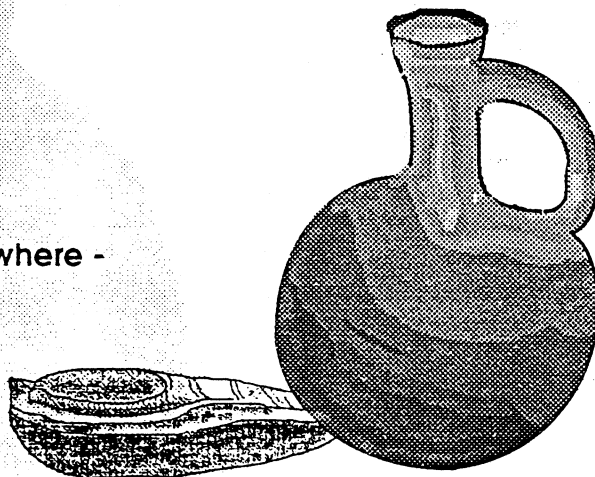
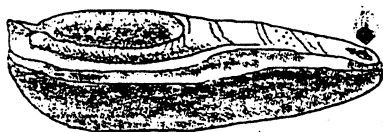


If your eyes *shine*, all will be well.
 Do not take part in darkness,
 but shine forth Light - always and everywhere -
 then the darkness will flee.
 How do you know that it is dark?
 What makes the room dark? -
 The lamp which is *not* lit.
 The *lamp* is responsible.
 Light up mankind and do not sorrow over darkness!



from 'Talking with Angels'



Pakh Shemen Tahor--A Cruse of Pure Oil

The single, small jar of olive oil which was found in the Temple storerooms and used to initiate the Hannukah miracle has become imbued with medrash, symbol, and myth. Some say that ancestor Jacob was looking for this lost flask of oil the night he wrestled with the angel and received his true name, Yisrael. Some claim that Samuel used this jar to anoint both Kings Saul and David, pouring special oil on their heads. Later scribes say that the Baal Shem Tov had access to its power and passed it on to the Magid for his use in initiating the first Hassidic Rebbes.

Our mystics claimed that the single, small jar of oil is carried by each human being, buried deeply in the vaults of our hearts. Even when internal conflict causes all direction and clarity to become lost, there will still remain a small cruse of Divine starter fluid available to be used to rekindle faith in the heart. A similar note is struck when we refer to God as 'Tzuri,' my rock. 'Tzur' is a flint-rock and can spark a bonfire even after storm winds have put out all the lights.

In this way, we see our spiritual life as maintaining some continuity even though our faith may periodically waver. As the Hassidim say, "between every two stages of something there must be a stage of nothingness," meaning that the process of sequential transformation must include times of confusion and darkness. It is a pattern hinted at in the creation story: "And the earth went through a state of being *Tohu Va'vohu*, empty and in confusion. And God restarted things by saying, *Yehi Or*, and there was light". Losing and regaining faith is seen as a cycle predicated on the regenerative faculty that we carry inside. It is the power symbolized in our tradition as the hidden flask of pure olive oil, the spark of the soul, the *pinteleh Yid*, the eternal flame.

This reserve for the hardest times cannot become extinguished. It is described in Hassidic texts as the 'inner of the inner' of the soul. Although the 'inner' part of the soul may become extinguished by negativity, the *inner* of the inner is said to remain untarnished within. Mystics claimed that we need not wait for hard times to draw on the resource of the *Pakh Shemen Tahor*. They said that we can sense the inner of the inner in good times, too. And so we may celebrate the essential experience of Hanukkah many times throughout the year.

There I was in 1978, smug in my Zen, sitting for hours and reaching for exciting 'satori' experiences of enlightenment. "This stuff aims higher than the Jewish trip," I thought. "Here in the *zendo*, even the simplest *Yidden* are going for the gold. Why not envision a possibility for every person (not just the firstborn son of the *Tzaddik*) that embraces God in the highest form, with the highest forms of self-recognition?"

It seemed to me that some forms of these West Coast-Eastern religions had out-*shpitzed* (out-finessed, gone beyond) even the enlightened part of the *Hassidic* heritage. In the part Zen--part Tibetan-Buddhist--part Hindu--trip I was being exposed to, every being was said to be on the road towards complete conscious enlightenment.

Of course you were never supposed to admit that you were seeking after *high experiences*, God forbid. A sensationalistic pursuit could distort the quality of your meditations. You were supposed to just accept wherever you were at and increase in this acceptance until you embraced all things. On the other hand, if you examined ancient texts, you might find that this journey would end ultimately in cosmic consciousness, the highest forms of saintly experience. It normally took more than one lifetime to accomplish this and what you didn't do this time around might be made up for in the next time around with a cumulatively growing spirituality account.

Once enlightened, the being could then choose to rejoin the life-cycle with the purpose of helping others along the path--the way of the *Boddhisattva* (altruistic saint). Meditation was seen as a way to accelerate this path--although there was the suggestion that ordinary life experience would eventually lead one to the same realizations, it would take whole lifetimes longer than if one had meditated.

I asked myself, where were the Jewish parallels to this dandy philosophy? I had learned of bits and pieces. Hey, we also had theories of reincarnation. The *Sefer Ha-Gilgulim*, our 'Book of Reincarnations', explains how a later life (or series of lives) may redeem an earlier one of its vacuums of accomplishment, its distortions and incompletions.

I read how our Mother Sarah, wife of Abraham and a well known *Tzaddaykess* in her own right, had nonetheless returned as the daughter of Pharaoh. It seems that as she was instrumental in the difficult choice and cruel act of abandoning Yishmael and Hagar to the desert, she had to redeem herself by being the one responsible for taking in baby Moses. Here we find a life in which an act of acceptance balanced an earlier life in which a rejection had taken place. Reverse balancing was spoken about--where an earlier life stores away merits that are used in the eventuality that they are needed in a later

incarnation. Put away some *Mitzvot* now--you may need them in the future!

Another text explaining the reasons for returning in another body used the metaphor of the 613 *Mitzvot*. It seems that doing all these acts is supposed to form some kind of a perfect structure, symbolized as the number 620. The 613 commandments together with the seven *Mitzvot d'Rabbonon*, the seven commandments of the Rabbis (making blessings, lighting Shabbat candles, lighting Hanukkah candles, reading the Megillah, etc.), form 620, which in Hebrew numbers is the Holy Crown of God--*Keter*. Every soul (and body) has 620 corresponding parts and has to do all 620 *mitzvot* (holy activities) while in a body here on earth to be fully *complete*, whatever that means. If one missed a few, say, accomplished only 617 acts, one would have to come back just for those three which had not been completed. You might have to return just to do the *Mitzvot* which correspond to your thyroid, adrenals, and sciatic nerve.

The theory expands as another Rabbinic authority theorizes that maybe that's why so many of us disaffiliated Jews nowadays seem to do less (formal) *mitzvot* than in past generations--apparently we've been recycled so many times that we have considerable cumulative *Mitzvah* accomplishments under our soul belts and thus we have need of only a few more. Thank you, past lifetimes!

These ideas mirrored the trans-lifetime soul-goals of achievement of holy duties, but were focused on the action realm, that of the *Mitzvot*. What of the higher consciousnesses and groovy experiences that my TM--Tibetan--Zen friends were headed for?

The Jewish descriptions of higher consciousnesses that I found were those mentioned in the *Tanya* (*Alter Rebbe*, Rabbi Schneur Zalman, 1796). The *Tanya* referred to many levels of *Tzaddikim* (Saints), who had completely overcome their *Yetzer Hora* (negative inclination). These were the people of consciousness achievement who had nullified their ego and personalities so that they could merge with the *Shekhina* (Divine Presence).

They responded to the *Mitzva* of "Thou shalt love *Adonai* (YHVH), your God, with all heart, soul, and might," with various degrees and qualities of love. There was *Ahavat Olam* (love that contained the whole world); *Ahava Rabba* (love that overflowed one's vessel); love which flowed like water; love which burned like fire; and the ultimate love--*Ahava B'Tanugim* (love with pleasures) which is the love that yearns with intense passion for the Ultimate while at the same time experiencing total satisfaction and pleasure with the Divine.

They had overcome the barriers of (1) feeling themselves independent and egocentric (*b'fnei atzmo*).

and (2) feeling separate from the rest of creation (*nifrad*). They had divested themselves of (3) the subtle feeling that they existed as an entity aligned with the Divine (*davar*), and even (4) the ultra-subtlety of being gauzily aware of just being a being (*yesh*).

And could we ordinary *mentshen*, should we aspire to these lofty levels, by doing *hitbonenut* (contemplation) or *sigufim* (self-mortification, like sitting *Zazen*) or whatever? Don't be foolish, said the *Tanya*, no. The most that anyone should aspire to is to do the good things that need to be done in this world and avoid the bad things that tempt you. Inner experience of extreme positivity is a grace, a gift. The inner experience that most may aspire to in non-*Tzaddik* lives is not like floating on a lotus leaf.

One can really never know whether one is free of the *Yetzer Hora* (the negative inclination) so it is best to assume that the struggle is still on. If you're feeling great for a protracted time, lucky you! Perhaps you have succeeded in putting the critter to sleep, but watch out--sleepers usually awake. Even great sages of the *Talmud* thought it best to consider themselves as being merely of *Benoni* (the middle person) stature: one who had achieved a standoff with the *Yetzer Hora*. One did not assume that one had attained *Tzaddik*-hood, the state of having permanently silenced the pest. The *Tanya's* definition of high consciousness revolved around whether there still remained an inclination towards negativity, anthropomorphised as the *Yetzer Hora*.

For those of us who are not-quite-sages-of-the-*Talmud*, how are we to self-image? The answer was: Think of yourselves in terms of your deeds, not in terms of consciousness states. Try hard not to be a *Rasha*, an evil one, one who is more negative than positive. Try to control the negative inclination. Don't aspire to consciousnesses way beyond your level of purity. If you're really trying hard, maybe you can be considered a *Benoni*-- a middle person- someone whose negativity in action is kept in check by a strong positivity-in-action, the *Yetzer Tov*.

The Jewish tradition seemed to not hold out before me the same nirvanic carrot that my Buddhist friends followed. It seemed, comparatively, a downer. If you were not lucky enough to be supported by ten thousand *Hassidim* and/or be the firstborn male scion of some glorious heritage, it was too bad. Granted that the *Hassidim* were big enough to let even simple people lead the prayers. In terms of conscious cosmic consciousness however, they felt that it suited the simple ones to stuff pennies in the pushke rather than to experience *Ahava B'Tanugim* at midnight. Rats.

Well, I hope that all of my Buddhist friends are right now sitting pretty in the *Realm of the Supreme Gods*, wondering whether they should come back and show the rest of us what to do with ourselves. As for me and my ecstatic path, my knees got strung out with

the weight that became perched on them, and I began to get interested in knee massage, neo-psychotherapy and neo-Hassidic Judaism.

As life proceeded I found myself in the strange *karmic* predicament of being in love with individuals who weren't in love with me. For some reason I let compulsive behaviors edge into the peace fields of my meditation. I was accused of overusing my holy substances allotment and accused myself of being the *Rebbe* who experienced God only when *altered*.

My struggles now seem more mundane than deciding which is the highest consciousness to which one may aspire. Staying away from compulsions, like compulsive eating, is now very 'high' on my *Tshuvah* list, and I'm hesitatingly looking at the amount of hours I need to 'meditate' in front of the TV set to unwind after I come home from work.

Focusing on inner compulsions and addictions seems less grandiose than reaching for *Satori*. I know there is a Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous. Is there a Religious Experience Seekers Anonymous? What about a TV-Watchers Anonymous? Like Betty Ford before me, I'm trying out the addiction control metaphors and finding value in looking at the many places of compulsiveness in my life, at my needs for being often hugged and for frequent spiritual-love experiences.

Once one takes on the metaphor of being addictively compulsive and out of control in some areas of your life, the best that one can look forward to is the prospect of being in 'recovery' for the rest of your life. You don't try for 'cure'. It is a sober and sobering path. I think it is working for me, at least for now. Maybe that was the point of the Zen meditation--to give up the search for some consciousness other than this one here. I looked up and felt that I was once again in the insoluble *Rasha--Benoni--Tzadik* hierarchy.

So I am fighting in the endless struggle of the *Benoni*, the middle person who aspires not to the highest attainments of the greatest saints, but rather to just stay in the struggle, to not get stuck and never to assume that the *Yetzer Hora* has been consumed. Hey, why even assume that the negative inclination is asleep? That's for the *Tzaddikim*, and for my holy friends. Maybe Jewish personal growth emerges out of the insoluble dilemmas posed by the *Yetzer Hora*. In the meantime, I'll be glad to keep trucking on the track of the *Benoni*.

David Blank

