

REACHING FOR THE HEAVENS

*Excerpts from the Writings of
Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz*





In loving memory of our mother
and grandmother

Tziporah (Robyn) Ferszt z"l
צפורה בת אריה הלוי פירשט ז"ל

A lover of G-d, Torah, Am Israel
and Eretz Israel

"Grace is falsehood, and beauty is
futility, a woman who fears the Lord,
she will be praised"

"שקר החן והבל היפי אשה
יראת ה' היא תתהלל"
משלי לא, ל



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Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz

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**“Three possessions should you prize:
a field, a friend, and a book” Rav Hai Gaon.**

With deep gratitude, we acknowledge
the support of our friend,

Rabbi Dr. Yosef Wosk.

His vision has enabled us to bring this series
to publication and open the field of Jewish
knowledge to all. This volume is dedicated to
the reader, a fellow pilgrim on the path.

About the Author

Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz was one of the greatest rabbis and Jewish thinkers of our generation. Through his extensive scholarly output, educational initiatives, and pedagogic brilliance, he had a profound influence on the lives of millions of Jews and non-Jews worldwide.

Rabbi Steinsaltz was a biblical and talmudic scholar. He was a mystic, an innovative educator, a keen social critic, and a worldly intellectual. *Time* magazine referred to him as a "once-in-a-millennium scholar," acknowledging the breadth and scope of his understanding of his own Jewish heritage, the religions of the world, and diverse academic disciplines. He met with heads of state, religious leaders, university professors, artists, scientists, and schoolchildren – all eager to have the privilege of being in his presence, and to learn from him.

Of all his prodigious achievements, Rabbi Steinsaltz is most renowned for his monumental work on the Talmud. His translation and commentary on the entire Talmud, made this magnum opus of Jewish learning accessible to the modern reader. This effort, as well as his commentary on biblical texts, the writings of Maimonides, and other Jewish thinkers, have led to a renaissance in Jewish learning. His books on Kabbala and Hasidic thought reveal and emphasize the relevance of mystical Jewish teachings in modern-day life. "The Thirteen Petalled Rose" and "The Soul" are two examples of his books that have been translated widely and achieved international popularity.

In recognition of his scholarly and educational accomplishments, Rabbi Steinsaltz was awarded the Israel Prize - a lifetime achievement award - as well as honors from the governments of Italy, France, and the United States. He also received honorary doctorates from multiple institutions of higher learning.

Rabbi Steinsaltz saw himself, first and foremost, as a "teacher." He visited and taught at hundreds of Jewish communities, his mantra being - "Let My People Know"; he dedicated his life to the continuity of the Jewish people and its culture. In Israel, he established a chain of elementary schools, schools of higher education, and research centers. Their unifying mission has been to promote Jewish learning and knowledge.

His deep concern for the fate of the Jewish people compelled him to travel to the Soviet Union in 1989, where he succeeded, remarkably, in establishing its first yeshiva for Jewish studies ("Lemad") and teachers' seminary. This educational center turned out to be tremendously influential in renewing Jewish life and culture in the former Soviet Union.

Rabbi Steinsaltz (1937-2020) was born, lived, and died in Jerusalem. In addition to his loving family, he is succeeded by all of the people who revered him and have learned from him. Thousands of his students and followers continue to work on carrying out and expanding his life's dream. The Steinsaltz Center in Jerusalem, whose mission remains "Let My People Know," is actively continuing the cultural and spiritual revolution that Rabbi Steinsaltz initiated.



To absorb unfamiliar information, we must first set aside some of the things we already know. Without doing this, progress is impossible and we cannot learn anything. A brief period of uncertain outcome - a kind of boundless void - accompanies any transition from one phase to the next. This is a very dangerous period of time, when anything can happen. It is like entering a body of water from dry land. There is a moment when a person is no longer on stable ground, but is not yet swimming. The longer the transition lasts, the more perilous it becomes. If we become stuck in a fixed way of thinking, we cannot advance and we can never learn.

**from: Creation and Change – In Word
and in Deed**





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The collection of essays before you is a sampling from the writings of Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. The editorial choices of what to include in this volume were challenging, as it was almost impossible to distill the Rabbi's expansive views on life, the world, and Judaism into a finite number of essays. We have chosen to include essays that can be seen and understood as seeds that have the potential to grow into flowers and trees. They can also be seen as little points of the light that may have the power to illuminate the lives of others.

Rabbi Steinsaltz wrote many different types of books dealing with a wide spectrum of topics and ideas. A unifying thread in all of his writings was the intent to relate, arouse, enliven, and inspire his readers to live life more fully, more meaningfully, and more honestly. He frequently quoted the Rebbe of Kotzk, who, when asked what human beings should see as the goal of their existence, answered, "Human beings were created to raise the heavens."

For Rabbi Steinsaltz, any dream a person attempts to realize, any goal a person sets for himself, is never sufficient. And yet, even the tiniest step forward, any progress made at all, is important and meaningful.

We hope that this book will serve as a kind of portal, a gateway to spiritual paths forged by the Rabbi, to roads that lead to a life of holiness and truth.

We are grateful to Evyatar Rubin who edited this book, to Shachar Gesundheit, whose luminous artwork gives the book its unique style, and to Gaya Aranoff Bernstein, who translated this volume from the Hebrew.

Our profound gratitude for all that Rabbi Steinsaltz has given and continues to give us in his writings.

May his memory be a blessing.





Reaching Higher





Reaching Higher

A person must want to be an angel, nothing less. This is not a goal that can be realized actually, but at least a person will have tried. This is how one can come somewhat closer to an exalted level, or at least begin to ascend. One has to dream big dreams, to want to climb higher and higher. And even though it is impossible to become an angel, the desire to become one remains critical. When someone is on a path of ascent, the Holy One, blessed be He, considers the desire to be an actual accomplishment, even if the goal is not reached. If one's dreams remain on the ground, that is where the person will remain, never to ascend. It is essential to truly want to reach for the sky; it is all a matter of desire.

from the essay: Breathing Life into Elul

Reaching Higher

In all aspects of serving God, one must always try to progress, always want to do more and more. As promised in the written and oral Torah, a path is cleared for those who desire to ascend. All doors are open to a person who has made a decision to try. There is no coercion to enter any of them, but it is forbidden to remain satisfied with the status quo. Satisfaction with one's attainments is a good quality only when applied to material things; when it comes to spiritual growth, man must strive endlessly to achieve more.

Our sages exhort us: "A person must ask himself: When will my deeds reach the level of those of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?" Why would our sages ask us to set such an impossible, unattainable goal? The answer has to do with desire. Every person should want to achieve more, should keep dreaming, and keep trying to ascend higher and higher in the service of God.

from the essay: **The Soul Within Elul**

Reaching Higher

It is forbidden for a person to remain stagnant. If one does not ascend continually, one is in the process of falling. The question to ask oneself is not "Have I not held my ground?" or even "Have I performed a good deed, or have I sinned?" The questions to ask are "Have I grown? Was I a better person today than I was yesterday?" If the answer is no, then I am definitely on a path of descent. In order not to regress, one must take greater, bolder steps than before. This is not an exhortation to live an unstable existence, but rather a call to establish a committed existence that is alive with progress and renewal.

from the book: Radiance of the King

Reaching Higher

When a person keeps taking on more and more to do, one worries that he may be spreading himself too thin. In day-to-day life, there are times one can feel that he has reached the outer limits of human endeavor, and that any additional effort is physically impossible. The Lubavitcher Rebbe believed that by doing more, one can change the nature of reality. In the physical world, when great pressure is applied to an object, its essential nature can be altered. A “white dwarf” is the term given to a star that is only about the size of the earth, but has a mass much greater than that of the sun. Under pressure, the physical substance of that star became something completely different from what it had been. A person also has the potential to push boundaries beyond limits and change one’s essential nature.

from the book: **My Rebbe**

Reaching Higher

A basic difference between human beings and the rest of creation is that people can strive toward a goal; one's deeds can reflect an overarching purpose. A horse remains a horse, and not necessarily a holy one, even if someone puts tefillin on it. Man can don tefillin, do good deeds, learn Torah, and accomplish a great deal in the course of a lifetime, but still not be much different from a horse. The true difference lies in the goal, and not in the specific deed. To be uniquely human, a person must have direction and a purpose. He must make a serious decision about the path he chooses to follow in life, and make an effort to reach the goals he has set.

from the essay: Breathing Life into Elul

Reaching Higher

A person has to see himself as a kind of candle. Before he can illuminate others, before he can become a blazing torch that can ignite the entire world, he must first enlighten his own personal existence. If his flame is weak, he deserves reproach; a flickering, sputtering flame produces very poor light. The fact that a person has free time should inspire him to jump up and get things done, rather than waste it. "How can I sleep when the world is in its current state? I must burn, I must try to create light for myself and for others. I am an individual who exists as part of a larger whole." A person needs to remain aware that time is limited and that every passing moment is irretrievable.

from the essay on "Vayetze," 5776

Reaching Higher

We believe not only in the coming of the Messiah, but also in the transformation of the world. With God's help, and with a slight effort on our part, the human race will be entirely different in the Messianic era. Not all of us can do great things, but each and every one of us can work in whatever way we can to be our best selves, despite the confines and limitations of our physical bodies. The Hebrew words *adam* (human being), *adama* (earth), and *adameh* (I will imitate) all share the letters *alef-dalet-mem*. Human beings were created from earth but we must strive to reach the heavens, and to imitate the On High (*adameh l'Elyon*), to elevate our souls. Our belief in the coming of the Messiah is essentially a belief that human beings are capable of being much better.

from the essay: **The New Man**



Reaching Higher

I am held accountable for things I could have tried to achieve, but did not. A person must act with the broken shards of his own reality, despite his own limitations. There are things that the Holy One, blessed be He, determines - the yield of a crop in a given year, for example - but there are also things that the Holy One, blessed be He, allows us to control. A person can learn as much as he likes; there are no limits placed on one's ability to elevate one's own soul. I am encouraged to reach toward a horizon that keeps receding farther and farther into the distance.

It is written of King Jehoshaphat: "His heart expanded on God's path." From this we understand that one must set ambitious, even unreachable goals when following God's path. I can go far on a path that has been paved by those who came before me. And I can aspire to reach its unattainable end, knowing that those who come after me will continue to follow the path, paving it one brick at a time. A person should say to himself - do not crawl if you can walk and do not walk if you can run.

Human beings must keep reaching for the heavens. There are people who see their lives in a limited way, looking backward at what they have achieved. Looking forward, anything is possible; man was created to raise his sights, to reach for the sky.

from the essay: Thirteenth of Tammuz, 5764