

One, One, Only One

The *Tanya* brings down a Talmudic statement (Makkot 24a) that although many, many *Mitzvot* (commandments) were given to Israel by God, Habakkuk (the prophet) came along and narrowed them all down to a single command. This is derived from Habakkuk's statement that, "The *Tzaddik* (saint) lives on faith alone" (Habakkuk 2:4).

"The *Tzaddik* lives on faith alone'...as if there was no more than just one commandment issued, namely, to have faith...one should imagine as though one had only this one commandment, and it alone were the ultimate purpose of one's creation and the creation of all the worlds" (*Tanya* Chapter 33).

The *Tanya* goes on to say that when one 'lives' on faith, one's soul can come alive with so much joy that it would seem as if it had been previously dead. Faith brings you to life. Major transformations can occur through undertaking this practice.

In general I like reductionist approaches to the Torah. There is a *Medrash* that says that all of the Torah can be reduced to the ten commandments; that even the ten commandments can be further reduced to the first two commandments which can further be reduced to just the first commandment, "I am the Lord your God who has brought you out of the slavery of *Mitzrayim*...." The point is to have faith in the transformative force.

This explains the further *Medrash* that even the first commandment can be reduced to its very first word, *Anokhi*, "I am," and even that simple word is reducible to its first letter, the *Aleph*, a letter signifying a distilled essence. The essence of transformation.



Changing Spiritual Identities

Because I easily get confused when considering the ocean of Judaism we have inherited, I sometimes like to imagine that spiritual development can be thought of as a series of stages of identity changes. Didn't Jacob dream of a ladder uniting heaven and earth? A ladder has rungs. The rungs on the spiritual ladder indicate successive stages of self-perception.

After the early challenges of getting to know the basic holydays, the yearly cycle, the Shabbat practice and songs, what is next for the seeker on the neo-hassidic path? Here goes for a playing out of my fantasies of what might come next, the stages as I see it¹. We start with finding a role to play.

Stage 1: What's Your Line?

There are many ready-made scripts available in the spiritual life. Perhaps one of them may feel instantly appropriate or could be adapted to help one express one's emotional-spiritual enterprise.

One can imagine oneself to be a servant of God; a child of God (such as one of the children of Israel), or a soldier to God. God is respectively cast into the roles of the king, wise parent, or commanding officer. Many people have ironed out the fine points of these roles over the ages. These roles have worked for many, many serious seekers. Finding a script that feels appropriate can put us on the first rung of the spiritual Jacob's ladder.

Pitfall 1: Roles That Don't Fit

There are a number of problem with living in a role. First of all, accepting any role is hard for some people to do. Even if one can find a role that one can live with, it may still feel idolatrous to cast God into the corresponding counterpart role. Maybe even the term 'God' is only a role.

Many of us feel burdened by adopting an obedient or submissive role vis-a-vis God (dust and ashes, the martyr for the divine), while in the rest of our lives we strive to be assertive, responsible, adult peers to each other. What do we do to balance our ordinary life script against our Torah identity?

One way out of the pitfall is to find a less co-dependent metaphor than being a slave or child. After all, some people have acted as friend to God as Abraham, Noah, Moses and Levi-Yitzkhak all did; or like Jonathan and David. Some have taken on being lover to the Holy One (as in Song of Songs), or the messenger of the Divine such as Elijah, the prophet.

Stage 2: Writing Our Own Script

After we get familiar with a standard identity vis-a-vis the Divine, we may get the urge to move beyond a pat script. We may feel that we can write our own description of the relationship between us and God. How does Judaism help us to write our own scripts?

¹ Much of the following is based on "The Developmental Spectrum and Psychopathology," by Ken Wilber, *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 1984, Vol. 16 No. 2.

Creative contemplation on the words of the *Siddur* has traditionally been one way to find personally relevant metaphors. One recites the prayers, testing the written words against one's own heart feeling, or uses the prayers as a jumping board from which to dive off into idiosyncratic outpouring and imaginative reverie. Doing this work may enable one to claim "'You are my God,' and not only the 'God of my ancestors.'"

Pitfall 2: Short Lifespan of Original Scripts

As the self emerges from standardized role behavior to unfolding the process of one's storyline, concerns about whether one is being fully authentic and/or fears of one's death have been known to develop. By developing a particular script one is beginning to identify as a particular being. Individual beings all die and disintegrate. The emergence as a particular being can cause a crisis in existential *emunah*.

This emergence then demands a personal re-testing of all the premises of faith--the permanence of the Eternal One, the existence of the eternal soul, its reincarnating nature, the nature of the unity of the universe. Analyzing the denial of death may become necessary as one becomes aware of one's uniqueness.

The perennial issues must be faced so that we can make courageous statements with our lives in the face of resistance, illness, and death.

Stage 3: Trying on the Robes of the Angels

Up to here we may say that the development has been of the 'self', the *ruakh* (emotionality) of the soul, as it moves from a ready-made script to an individualized script. The stages from here on may be said to concern the development of the 'soul', the *neshama* (the spiritual intelligence) We begin to take up the issues of identifying as a spiritual being.

One starts to discover a new quality of integration with our smaller concerns, the *nefesh* (the outer self-perception) and *ruakh* altogether. By identifying as a *neshamah*, a spiritual being, we can discover an awesome and fascinating aspect to ourselves.

In this stage, it is useful to try on the kabbalistic explorations of communicating with divine archetypes such as the *Sefirot* (the divine qualities), the angels, *Tzaddikim* (saintly beings), etc. All these are higher parts of ourselves which are usually dormant or barred from our awareness.

We can try to get in touch with the essence of eternal wisdom, the intelligence of the universe, the mother, the father, the guide, the ally, all the higher *sefirot*. We can look into the personalities suggested by the lower *sefirot*, the struggle involving strength and overcoming, valor, groundedness, the young man, the young woman, the hero, the heroine, the source of transformation, harmony, the heart, and pure love.

After getting familiar with spiritual archetypes, the path hopefully leads to finding and centering on one archetype (*Sefira*, etc.) and beginning to stabilize in its identification. It is from places like these that Rebbes have recorded their dialogues with *Eliyahu hanavee*,

various angels, and long-gone prophets, because they were in touch with these archetypes.

Pitfall 3: Psychic Inflation

Relevant to these archetypal explorations are the Hassidic stories dealing with false pride against which the Baal Shem Tov warned us. We are liable to confuse higher realms with narcissistic fantasies and egoic imagination. The Baal Shem tried to tip us off to look at our split life-goals where we want to have the perks of being a high being but haven't let go of the perks of conventional living. Sometimes we play-act at having transcended our natures like the big guys when we're really not as free as that suggests.

Stage 4: Going Beyond Patterns

Even *El Elyon*, 'the most high God' is a form, even if it is a superlative one. Moving beyond even subtle limitation is the next rung on Jacob's ladder. One must learn to do as the 'Holy One, Blessed be He/She,' does--i.e. to unify the highest realizations with the lower ones. It is while being in this state that *Tzaddikim* would invite their followers to enter into the '*Yekhidut*' - 'oneness' - audience and to speak with them from the place beyond anything nameable.

Pitfall 4: Getting Lost in the Garden

The work at this point is to detach from even the luminously tempting forms. This is what Reb Nachman called, "not getting distracted by the King's garden." The idea is to not identify as being high and grand, but to integrate all the levels together.

Here we are warned against the kind of thing that happened to Rabbi Shimon bar Yokhai. Rabbi Shimon emerged from his cave after twelve years of meditation and saw farmers farming to get food. He criticized them for not studying the Torah so that they could make food by miracle. He was characterizing the lower forms as defilements and not as a means of extension of the divine wisdom.

After a year longer in the cave he transcended this criticism and blessed people at whatever level they happened to be at the time. So even after thirteen years in the cave, the author of the *Zohar* still needed more work and corrections. Where does that leave us?

On and Off Jacob's Ladder

Well, they say that there was a "Book of Tzaddikim" (saintly progressions) written by the *Alter Rebbe*, but it was never published. Some say that he burned it, or only passed it on to those who seemed worthy. In any case I didn't get a copy.

We don't have a clear guidebook; we have no complete system. All we know is that at each stage of walking the path there are resistances, reactions, crises of faith, and regressions. What do we do then?

Wherever we are, we can be aware of the the safety net under the ladder, our *emunah*. We must be trusting that we will get as high and as deep as we need to. That is the center to focus on as we encounter the pitfalls between the stages of our growth.

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