

Be, Become, Bless
Jewish Spirituality between East and West





Yakov Nagen

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BLESS

*Jewish Spirituality
between East and West*

Translated by Elie Leshem

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Lovingly Dedicated to

Hillel and Shira

Noa

Michael

Yonatan

Naama

Yinon

Ayala

Sheva Berakhot each day

Dedicated in honor of our amazing children and grandchildren, who embody so many of our hopes for future generations of the Jewish people.

*To our children
Rabbi Kalman and Talya, Aryeh, Shoshana,
and Anni, and our grandsons
Yosef Dov and Simcha Yeshaya*

May we all merit to find meaning in living Torah-based lives.

Rachel and Shimon Laufer

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– Nishmat Kol Hai

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Be, Become, Bless

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This book is an attempt to learn about life, and thus I dedicate it to my children, who are life itself.

Yakov Nagen

Introduction

One of the defining characteristics of our time is the ever-expanding search for spirituality. The more accessible material wealth becomes, the stronger the longing for meaning in life. At the root of the search for spirituality is the sense that there is more to life than what is visible and familiar – a secret that, once discovered, can facilitate a deeper understanding and light up our lives. This search encompasses many sections of society: men and women, religious and secular, young and old. It seems as though the rising thirst for spirituality is part of a broader societal shift, one that emphasizes experience, feeling, and imagination.

Those searching for answers to existential questions within the world of Judaism tend to gravitate toward the esoteric, taking up Kabbala studies in various centers, perusing books on the inner meaning of the Torah, or adopting modern-day Israeli incarnations of Breslov and other hasidic traditions. For me, the search for the secret of life and the face of God is part of a life-long journey, revealing meanings that have become my guiding lights. My contemplation of life draws on the Jewish canon in its broadest sense: Bible and Talmud, Hasidism and Kabbala. I am also greatly indebted to the people I have met along the way, who have enriched my spiritual world in immeasurable ways. Secular

sources, Jewish and otherwise – including poetry and literature, music and film – have also informed my studies, along with academic methods. This book is the story of my meeting with these sources. The main challenge in writing it was to strike a balance between an enriching breadth and a depth of focus.

The World Is Within God

When my children were four and six years old, we had a conversation at home about the relationship between God and humanity. Noa returned from daycare and declared that God is in heaven. Hillel replied, “God is everywhere – in the mountains and in the sea and in heaven too. I will explain it to you: Do you see how our house surrounds us and we are inside it? God is like our house.” In his succinct and astonishing explanation, my son echoed a profound kabbalistic insight: the world is within God.

Later I discovered that the simile my son chose appears in the ancient kabbalistic work *The Bahir* (1:14): “Why is the letter *bet* closed on all sides and open in the front? This teaches us that it is the house (*bayit*) of the world. God is the place of the world, and the world is not His place.”¹

Kabbala teaches us that God is present in everything: in life, in humanity, and in humanity’s relationship with the world and all living creatures. We can begin to approach the realization that our lives are guided by the Great Spirit – the awesome secret of the meaning of God in our lives – through the experience of living. If we open ourselves up to this way of thinking, it will change the basic consciousness mediating our experience of reality. This is true of every human encounter, every vagary of life. It is an insight that teaches us to open our eyes and hearts to the light and goodness in the world and in humanity, to love life and

1. Aryeh Kaplan, trans., *The Bahir* (York Beach, MA: Weiser Books, 1979), 6.

consider it a blessing, to understand that there is a principle that unifies everything.

God, in encompassing all, is the source of life for all: God sustains me and you, predator and prey, enemy nations. The primary idea in a growing awareness of God is that He encompasses all and sustains all. We consider black and white to be opposites, but at their source they are one. While this idea appears in many spiritual systems that emphasize the unifying principle of life, Kabbala introduced the idea of encompassment. Even though there are principles that unify all life forms in the world, they do not erode the uniqueness of the expressions that life takes in each and every individual. The “I” is not devalued; it is significant, as is the “you,” and as is the entire world with its staggering wealth of variegated life forms. There is significance to every unique expression, and we must find a way to encompass it.

A good example of this principle can be found in the Zohar (*Vayikra* 12b), which notes that the Hebrew word for “peace,” *shalom*,” begins with the letter *shin* and ends with the letter *mem*. The *shin*, it explains, represents fire (*esh*), while the *mem* represents water (*mayim*). Peace is the capacity to encompass those binary opposites. Similarly, the Talmud (*Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 1a) points out that the word “*emet*,” “truth,” is composed of three letters: *alef*, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet; *mem*, which is in the middle; and *tav*, which is last. This observation reflects the idea that truth is not a specific point of view but rather a complex gaze that encompasses everything.

This complexity is readily apparent in the question of Jewish national identity. Judaism is connected to the world, to humanity as a whole, and yet it retains a distinct identity. Its vision of the end of days does not efface national identity and convert all of humanity to Judaism; rather, it establishes a reality in which all peoples coexist in solidarity. The same is true in the life of the individual: my private existence has meaning; I do not efface myself in relation

to the world or to God, but rather come to understand them from within my own uniqueness.

Light or Darkness?

One's conception of reality, the manner in which one experiences it, is no less important than reality itself. A reader of my blog once said to me, "What a beautiful world you live in!" His intention, as I understand it, was not to comment on my biography or geographic location. Rather, he understood that a beautiful conception of reality can generate a beautiful life. Put in contemporary terms: our point of view shapes our attitude toward our experiences, eventually becoming an indivisible aspect of reality itself. Everything is in the eye of the beholder. "Everywhere you look, you see nothing but light, while I only see darkness," the author Yosef Haim Brenner was reported to have said to Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. One's conception of reality radiates on one's life and experience. My intention with this book is to set out a progression of ideas, a conception of reality, that everyone can embrace. In that regard, this book is a manual for spiritual practice, a volume that, beyond presenting readings of Jewish sources and beautiful ideas, teaches renewal – the capacity to create an ever-regenerating reading of the Torah and of life.

The Weekly *Parasha*: A Renewing Reading

I chose as a structure for this book the *parasha*, the weekly Torah portion, read each week in synagogue. I chose it for two reasons: First, musings on the weekly portion have always served as foundations for new Torah literature, from Midrash to Kabbala, to Hasidism and contemporary thought. In each and every generation, people recognize themselves and their stories in the *parasha*. This is due to the fact that the Torah relates stories taken from life: relationships between men and women, between parents and their children, among friends, and between humanity and God. The

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parashot grapple with the fundamental values of society – morality and justice – and the basic problems facing the individual: injustice and evil, internal and external enemies, and the difficulties of day-to-day life. A second reason is that reading from the Torah is an activity that unites the entire Jewish people, from the believer, who studies it as the word of God, to the secular Jew, who sees the Bible as our origin story. No matter their approach, the meanings unearthed in the *parasha* become embedded in their identities.

This book is a summation of my insights about life, along with a perception of reality and an approach to it. Consequently, it is less a *parasha* book with insights about life and more a book about life that follows the course of the *parashot*.

While writing the book I was surprised to find that the passing weeks revealed hidden threads linking my commentaries, which took on the shape of a spiritual journey of sorts, beginning in the Genesis stories, continuing through slavery in Egypt, the Exodus, and the years in the desert, and culminating at the gates of the Land of Israel. May the fruits of my journey through the *parashot* introduce many readers to miraculous and fascinating paths in their own lives.



Bereshit

To Be or to Do?

It was 1954, decades before hordes of Israelis would flood the Indian subcontinent, when Ezriel Carlebach, the legendary editor of *Maariv*, traveled to India. In a book about his experiences, *India: Account of a Voyage*, Carlebach sums up well the difference between the Western and Eastern mindsets. He quotes a conversation he had with the prime minister of India at the time, Jawaharlal Nehru, who described the cultural divide:

We mentioned the diplomatic complications, which seem difficult to overcome, and I remarked, “Well, the question is what to do.” He gazed at me for a while, and said, “You see? That is a typical question for a European.” “How so?” I asked. “Well,” he replied, “an Indian would have asked, ‘What to be?’”¹

1. Ezriel Carlebach, *India: Account of a Voyage* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Maariv, 1986), 266.

The difference between “doing” and “being,” in this intercultural comparison, is the difference between wanting to change reality through action and the capacity to accept reality as is, between orientation toward the future and a recognition of the present. Existentially speaking, it is the difference between defining oneself in relation to the question “What do I do?” and the question “Who am I?”

The Land of Israel is at the crossroads of East and West, a geographical-historical fact that carries profound spiritual implications. Judaism contains ideas that are generally identified with Eastern religions, along with ideas that underpin Western thinking. Judaism’s grand spiritual message is, to my mind, the synthesis of these disparate elements, an outlook that unifies “being” and “doing.”

Was the World Created Twice?

The distinction between “being” and “doing,” and their synthesis, is foreshadowed already in the Creation story. The Torah relates the creation of the world twice: chapter 1 of Genesis divides it into seven days, while the telling in chapter 2 focuses on Man in the Garden. Torah commentators have sought to explain the repetition and the differences between the stories (preeminent among them in recent generations were Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in his essay *The Lonely Man of Faith*, and Rabbi Mordechai Breuer in various writings). Some see the dual telling as an expression of the complexity and multifariousness of reality; others as an expression of varying attributes of God’s sovereignty over humanity and the world.

I wish to suggest an alternative reading that considers the difference between the stories as an expression of the gap between a life approach of “doing” and a life approach of “being.” The terms “being” and “doing” are not extraneous to the Torah – they appear in the text itself. The two principles are among the foundation

stones of *Parashat Bereshit*, and the interplay between them is a motif throughout the Torah.

In the first description of Creation, the Torah relates a story of action. Humanity is made in God's image, and its purpose is to rule over the world: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creeps upon the earth" (Gen. 1:28). In describing the purpose of Creation, the Torah uses the word "*laasot*," meaning "to do" (2:3).

The second story, in contrast, describes an existential experience of "being": humankind is portrayed as living in harmony with nature in the Garden of Eden, and the purpose of its creation is given as "It is not good that the man should *be* alone" (2:18). In the first description, the relationship between Adam and his wife is outward-facing – they are charged with changing reality by being fruitful and multiplying, enjoined to procreate so as to dominate the world. But in the second narrative, the relationship faces inward, and rather than multiply, the male and the female coalesce: "...and [he] shall cleave to his wife, and they shall be one flesh" (2:24). Together, a man and a woman are the answer to human solitude, and being in union is the pinnacle of their relationship.

Reflecting the twin narratives of Creation, expressions of "being" and "doing" pervade Judaism. The Jewish week is divided into six days of "doing" – "Six days shall you labor, and do all your work" (Ex. 20:9) – and a day of rest: "But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God, in it you shall not do any manner of work" (20:10). The obvious question is whether "being" and "doing" are inherently contradictory, thus entailing the admission that life is fundamentally dualistic. Must we choose between a life of "being" and a life of "doing"? Are these two aspects of our lives irreconcilable?

The Torah casts these two principles in separate Creation stories in order to elucidate each on its own. Yet, ultimately, they are not separate, but rather two sides of the same coin. In our lives, too, there is need to separate the various principles, but the goal is nevertheless to lead a dynamic lifestyle that enables interplay between their expressions – a harmony of “being” and “doing.”

The Taste of the Fruit and the Taste of the Tree: Rav Kook and Tom Sawyer

The opportunity to examine God’s intention, His blueprint for the world, is fascinating. In chapter 1, God commands the earth to sprout “fruit-tree bearing fruit,” but instead it brings forth “tree bearing fruit” (Gen. 1:11–12). Rashi, based on a midrash in Genesis Rabba, writes, “Fruit trees: That the taste of the tree should be like the taste of the fruit. It [the earth] did not do so, however.” Midrashic literature refers to this act of disobedience as “the sin of the earth.” What is the import of this sin, and why is it so important that the tree have flavor? Rav Kook (*Orot HaTeshuva* 6:7) explains the relation between the tree and the fruit as an allegory for the relations between means and ends: the fruit is the end and the tree is the means. God intended for the tree itself, and not only its fruits, to have flavor. It follows that actions – beyond being means to an end – should have intrinsic value.

This idea can be taken in other directions and applied to the question of the relation between form and content. The original purpose of Creation, according to Rav Kook’s cosmology, was to construct a world in which the forms that life takes are perfect likenesses of their content: the body would describe the soul, the external would reflect the internal, and we would be capable of expressing ourselves externally just as we experience ourselves internally. And like us the trees, the animals – all of creation. But the earth sinned in separating form from content. Thus, the tree became a means to the fruit, its treeness utterly devoid of the flavor

of the fruit. The earth, as Rav Kook puts it, “betrayed its essence.” Instead of daring to be itself, as the Lord had intended, it chose to actualize itself only partially. Thenceforth, all of our actions in the world have been mere stages en route to some future goal, bereft of inherent existential meaning.

Mark Twain’s classic novel *Tom Sawyer* can help elucidate Rav Kook’s idea. In one of the chapters, Tom’s Aunt Polly punishes him by ordering him to paint the fence in the yard. The aunt signifies a reality in which the tree does not taste like the fruit. In it, only the “fruit,” meaning the painted fence, has value, while the act of painting – the means – is punishment. But Tom – perhaps thanks to his tender age – gleans a competing intuition about the ideal life, and shares the secret with his friends: the path is not merely a curse, or even a means; it is a bountiful blessing. Tom’s friends are so enamored of his insight that by the end of the story they are handing Tom their treasures merely for the privilege of helping to paint the fence.

We can extract a profound secret about life from the midrash quoted by Rav Kook. An “awakening” is generally the goal of spiritual outlooks, the basic assumption being that people’s lives are passing them by while they sleep. The contrasting of “sleep” and “wakefulness” refers to one’s awareness and the manner in which people lead their life. Generally speaking, an absence of awareness of life stems from the mind wandering either backward to thoughts of past experiences, or forward, anticipating what is yet to come. Thus the individual is absent from the one place where life occurs: the present. As John Lennon said, “Life is what happens while you’re busy making other plans.” A sleeping person is not present, while one who is “awakened” can concentrate and truly exist in the moment.

This ties into the question we raised earlier: whether the world of “doing” can be connected to the world of “being.” When action is entirely expedient, relating only to purpose, it is cut off

from its nature. It is an expression of the “sin of the earth,” where the world of doing (*assiya*) exists separately, cut off from our inner essence. When, however, we succeed in experiencing action as a value, as an essence in itself, it becomes an actualization of our nature. We find that “doing” can become our “being.”

The Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life

Now we can better understand the sin for which humanity is expelled from the Garden of Eden. Eating from the Tree of Knowledge causes a fundamental shift in Adam and Eve’s consciousness.

Their eyes are opened to good and evil, so that everything in the reality of their lives becomes either positive or negative. It is not reality that changes; it is their consciousness, their relation to it. This opening of the eyes, which enables a more adult perspective on life, is also a punishment: “In the sweat of your face shall you eat bread” (3:19), God says, dooming humankind to a life of struggle. At first glance, the statement indeed appears to describe the curse of Man. But is it perhaps possible to transform the curse – the immense effort we invest in surviving and living – into a blessing, a connection to the very essence and flavor of life? Rabbi Nahman of Breslov, in a refreshing reading (*Likutei Moharan, Tanina 6*), teaches that the Hebrew word for “sweat,” “*ze’ah*,” can be read in the acrostic of the verse “This (*Zeh*) is the day which the Lord (*Hashem*) has made (*asa*); we will rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 118:24). In the very sweat with which man has been cursed, Rabbi Nahman finds a blessing, and happiness.

“The sweat of your face” is only a curse if one sees it as such. As soon as one realizes, however, that the very same sweat can be a key to finding existential meaning, it turns into a blessing. The connection to the Tree of Life, denied us with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden, is attainable as an act of mind. Should we succeed in deconstructing the curse of “In the sweat

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of your face shall you eat bread” and translating it into the blessing of “This is the day which the Lord has made,” perhaps we can restore a modicum of wholeness to our splintered life experience, bringing it a step closer to a unified existential reality. The Jewish message is the sustainment of both forces – being and doing – within life itself.