled level of ecstasy that is experienced when that child is born, but from then on the child can no longer physically grow in the same manner it had been growing while in the womb. The child has been given physical life, but has lost its capability for embryonic growth.

This is what the Sages meant when they said that *one moment of returning to God and good deeds in this world is more beautiful than all the moments of the World to Come*. While the World to Come is the place of spiritual experience, it is not the place of spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is what this world was created for. This world is often referred to in Kabbalah as *Olam HaAsiyah*, the World of Action. This doesn't just imply that our world is a place of skyscrapers and Learjets. It means that this is the place for the building of our own selves — physically as well as spiritually.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that society has come up with the phrase “killing time.” If we have been given time on this earth with which to grow spiritually — during the half-hour that a person “kills” watching TV, how does he differ from the one who is already dead? In fact, we must understand, that to squander a moment in this world is, in a sense, to commit an act of mini-suicide.

The Soul's Fuel

In Proverbs, King Solomon compares people to candles when he says, “*The candle of God is the soul of a person.*” In a candle there exists two parts: the body of the candle and the flame which makes the candle come alive. The flame is always going upwards, yearning to go heavenward, but it is attached to the body of the candle. The same can be said of every human being. We all have a Divine spark, a soul, which yearns to go back to its source in the heavens. The only thing that keeps our souls here is their attachment to our bodies. Since our temporary time on this earth has infinitely valuable potential, it is only logical that we cherish that which keeps our souls in our bodies. Among other things, food is the means by which we stay alive. Food gives us the energy, strength, and sustenance to keep going. It is the fuel that connects our souls to our bodies.

Holy Cow!

This is why Judaism is so obsessed with food. As previously mentioned, almost every religious accomplishment is celebrated with a festive meal. And almost every holiday has some food attached to it: On Passover we eat foods that teach us to use our freedom. On Shavuot we eat dairy to teach us to emulate the characteristics of Moses. (Moses was on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights, so we eat dairy [*chalav* in Hebrew], the numerical value of which is forty.) On Sukkot, we eat in a temporary hut to remind ourselves that life is temporary. On Hanukah, we eat foods made with oil because of the miracle of the one day's worth of oil that lasted eight days, thereby reminding us that God is running everything in nature. And on Purim, we give gifts of food to others in order to bring unity to our nation, because that is how we were originally threatened during the times of Esther (see *Esther* 3:8). It is difficult to imagine what Judaism would look like without food-oriented observances.

Just as our souls are the life-force and end-purpose of our physical existence, so too, God is the life-force and spiritual aim of the physical world. And just as food is what connects our souls to our physical bodies, God also has “food” — things that, through their performance, generate such a love between God and man, that they “connect” God to us and the physical world more than anything else.

In the Torah, God refers to two activities as His “bread.” The Kabbalists liken the strong connection between man and God created during the time of their performance to two smooth boards being glued together — impossible to pull apart.

They are: *Torah Learning* and *Divine Service*.

We will proceed to talk about *Divine Service* here and in the following chapter.

The value of *Torah Learning* will be discussed later, in the chapter “Unity: Putting the Pieces Together.”

Divine Service

One year at our Passover Seder, I blessed everyone that they should merit to see the Third Temple and partake of the Pascal lamb. As you may have guessed, one of my guests came up to me afterwards and asked, “You don’t really mean that, right?”

We will touch upon animal sacrifices in a bit, but for now I would like to briefly explain the Temple’s centrality in Jewish thought and how we can connect to it.

Bridging the Gap

According to Judaism, all that we receive in this world comes from God. And the way it gets to us is through the Temple. That is to say, the Temple serves as the “link,” in a sense, between our world and God. In order that Divine influence enters our world, there must be a Giver and a receiver. God bestows the abundance from the Heavens above, and the Land of Israel receives it below. (All lands receive their portion through the Land of Israel. Therefore, in Grace After Meals, we bless the Land of Israel even if we are not in the Land nor eating Israeli produce.) Since God and the Land are “separate” entities, however, there needs to be a “middleman” that is connected to both above and below through which this abundance can travel. This is the function of the *Beit HaMikdash*, “The Sanctified House,” otherwise known as the Temple. On the one hand the Temple is connected to the physical world in that it is located in the physical world. On the other hand, it is spiritual in the sense that constant miracles occur there and it operates outside the laws of space and nature (see *Ethics of the Fathers* 5:7). For this

reason, the Temple has been compared to a ladder that can bring earth up to Heaven and can establish Heaven on earth.

On the flipside, however, it is understandable that nowadays, when we lack the Temple, the world is going to be a sick place, being that it is not receiving the nutrients it needs to preserve its healthy state. In a number of places, the prophets refer to the Temple as the neck of the world. The neck is the part of our bodies that connects that which distinguishes us from the animal kingdom to the side of us that seems relatively identical to the animals; our brains to our bodies; our spiritual side to our physical side. A world that has had its neck severed for 2,000 years is obviously not going to be doing all that well.

Soon, when our collective neck is restored, there will be many ramifications. For the world and humanity as a whole, there will be a return to the healthy norm, where God's abundance flows to us in its full strength because that bridge between God and us has been rebuilt. For each individual, there will be a stronger sense of clarity and personal connection to God, and therefore it will be easier to tap into the Infinite.

Being Templesque

God tells us in the Torah, "*Make for me a Temple and I will dwell in **you**.*" At first glance, this verse does not seem to make sense. It would seem that the verse should have ended "*Make for me a Temple and I will dwell in **it**.*" But Kabbalah teaches that each part of the Temple corresponds to a different part of the human being. Therefore, when a person comes to the Temple with this proper understanding, he is inspired to make himself into a miniature Temple, thereby bringing God into his life just as God is present in the Temple itself.

Many people think that the building of the Temple itself is the goal of the redemption, but, as this verse teaches us, that is not exactly the case. The Temple's individualistic objective, according to Kabbalah, is that a person enter it and see the consciousness and awareness with which everything is being done, see the holiness and sanctity, and say to himself, "Just as they are alert and aware of every detail in the Temple, so too I want to live a more conscious and meaningful life. Just as they are

connected to God in the Temple, so too I want to focus on my spiritual side and make my actions holy. And just as God 'dwells' in the Temple, so too God will 'dwell' within me."

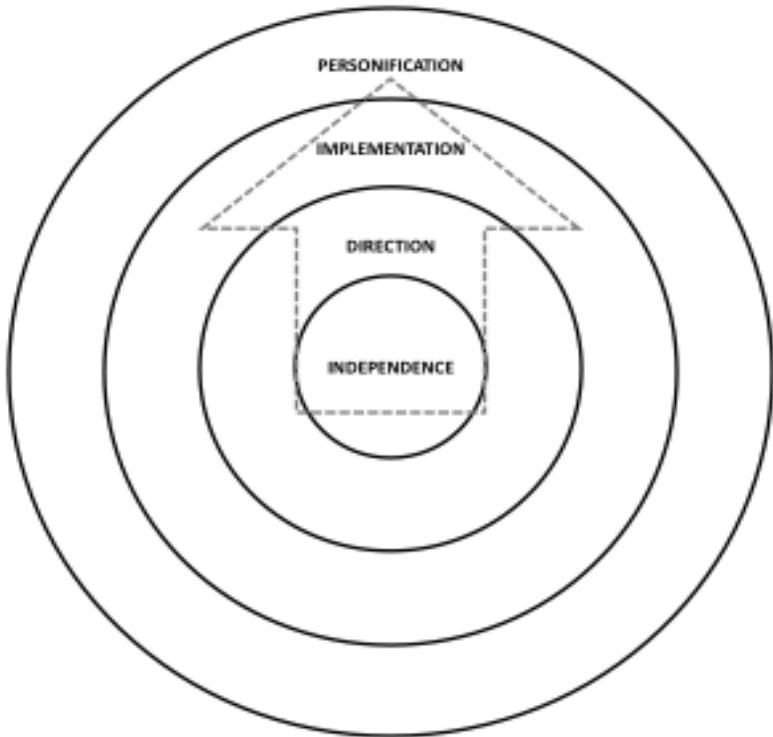
Unit 4 Conceptual Visualization: PERSONIFICATION

Who am I and what am I made of?

What am I about and how do I get there?

Am I being real with myself and do I really care?

Am I doing all that I can and am I making the most of my opportunities?



UNIT 5 —
INTERDEPENDENCE

Meditation and Prayer

Connecting with Reality

The key to Divine Service is that it is performed through focusing on the greatness of God and man's complete dependency on Him. There is a Chassidic story told of two holy teachers who were having a dispute as to how one should come to God-consciousness. Reb Elimelech was of the opinion that one should focus on the greatness of God, and that will lead him to awareness of his own dependency upon Him. Reb Zusha believed that one should contemplate his own complete reliance and dependency on God, and through that he'll come to see the greatness of God and His attributes. They decided to ask their teacher, the great Maggid of Mezrich. The Maggid of Mezrich responded by saying that both approaches are completely legitimate, but that to first take a look at one's own

limitations would be the better of the two because it is easier to focus on oneself than to look outside of oneself — one can't fall from the ground.

Being a Dependent

By truly focusing on God's greatness and man's dependency on Him, we generate within ourselves a sense of *awe* of God, and a sense of *love* for Him. A sense of *awe* is always felt when we are placed into someone else's hand. Often, when we meet a potential romance and are interested in pursuing the relationship, we become concerned about the mate's reactions to that which we say and do. There is a sense of awe there because, given that I want the relationship, it is the mate who will determine whether or not it will advance. In a similar vein, to the extent we understand and internalize our complete dependency on God — for our existence, sustenance, and everything else — it will generate a sense of awe within us.

Love for God is felt because a person always loves that which is his fulfillment and completion. It is appropriate that a man who feels like half a person love his wife who, he feels, completes him and makes him whole. (That is one reason why marriage is so central in Jewish consciousness — it is the ultimate parable in our physical lives for the relationship between man and God.) Similarly, the soul achieves its fulfillment and sense of completion through building a spiritual relationship with the Infinite.

However, there are times when we fall. We squander the energies that God has given us in order to achieve relationship with Him, descending from the human level to act uncharacteristically animalistic. The reality of our base animalistic side is the reason we have sacrifices, *korbanot*. The word *korban* literally means to “bring close.” Through the performance of the animal sacrifices in the Temple, one *sacrifices* his animal side thereby bringing himself *closer* to God. Hence, one actually services the divine with himself. (It must be emphasized that it's not that the individual who brings the sacrifice witnesses what happens to the animal and is inspired to change — that may be true — but even without that, the bringing of the sacrifice *itself* makes a *real spiritual change* in the person and his consciousness.)

Prayer

Nowadays, since we are lacking the Temple and all its service, there is a serious lack in this area of Divine Service. It is such a serious lack that most of us don't even know we are missing anything. However, we can still achieve Divine Service to a certain degree through meditation and prayer. This form of Divine Service is called "Service of the Heart" in the Talmud.

Many people have misconceptions about the Jewish idea of prayer. It is often understood to be meaningless mumbling out of a book, and as such, it is often surrounded by a combination of ill feelings and philosophical questions. In order that we paint a clear picture of what prayer is all about, we must delve into these philosophical issues. Hopefully we will emerge with a new appreciation for this pinnacle of Jewish practice — an understanding that will go beneath the surface.

Choosing Words Wisely

Recently, I was asked by a guest at our Shabbat table what the "symbolism" is for one of the "rituals" we were doing. To which I politely responded that we were not doing a "ritual," nor is there any "symbolism" in this or anything else we are involved with in Judaism. Of course I know what she meant, and after this discussion I did explain to her why we were doing what we were doing. But the prerequisite to making anything in Judaism meaningful is to change the way we talk and the way we think. "Practice" for the sake of "tradition" renders that action trivial at best. It sounds like you are doing it simply because someone passed it on to you as something "we do" — a hollow exercise in which there is nothing real going on, that effects no real change in the world, and has within it no real essence. When this is what most of those involved in Judaism intuit, feel, or believe, it's no wonder their kids are opting out.

Having an Effect

The Kabbalistic understanding of the 613 mitzvot, commandments, is that their performance has both an individualistic effect and a worldly effect.

On an individualistic level, the mitzvot come to elevate one's soul through their corresponding effect on the body. There are 248 positive mitzvot (Do's), corresponding

to the 248 limbs of one's body. And there are 365 negative commandments (Don'ts), corresponding to the 365 sinews of one's body. To the extent we are involved in the positive mitzvot, our bodies will be infused with spiritual light and our souls drawn closer to God. To the extent that we don't capitalize on these mitzvah opportunities, we are left with latent potential and life not lived. In reference to the negative mitzvot, to do such an action erects a spiritual barrier between oneself and God. To pass on such an opportunity brings God's Light onto the individual.

In a similar vein, just as an individual's performance of a mitzvah lifts him to new heights, it also raises the world as a whole. This is not simply the butterfly effect. Rather, since everything in the physical has its root in the spiritual, there exists a causative relationship between the two, based on the system that God has laid out and continues to operate. That which the world receives physically will be based entirely on the level we are at spiritually. Hence, included in each mitzvah are worldly as well as personal ramifications — both spiritual and physical.

Stating the Obvious

In prayer, when we praise, thank, or ask God for things, we are not doing it because God has an ego problem. Of course, there is nothing God is actually "getting" from this — after all, if we pray to God is He now Infinite plus one?

In order to understand what point there is in talking to God, we must simply look at the essence of what a person is doing while he is praying. First and foremost, one who is praying is making a statement. It is an acknowledgement of God's existence and man's dependency on Him. There are many goals of prayer, but this is primary.

Stepping Up

As a matter of fact, there is a special mitzvah that applies to prayer and nothing else. It is referred to as "Reward for Steps." Every step one takes to get from his house to the synagogue counts for him as another mitzvah. Why does this apply only to prayer? Why not for Torah study or for a good deed?

A person's house is his comfort zone. You come home after a long day of work and errands, you walk into your front door, and finally you feel "at home." You mosey

along to your living room. You sit down and sink into your couch as you pick up the remote. Here, no one can bother you. Here, you are master of your domain. On the flip side, when a person leaves his house for the synagogue, he is making the statement: “I’m not the master of this domain; God is running the show.” In effect, with every step he takes, he fulfills the primary purpose of what prayer is all about — testifying through his actions that everything is in God’s hands.

When recognizing that God is the Source of everything, and when asking and thanking Him for things, we elevate our consciousness and come closer to God. Since God gives us what’s best for us in accord with the spiritual level we’re at, when we make a request of or show gratitude to God, we are not simply asking and thanking Him for things. Rather, we are elevating our spiritual level. When we activate our relationship with God in this manner, we create spiritual energy that was not there previously, thereby improving what is best for us.

Getting Personal

To pray in one’s own words and mother tongue is considered by many to be the highest form of prayer. However, there is also a set prayer composed by the Sages and prophets considered somewhat essential in Jewish thought. The logic behind praying in someone else’s words can be loosely compared to the following situation:

Imagine you were a fundraiser attempting to solicit money for your worthwhile cause. An associate manages to get you a meeting with Bill Gates. Obviously, this is the opportunity of a lifetime. Your meeting is scheduled to take place in a week, so you have time to prepare and consult with people about the approach you wish to take when you and Bill sit down to chat. Now, let’s say you had the opportunity to consult with *anyone* in the world, who would you want to speak with? Most likely, you would seek out people who have received contributions from Bill in the past, business associates, Bill’s personal therapist, his family, his wife, his mom — all those people who understand and know Bill the best are the ones you are going to fly all over the world to meet with before the biggest day of your career.

In a similar manner, we have been left a gift. Those who have known and understood God in ways unimaginable to us have left us a guide advising us as to how to

best approach God. Could you imagine if you had such a guide to Bill Gates? How many times would you read it over and study it deeply before your meeting with him? By using the set prayer, we learn about God and the world around us; we learn how to refer to God and how to think about God. Without the set prayer, our ideas about God and how to relate to Him would be determined almost exclusively by the society that has raised us— instead of connecting to the God that is, we'd be left to connect with the god of our imagination.

In Judaism, connecting to something as god when it is not God has a word: idolatry — and that's not doing anyone any good at all. With the set prayer, we have an alternative to the images portrayed by society, a chance to connect, focus, and meditate on the God that Is. The Jewish ideal, therefore, is to be involved in the set prayer and, without altering anything that has been handed down to us, to personalize it through your own additional prayers and alone time with God.

A One-way Ticket to Paradise

The Talmud relates that when the great sage, Rabbi Elazar, was on his deathbed, his students came to visit. One may question whether these scholars ever sat around to shoot the breeze, but certainly this was not the time, so the students engaged their teacher in matters pertaining to the soul. They asked the question: “What can we do in order to get into the World to Come?” In other words, they either wanted to know where in particular they should focus their energies in order to achieve greatness; or, perhaps they were asking for a quick and easy thing they could do that would guarantee them an in. Either way, Rabbi Elazar responded, “Know before Whom you stand when you pray, and through that you will merit the World to Come.”

At first glance, this answer seems odd. Why not give them something more central in Jewish thought to focus on? Why not answer, “Avoid the three big sins: murder, idolatry, and the sexual sins”? Or, how about focusing on one of the Ten Commandments? What specifically is it about knowing before Whom we stand when we pray that through it we merit a portion in the World to Come?

Applying Inspiration

Jessica arrives at the *Kotel*, the Western Wall, for the first time. She walks up to it. She touches the stones. She starts to think about her life, about her family, and she starts to pray. Jessica gets more and more involved in her prayer. Obviously, for many, this is a very powerful experience...

Now, imagine her feelings and her thoughts as she finishes praying. “Wow, that was incredible. I was talking, and God was listening!” She takes a few steps back from the wall and thinks about the amazing experience she just had and what she had just felt.

A few minutes later she thinks to herself, “If God saw me and heard me at the Wall, it must be that God sees and hears me now too.” Jessica excitedly continues to walk back — all the while contemplating the inspirational experience and her relationship with the One Above.

At this point, Jessica sees a few of her friends. She wants to walk over to them, but then she realizes they are gossiping about someone she knows. Having God in mind, she decides to pass on the friendly chatter for now. She avoids gossip as a result of the God-consciousness she attained while in prayer.

Rabbi Elazar tells his students that the road to the World to Come is paved with knowing before Whom one stands while in prayer. If a person meditates on being in the presence of God — once in the morning to focus his day; again at night to end it in the appropriate manner; and once in the middle to realign himself with what really counts in life — there is little doubt that this awareness will spill over into the rest of his day. Little by little, one begins catching himself doing things he’d rather not be doing, and he begins to fix his character traits. At first, he catches himself only in the first five minutes after prayer, but soon that improves to seven minutes, then ten minutes. By the time the next Rosh Hashanah rolls around, this individual finds himself a completely different person than he was the previous year — one that is refined and feeling good about it. It turns out that what had started as a person being aware of Whom he was standing before while praying, has concluded in that individual’s complete personality transformation and rectification.

Unity

Putting the Pieces Together

In *Ethics of the Fathers*, the Sages observe the following:

"The world was created with ten utterances."

With an Infinite Being at the helm, there is nothing random or by chance, so this statement was followed by a question:

"What does this come to teach us? Wasn't it possible to create [the world] with one utterance?"

The answer given is perplexing:

"[God created the world with ten utterances instead of one] to exact punishment from the wicked who destroy the world that was created with ten utterances, and to bestow goodly reward upon the righteous who sustain the world that was created with ten utterances."

While there are a number of questions one can come up with here, the most striking is: What does exacting punishment and bestowing reward have to do with ten utterances versus one?

God's Prism

As mentioned, there is a well-known idea in Kabbalah that God looked into the Torah and created the world — that the Torah is the blueprint for the entire universe. This means that in essence the Torah includes everything, and on a certain level we are all one. This can be likened to looking at light through a prism; you see an assortment of colored lights, but really the source of all those distorted lights is the one true light. The same holds true with us. Everyone appears to be separate and individual, having nothing to do with one another, but in truth we are all really one soul — Adam — broken up into different pieces. We each have a specified task to fulfill in this world, something unique to fix.

When God created the world, He left it incomplete and gave humanity the gift of the ability to become partners with Him by completing the creation process. This is one approach to the Biblical teaching that man was created “in the image of God”: through fixing something in the world that needs completion, man, in a sense, teams up with God to perfect the world.

Revenge

This unified nature of the world is a reason that revenge is prohibited by the Torah and, in general, not a wise thing to do. After all, if your hand smacked your face, would you smack your hand? If you would, you'd only hurt yourself. So too with humanity: by hurting back someone who hurts you, in reality you actually *are* hurting yourself, because you and the other are actually one. When a person goes ahead with revenge despite all this, he denies this idea of the unified nature of the world, in effect denying that the Torah is the blueprint and source of all of creation.

(This does not mean that a person is never supposed to take action or use self-defense. Of course, if one's hand is too destructive and threatens the life of the whole body, i.e., cancer, it must be cut off.)

The Number Ten

This is the significance of the number ten – its power to unify.

We all remember those math workbooks from second grade with the different sections: ones, tens, hundreds. Up to number nine, all numbers are in the “ones” category, scattered and independent. We find that the number ten brings all those otherwise individual “ones” together as one unit. The number ten signifies “completion at this level.”

By setting up the world with ten utterances, God is hinting that just as the number ten is a unit — more than one yet comes together as one — so too the world may seem as though it’s a divided place; it may appear as though what one person does in China has no effect on the guy standing in Australia. However, we are in fact all linked, and we are all interdependent.

It is no coincidence that the letter with the numerical value of ten, *yud*, is the smallest of all the letters. It teaches us that even though there are ten, it unites into one point, as the letter *yud* (י) is but a mere dot.

Therefore the number ten implies that, although we are in a world of plurality — a world that seems fragmented and non-united — in reality, all are parts of a greater whole.

The Path of the Blueprint

As we said earlier, the Torah is the blueprint of creation. Therefore the world can be compared to a building. In a building everything has its place and its purpose. If something is out of place or not strong enough to fulfill the task allotted for it, the building as a whole is affected. The same idea can be applied to the world. Even though we are all individuals and we are all different, our individual actions do not only affect our individual selves. Rather, we are all interlocked, interdependent, and parts of the same whole with the same destiny. Therefore, when a person leaves his allotted task and disregards the blueprint of creation, not only is he affected by his actions, but the entire building — the world — is brought down with him. In turn, those who do act in a blueprint-conscious manner are solely responsible for keeping the building intact — for

sustaining the entire world. As the verse in Proverbs states, “The righteous one is the foundation of the world.”

This is what is meant by the well-known idea that loving one’s neighbor as oneself is the main point of the whole Torah. To the extent one is involved with Torah, he actually sustains the world at large. Could there be any greater act of communal responsibility than this?

A Happy Alternative

This spiritual principle has a similar expression in the physical world. In high school, while most people I knew were busy taking shots at each other, there was one friend of mine who was actually always positive and uplifting to be around — it didn’t matter who you were, you were greeted with a smile and treated like gold. It was as if this sixteen-year-old had simply chosen to be happy, and for anyone who paid attention, the ripple effects were clear. People around him were just more positive — it was as if you couldn’t bring yourself to say something negative around this guy. By living his choice for a life of positivity and patience, he elevated everyone else around him. Sure, he had the ability to bring people down like anyone else, but day-in and day-out he made the constant choices to live his personal blueprint of constructive optimism, and as a result he lifted up those around him as well.

In life, when you play the hand that you are dealt in accordance with your principles, you earn the respect of those around you. Family, friends, and even those against you take note of a change that first took place on a level of will, then thought, next emotion, and now action. At first, others tend to view these changes with skepticism. They often proceed to (consciously or subconsciously) challenge your changes to see what of it is real. As you continuously stick to your guns, their perspective begins to change. Eventually, people become inspired by your positive traits and growth, leading to them making changes in their own lives and personalities. In the end, the alteration you’ve made in yourself serves as a prototype for others to modify their lifestyles, be more conscious and committed, and, as a result, lead more fulfilling lives.

As each of us strengthens our individual roles, the world at large becomes a different place — the place it was meant to be all along. While our collective destiny is

one and the same, each of us has what to contribute; each of us has an infinitely valuable individualized task in getting us there.

True Peace

Underlying Harmony and Personal Completion

After having discussed the interconnectedness of the world and the unifying nature of Torah, it should be a foregone conclusion that peace is essential for the world's ability to function properly, let alone thrive.

National Unity

There is a deep teaching that when the Jewish people are united as one, they are untouchable. This applies even if they are committing the most heinous acts — idolatry, immorality, etc. Since they are united in the fact that they originally accepted the Torah, when they come together as a nation, they are complete.

The Kabbalists explain that the source of all of our collective problems is a deficiency in our collective self-actualization. It is only where there is an internal lack or

void that an external problem can arise. However, if nothing is lacking in our national unity, there is no “place” for a problem. This can be compared to a person trying to tear a shirt. If the shirt is whole, it is very difficult to rip it. But if the shirt already has a nick in it, it’s a whole lot easier to tear — the slightest tug will rip it further. So too when the Jewish people are united, they are like the whole shirt and cannot be torn; but when they have internal division, they are vulnerable to their enemies.

A good example of this is the contrast between the biblical generations of King Saul and King Achav. In the generation of Saul, the Jews were generally righteous and pious people, yet when they went to war with their enemies, they fell. However, during the time of Achav, while the Jewish people were committing grave sins — from idol worship to immorality — they were victorious. The Sages teach that this is attributed to the fact that although Saul’s generation was generally righteous, they slandered each other, causing internal division. Achav’s generation — although by no means pious in the traditional sense — treated each other with genuine dignity and respect, and were, therefore, undefeatable.

“Shalom”

This idea of Jewish security being hinged on national unity and peace between brothers is hinted to in the root letters of the word *shalom*, peace. The first letter, ש, *shin*, has three legs going upward. The two on the sides represent the extremes of society, and the leg in the middle symbolizes the rest of society that unites them. This “unification of society” is followed by the letter ל, *lamed*. The *lamed* goes upward, symbolizing the high level before God that this unified nation achieves due to the camaraderie between all of its people. The last letter, מ, *final-mem*, signifies that when the Jewish people actually have this unity and reach this high level before God, they become like the מ, *final-mem* — just as the *final-mem* is sealed like a box and nothing can get through it, so too the enemies of the Jews will not be able to penetrate the Jewish people when they are united.

Women and Unity

Women, in particular, have this special quality and capability of bringing unity.

There is an obscure passage from the Talmud in which Rabbi Yossi, a Sage, unabashedly relates that he always called his wife “house.”

To us this seems very strange. What does Rabbi Yossi intend by calling his wife that? After all, do you know of any wife who would want “house” for a nickname?

Interestingly enough, we find that this was actually a term of endearment. There is a deep idea that the woman has the special power of the “house.” Without a house, your refrigerator, oven, sofa, and table would be just that — a refrigerator, oven, sofa, and table. What brings them all together and makes them into a “home” is the house itself. Just as the house unites all its utensils into a home, so too, the woman brings everything together.

We see this principle demonstrated by way of Rachel being buried outside Jerusalem, instead of in Hebron with the rest of the Matriarchs and Patriarchs. Jacob, who was also named Israel, was the father of the twelve tribes, which were to become the Jewish people and be called Israel after him. Since Rachel was the main wife of Jacob (Leah would not have married Jacob if it weren't for Rachel giving her their signs [see Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 13b]), she therefore represents a special force for unity within the Jewish people. Jacob, foreseeing that in the future his children would be exiled from Jerusalem and scattered around the globe, buried Rachel outside of Jerusalem. This way, when the Jews are being thrown out of Jerusalem, they would pass by Rachel's burial place on their way out, and she would cry out and pray to God for her children's reunification in the Land, with her special power for unity as the mother of the Jewish people.

It would seem that our society is in tune with this truth as well. Hence the term “women's intuition.” What is intuition? It is the ability to make the right move — not because of a logical formula leading to a logical solution, but through the power of empathy. More than simply picking up on another's vibe, empathy means to enter another's reality. It is a unification with that other, to receive what they are going through, to feel what they are feeling. For this reason, the Kabbalists teach that women are spiritually built in a manner more equipped for the World to Come than men. The World to Come is a consciousness that needs to be received, and receiving is at the core of the feminine principle.

Inner Peace

The Hebrew word *shalom*, peace, is closely related to the Hebrew word *shleimut*, completion — when a person is at peace it brings him to completion, and when he is in a state of completion it brings him to a state of peace.

One of the most fundamental teachings of the Sages lays out a three-point plan of how to come to true completion, thereby attaining true peace:

“The world stands on three things: on Torah, on [spiritual] work, and on acts of kindness.”

As previously mentioned, Kabbalah relates that everything in the world was created for humanity. That is to say, man is the real foundation of the entire world. And so this teaching is, in effect, meant to relate the three things that man stands on. These pillars of the world, therefore, represent the three areas in an individual’s life that need to be perfected in order to achieve true completion: **Torah** represents a person’s relationship with himself, because through Torah one brings true meaning to his life. **Spiritual work** represents our relationship with God. And **acts of kindness** represents our relationships with other people. When any particular human being achieves perfection in these three things, that individual arrives at true inner peace. And when humanity as a whole will elevate themselves to this level, we will finally arrive at true world peace.

Unit 5 Conceptual Visualization:

INTERDEPENDENCE

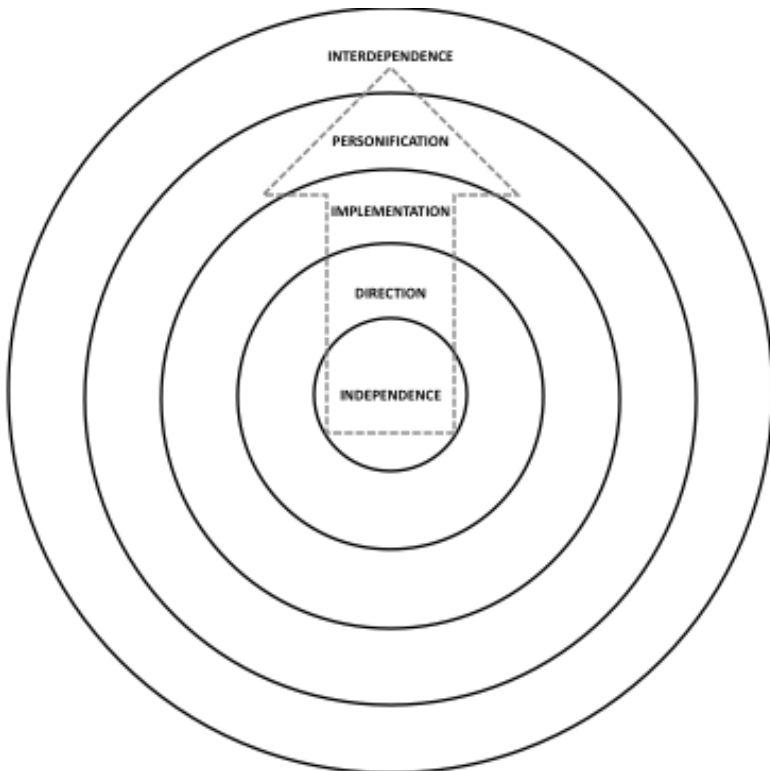
Who am I and what am I made of?

What am I about and how do I get there?

Am I being real with myself and do I really care?

Am I doing all that I can and am I making the most of my opportunities?

Am I using my individuality to contribute to the whole and am I utilizing what the whole has to offer to maximize my individuality?



Conclusion

On the Road to Personal Greatness

One final note of encouragement.

When embarking on a road of personal improvement or when implementing life changes, it is almost inevitable that one will face challenges and failures. Often people make much more of such failures than they actually are.

People tend to take an all-or-nothing approach. For example, an individual is presented with a personal challenge. He is successful in holding out and not succumbing to the temptation for ten minutes. However, after ten minutes of holding out, he messes up. If you were this individual, how would you view your situation? Most people see the totality of this episode as one failure. In their eyes they have a record of 0-1, zero wins and one loss.

In Kabbalah, it is taught that no two moments of existence are alike. Each moment has its own particular purpose, and each of us has our own particular purpose to fulfill in each particular moment. What comes out from this approach is that even if you mess up ten minutes into the journey, your record is not 0-1, rather it is: 10 minutes' worth of moments-1. Each moment stands alone, and the amount one gains before the mess-up is still his. It has not been lost and it was not for naught. The key is not to get down on ourselves for mistakes we make or weaknesses we may discover along the way. Don't lose sight of the big developing picture, and hopefully from Rosh Hashanah to Rosh Hashanah, we will be able to look at ourselves in the mirror and see a different person each year — one who has grown in freedom, inspiration, passion, consciousness, and spirituality.

There is a principle in Jewish spirituality called *Torah lishmah* — Torah for its own sake. Many explanations as to what exactly this means and what it excludes have been offered, but perhaps the simplest understanding can be found in the words themselves. A more literal definition of the words *Torah lishmah* is Torah for its name, meaning: look into the name “Torah,” and there you'll find its principle purpose. The word “Torah” literally means “instructions.” The Torah is an instruction book for life — it's the original Self-Help Book. Delve into it and you will achieve personal development, spirituality, and relationship with God — all of which, I hope you have come to realize by now, are really one and the same. The idea of *Torah lishmah* is to use these instructions as a practical guide for decision making, spirituality seeking, and anything else of value during one's journey through this temporary physical stage of our eternal spiritual lives.

When discussing reasons for the mitzvot, the word for “reason” that is used is the same as the Hebrew word for “taste,” *ta'am*, because when attempting to get a grip on the deeper reasons behind God's will and spiritual system, we can only get a taste. It is my hope and prayer that with the writing of this book I have given the reader such a taste in a practical and helpful manner, and that an interest has been sparked within the reader to further explore the depths of Jewish spirituality and all that Torah has to offer.

Please feel free to be in touch with me directly with any questions or feedback, and enjoy the selection of Jewish articles, Q & A, and downloadable classes on my website www.lightuntoournation.com.

Rabbi Eliyahu Yaakov

Jerusalem, Israel

5770/2010

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RABBI ELIYAHU YAAKOV



For the past 10 years Rabbi Eliyahu Yaakov has been working to educate and inspire Jews of all backgrounds to take a fresh look at their Jewish heritage from the perspectives of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah. With a plethora of parallels and explanatory precision, Rabbi Eli succeeds in communicating abstract ideas in a clear and meaningful way to the well-read student and the newcomer alike. Rabbi Eli's world-renowned lectures and writings have captured the minds and hearts of many, and have helped to open the door for those looking to integrate truth and spirituality into their lives in a down-to-earth manner. By dealing with the whys of Judaism in a sophisticated yet practical way, Rabbi Eli's teachings are a breath of fresh air for anyone searching for happiness, love, fulfillment, wholeness, or themselves, as he breaks Jewish stereotypes and misconceptions along the way.

Rabbi Eli moved to Israel from New Jersey in 2001 and currently lives in the Old City of Jerusalem where he, along with his family, hosts hundreds of Jewish students and travelers for inspirational Shabbat meals each year.

Books authored include *Shabbos Insights of the Maharal* (Targum), *Human By Choice: A Kabbalistic Path To Self Help* (National Light), and *The Trees In The Forest: Jewish Living In The Context Of Kabbalah* (National Light).

For more from Rabbi Eliyahu Yaakov, visit: www.lightuntoournation.com

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- 2. Character Advancement & Meaningful Living**
- 3. Implementing Principles & Personal Accomplishment**
- 4. Actualizing Your Potential Self & Embodying Life Goals**
- 5. Personal Harmony & Communal Interdependence**

Human By Choice has the makings of a life-changer for anyone searching for happiness, love, fulfillment, wholeness, or themselves.

RABBI ELIYAHU YAAKOV

For the past 10 years Rabbi Eliyahu Yaakov has been working to educate and inspire people of all backgrounds to take a fresh look at their life's direction, goals, and dilemmas from the perspectives Kabbalah and Jewish Metaphysics. With a plethora of parallels and explanatory precision, Rabbi Eli succeeds in communicating abstract ideas in a clear and meaningful way to the well-read student and the newcomer alike. Rabbi Eli's world-renowned lectures and writings have captured the minds and hearts of many, and have helped to open the door for those looking to integrate truth and spirituality into their lives in a down-to-earth manner.

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