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The Candle of God

DISCOURSES ON
HASIDIC THOUGHT

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Hidden Aspects of Shabbat

Chapter one

Torah and mitzvot are called the way of God, as it is written: “Its ways are the ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace” (Proverbs 3:17). For the ways of Torah are to keep to the paths of the Lord, to do charity and justice. In another passage, we find a statement to the effect that the Heavenly world and this world are built on two letters of one of the Divine Names – the Heavenly world by the letter *Yod*, and this world by the letter *Heh*.

What does this mean? Why should the letter *Yod*, the smallest and most insignificant of the alphabet, be that which becomes the basis for the most spiritual of worlds? And the answer is that *Yod* is ten; by ten Divine utterances did Creation take place, and thus, according to the ten *Sefirot*, were the worlds formed. To be sure, it has to be remembered that God is not the same as His creation, that there is an unbridgeable gap between the actuality of Divine Being and the actuality of all the worlds, from the most spiritual to the most material. That is to say “for with You is the source of life, and in Your light shall we see light” (Psalms 36:10), meaning that in the next world the souls (of men) enjoy the radiance of the *Shekhina*, Divine presence. This bliss is not other, cannot be more than what a person is capable of grasping. It is not a matter of the mind,

obviously; it is a spiritual situation. At the same time, just as with intellectual matters or even physical, the soul has to be able to receive that which is bestowed on it; the bliss is only proportionate to the capacity of the individual to absorb it.

The other side of this concept is that the soul is able to absorb something of the Divine splendor, that the infinite light of the next world is not so far beyond the human that it is inaccessible. It is made available to a person by descending level upon level of purity and light. Ultimately it is available, and it can be experienced as real. To be sure, it is a very much condensed and contracted Divine Joy, as we have said, and for all its being intangible, it is not a nothing; being spiritual, it is a positive existence, a genuine reality. It is a nothing only in the sense that it is not anything that we can identify or grasp, as well as being so greatly contracted, and a something in the sense that it is the source of bliss, “for You are the source of life.” Bliss and life are identical here. Since the actuality of the Divine is not given, nor even the possibility of being with Him even when in His presence, we say that we can be in His light. And that is the meaning of the *Yod* as a symbol of the great diminution and contraction, of the available reality of the next world for the soul.

Following upon this is the concept of the extension of reality from the *Yod* through all the letters of the Divine Name, the *Tetragrammaton*, which is the key to the order of Creation. But this is a profound kabbalistic way of interpreting the world of God and man. For our purpose, it is enough to note the significance of a beginning point, a point of departure, so to speak, which is in itself meaningless for all but the One Who is giving. For this One Who wishes to transmit something, it is necessary to extend the initial impulse or inspiration through a number of gradations or channels: thought, speech, and action. The receiver does not have to do more than receive through the channels of transmission and somehow reconstruct the message. An idea is expressed in words; the listener has to interpret the words back to the idea. Sometimes a message is transmitted through electromagnetic waves and it has to be rechanneled through a proper electronic apparatus to be heard. In all cases, from the point of departure the message has to take form and go through a channeling, and then there must be a corresponding instrument to receive and “interpret” it.

Thus, the *Yod* of beginnings is the source of life. It has to extend in all dimensions and contract in terms of Infinite Light in order to become reality. For man, the capacity to “contract” in this way is also the beginning of expression. Without gathering together one’s impressions and mental processes, focusing them somehow, nothing significant can be done. Speech needs a prior contraction of thought, just as any transmission requires an ordering of the factors involved.

The “contraction” can take several forms besides that of actual diminution or shrinkage. It can be a concealment or screening process that beclouds the light (like smoked glass), shielding the receiver and making it possible to absorb the rays of the sun or the higher worlds without injury to one’s self. Another kind of contraction is by the use of a transmitter. The moon can be safely looked at even though its light is of the sun, because it is an agent, lessening the light by reflecting, by transmitting on a lower key, giving off less than it receives. Thus, the higher light of God can usually be received only through those lights that are able to transmit it to us in safety.

Similarly, the Torah has many degrees of light and transmission.

But to return to the concept that the next world was created by the letter *Yod*. The premise is that this world is the revealed world; the next world is really the source, that from which this world gets its substantiality. The Heavenly world is illumed and infinite; this world below is dark, limited, and material; it is revealed only in the sense that it is a visible portion of reality, like the dry land surrounded by the sea. And of course there is considerable hiddenness also within the revealed, but altogether our world is “this” world, that to which we can point and with which we can interact as part of our existence, the world of good and evil.

This, in turn, brings us to the scriptural commandment to “do it today” (Deuteronomy 7:11). Besides the simple fact that this is always good sense, there is the well-known dilemma of putting off till tomorrow. Both the *tzaddik* and the wicked are constantly provoked by the bad impulse as well as the good. The essential difference between the virtuous person and the sinful one is the difference between the postponement of the good impulse, and its immediate putting into action, today, and whether the bad impulse is deferred or eagerly realized now.

Hidden Aspects of Shabbat

In this way we live on in this world of ours, oscillating between a constant choosing of one thing or another.

Consequently, the world also presents a challenge. We are charged with the task of revealing the Divine, of bringing God out of His concealment by overcoming the obscuring barriers. This does not exist in the next world, where the Divine is available according to one's capacity – where there is no object of desire, no privilege or duty. Everything is given and nothing is left to be yearned for. It is a static non-state in which one performs neither mitzva nor transgression. The next world is complete and infinitely satisfying. This world, in contrast, is marked by the need “to do it this day,” for only the present strives for perfection.

All of which is only an introduction to our subject of the Shabbat. The speculations concerning the nature of the next world are based on the insights of the Sages as well as reasonable hypotheses. Our intention is to show that the essence of Shabbat is really a trickle, an infiltration, of the next world into this world. It is a percolation and diffusion of an existing Divine Reality.

Chapter two

How shall the infinite plenty be drawn down from above? To satisfy this urgent need we have learned to do the actions of Torah and mitzvot, to bestir or awaken the upper worlds and induce the desired response. We do not have other ways of drawing upon Divine plenty. Man was put into the Garden of Eden to till and to keep it (Genesis 2:15), as it is written: “To till it” means the 248 positive mitzvot, “to keep it” means the 365 negative mitzvot. Just as the work of the gardener makes the earth give forth greater fruit and abundance, so does man draw forth the utmost joy and goodness from life by proper cultivation of Torah and mitzvot.

This is also the meaning of “All that has breath shall praise God Halleluya” (Psalms 150:6). To praise here is also to laud or acclaim, to glorify and adore, that is, to add light (or provide an enhanced view). The word *hallel* (praise) is close to the Hebrew root word *hela*, that which illuminates. When we worship God we also send light upward, so that the human soul is called the candle of God in the sense that it not only sheds light for itself to illumine its own way, it also serves to draw the Divine light to itself. At the same time, the soul is only a receptacle, or instrument, of light, in the way that the candle is only a means for

light to fasten itself. The soul of man is simply a place where the name of God is revealed.

A deeper inquiry may consequently expose the question: why then is the soul unable to draw down Divine light by its own powers of thought and striving? Why the need for mitzvot? The answer given by the Hasidic Sage is a rather baffling and profound statement concerning the origin of the mitzvot. The primary root of the mitzvot, he asserts, is of the aspect of the inwardness of the highest delight. The mitzvot come from the inner depths of the *Oneg Elyon*, which is the utmost joy and rapture of being.

It is written in the Scriptures (Proverbs 8:30) that the Torah is the plaything of God, and by plaything is meant that which gives pleasure and gladness. More inwardly it signifies God's playing with Himself; in the sense that the Torah in its essence, in itself, not as that which was given to man – is God's amusement. And what would such a Divine plaything consist of, before there was a world, before existence and reality? It would have to be an all-sufficient delight, the blissfulness of being, the very source of all pleasure, "for with Thee is the source of life" (Psalms 36:9). As the primary source of life, it is equivalent to the origin of the higher delight, the *Oneg Elyon*, and as such is the very beginning of all beginnings. It is that which we may first grasp of the very essence of the Divine.

Even before acknowledging that, however, we are made conscious of the fact that God "sanctifies us with His mitzvot." We recite the words before the doing of the action. Sanctification may here be defined as being allowed to take part in elemental holiness as God's way of playing with man. Torah and mitzvot form the substance of a mutual enjoyment. Indeed, the blessing very specifically denotes that we are performing "His" mitzvot (מצוותיו), mitzvot that He gave to us and which sanctify us. We recognize that God is relating to us through something that is His, not ours – ואהיה אצלו שעשועים ("And I shall be unto Him as a plaything"). He is letting us share in His delight, by sanctifying us in His mitzvot. We are granted a gift of Divine joy.

This is possible because God raised us to the level of consciousness in which we can participate in His mitzva and in the accompanying heavenly delight. Such, too, is the meaning of being occupied with

Torah for its own sake. There are those who get involved with Torah in order to imbibe its contents, or to use it for whatever practical or even idealistic purpose they think best. They are not relating to the Torah for its own sake, that is for the love of Torah itself and not for the benefits to be had from it. To be occupied with Torah for its own sake means to relate to Torah, not as a literary work or as moral instruction or even wisdom, but to let the Torah emanate its splendor and joy, to let it serve as a channel for Divine light. One thereby reveals its ever new and vital message as a gratification of unspoken wish; it is a happiness that does not come from anything in the world or in oneself.

Hence it is said that “Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold on her; and happy are those who hold her fast” (Proverbs 3:17). Pleasantness here is a certain sweetness. It is a feeling of sweet delight. And the pleasantness of Torah refers to such a self-sufficient delight in God. For there are all kinds of enjoyments; but the higher enjoyment or Divine delight is the source of them all. As it is written: “For with you is the source of life” (Psalms 36:10).

A passing remark is here in place concerning the use of the plural in the ways of Torah. Isn't it one way and not many? To be sure, there is the kabbalistic definition of “way” as the three *Sefirot*: *Ḥesed*, *Gevura*, and *Tiferet*. These are the three basic lines of existence; they parallel the three fundamentals we have learned from the Sages: Torah, *Avoda* (Divine Worship), and *Gemilut Ḥasadim* (Kindness). With Kindness corresponding to *Ḥesed*, Divine Worship to *Gevura*, and Torah to *Tiferet*, these can be considered the three ways of the Torah; each of them an expression of a different mode and attribute. In addition to all these, however, is the more encompassing view that every mitzva is in itself a separate path or way for the experience of delight in being. This is the meaning of the use of the plural in the Biblical statement, “Her ways are ways of pleasantness.” And thus every mitzva is a pathway for holiness and Divine delight to go from level to level of being.

To proceed further into the meaning of “for with You is the source of life,” we may inquire into the meaning of the words. “With You” does not signify that the source of life is your very essence and reality, but that this source of life is something that is with you, as an aspect of

yourself like your name. This name, which is known elsewhere as “His great name,” the first name which God had before there was anything else, is “אור אינסוף,” Infinite Light. And, as we say in the prayer book (*Tanna D’vei Eliyahu*), “before there was a world, only He and His name existed.” This Divine Name, which is Infinite Light, becomes the source of life in the process of Creation. “With you” therefore denotes not by you or next to you, but from you in the sense that the light of the sun is of the sun and from the sun itself, not something extraneous. So we say He and His name (that comes from Him) are one. His name is the way He becomes known to others, it is the potential of that which acts upon all else, the First Light emanating from Him. As such He is called the source of life, or the source of delight, which is the same thing. For life and joy are part of the One Being.

As it is known in Kabbala, the level of reality called “the inwardness of *Keter*” is the source of delight and is an aspect of Infinite Light. Also called “*Atik yomin*,” this level of being is primary, preceding all else and serving as a source for all life and existence, including, of course, the delight of existence. But what do we really mean by this primal delight? Evidently it is not the same thing as the delight that comes from below, from taking pleasure in anything on earth. It is not a matter of the usual subject-object relation of sensation and joyful reaction. Indeed, pleasure or delight is not even of itself, it is derived from something. It does not seem to matter much what it is, whether tasty food for the body or spiritual nourishment for the mind. Joy comes from some other reality; one takes delight in something. Whereas the primal delight from above needs nothing else, it is totally self-sufficient. In terms of the Divine, there is nothing else: He is. He exists in and of Himself, and His Delight does not depend on anything outside of the soul (which mirrors Him).

Since the pleasures of the world are dependent on “a something else,” the pleasures that are not so clearly derived are clearly more pure. Just as we may conceive of a reality that exists in its purity as something that stands on its own, without any dependence or support, so does the Rambam speak of the reality of God as that which is the background for all that exists. At the same time, of course, the Divine reality cannot be defined by any other reality, for everything is defined by God – at every level an entity is defined very precisely by the one above it. Hence,

too, the Divine delight is totally different; nothing creates it, it is not a delight in anything else but itself.

It can be considered on a higher level even than the Higher Wisdom which is above all other levels of existence. Wisdom, or *Hokhma*, is composed of two aspects: *Hokhma* and the delight in *Hokhma*. This seems to indicate that the delight in Wisdom is not the same thing as the primal delight mentioned above; and that Higher Wisdom, which is connected with this particular delight in wisdom, is also not at the utmost level, not being pure and simply itself. It is Divine delight that is pure and simply itself at the utmost.

The concept of utmost simplicity is borrowed from the Maharal, who said that all the entities in the world are compound, everything is a mixture with something else, and that a simple, independent entity is one that is not mixed with anything else and cannot be separated into parts, and cannot be defined (circumscribed by delimiting forms).

In ordinary terms, simplicity is that which remains after all that is superfluous has been stripped away – the naked quality of a thing. But there is a far more profound meaning; after all there can be no end to the stripping away, in so far as the covering or skin of a plant or animal can be removed. The utmost simplicity is that ultimate which is not clothed, that from which all covering is stripped away – the thing itself. The utmost reality is therefore the basic essence of an entity, but it is more than an abstract uniqueness; it is that which is beyond combination or penetration, inward or outward, beyond definition or grasp. At the same time, it is very real. That which is simple to the utmost can, therefore, not be pinpointed or encompassed. And the higher delight, the primal joy of which we speak, is just such a self-sufficient taking pleasure in delight, simple to the ultimate.

The nature of pleasure in our world is to spread out in length and breadth, more so perhaps than any other quality of the soul. This would indicate that the primal delight, which comes from above, reaches out in all directions and goes to the deepest depths. It branches out in an enormous variety of form and detail. Indeed, there is no other power or quality of the soul that reaches so far in height and depth and breadth, in expansiveness and restriction – that is, in amplitude. For nothing is as broad as pleasure; nothing has such a multiplicity of form and expression.

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In all, the object and content is that which gives joy and makes one happy. The hedonistic impulse is behind the action and gives it drive and power and meaning.

As a negative part of this process, perhaps, is its opposite, the play of affliction and suffering – that which man tries to avoid. This becomes the subjective definition of good and evil; good is pleasure-giving and evil is pain-inflicting. Even in the Bible it says: “Behold I have given you today life and good and death and evil...therefore choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19). The choice here is not between good and evil but between life and death. What is good then becomes more than what is merely pleasurable. The nature of the pleasure, the level of its action on me, becomes a crucial question. Pleasure has to be distinguished from the distortion of soul that may accompany it. What is truly good and what is truly not good? The problem circles around the nature of pleasure. Pleasure is good and life-giving. Also there is the blessing on that which “gives life to every living soul,” recited after meals. The meaning of “to give life” does not necessarily refer only to the necessities of life without which one cannot exist. It refers also to the pleasures of life, for this blessing is said not only after drinking water or eating meat but also after eating sweets and other delicacies.

That is to say, the essence of life and the joy or pleasure of life are the two sides of the same thing; they are not separate entities; the essence of life is in pleasure and the primal, basic pleasure is life itself. For this does man toil and labor. He does so to live or, rather, to enjoy life. Just as a person engages in bargaining in order to make a profit, so does man engage in struggle for the sake of the pleasure that life affords. What is paramount here is the fact that joyfulness and the recognition of what constitutes pleasure are not the same for everyone. The person whose chief delight lies in wealth lives in order to make money but, in point of fact, his aim is pleasure and not money. The money is only the means. Similarly, for one who strives to obtain wisdom, the aim is really the inner joy that comes from knowledge and a measure of sagacity. The difference between the two is not a difference in the basic aim; it lies in the mode of feeling about the way to obtain it, in actions that are more preferable, in simple human terms of like and dislike. A person chooses to invest his energies in that which ultimately is most pleasurable to him.

The higher the level of pleasure the more superior the aim of one's life. The extent of one's capacity for joy is the chief instrument for achievement at all levels, higher or lower, and may even be considered the primary root of all action.

This is the vertical line of joy, its height and depth, whereas the breadth and horizontal expanse of joy may be seen as the many-sidedness and broad range of the possibilities of pleasure, in the senses, the feelings, the mind, and the spirit. A whole world of opportunities for pleasure lie in food and drink alone, and not only in taste and smell and in the many social aspects of the table, but also in all that is offered as variety. Taste itself is a pleasure that exceeds very many gastronomical possibilities. One can enjoy such an enormous range of beverages, wines, and drinks, it staggers the imagination. Even in the more subtle sense of smell, the pleasure derived from a vast range of odors and scents is different for each one.

Similarly, there is the delight in speech – in communication, articulation or study of language, logic, grammar, eloquence, and the like. It is not necessarily an intellectual pleasure connected with the meaning of what is said; it can be an esthetic delight in the beauty of speech. In certain countries, it often does not matter what a person is saying but how well he says it. For a rather special pleasure is to be found in the purity of a verbal communication, in the exactitude of grammatical forms or the precision of a sentence. Another sort of pleasure comes from the telling of a joke. And then there is the simple satisfaction in talking – simple conversation or sharing thoughts and feelings, expressing worry and getting rid of a burden on the soul. There may not be a solution to the problem, but the speaking is a release and a pleasure of sorts.

Seeing and hearing are the more obvious and constant sources of delight. Besides the harmony of music or visual beauty, the unimaginable extent of the things enjoyed by the eyes and ears of man cannot be expressed. Besides all this, which we may see as the mechanism of pleasure, we are aware of an inner world of intellectual and spiritual content behind all sensation. These higher delights of the mind appear first as accompaniments to emotion or thought. Thereafter, the nature of mind is such that it expands the pleasure derived from the senses, enhances the delights of the emotion and intellect and as we have said,

provides height, depth, and breadth to the pleasurable, transforming it from something tangible and carrying it to another dimension, to that of infinitude. That is to say, every object in the world can be enjoyed and it makes no difference what it is; pleasure can penetrate anything. And beyond the sensual, pleasure has the power of transforming the particularity of a thing into something limitless. Enjoyment, therefore, can proceed beyond the personal which is its essential root and become a general or universal factor taking one out of the specific into the unbounded.

What is implied here is that delight, in all its forms, is more than a particular quality; it belongs to life itself, capable of adhering to anything in the world. It is also far more than any one kind of action or any one aspect of life; it is at the core of all aspiration, purpose, and human direction. The difference between the courses of behavior people choose lies in the pleasure they get (or hope to get) out of their choices.

Moreover, pleasures of whatever variety also serve to educate and nurture pleasures of the same kind. Indeed, all training is based on this principle: listening develops the pleasure of hearing music, observation enhances the powers of vision, and so on. And there are many things that have to be learned in order to be enjoyed, whether in art or technology. To be sure, technical learning does not, in itself, harbor pleasure for everyone; one often misses out on an essential delight by failing to “educate” the capacity to appreciate the enjoyable in something.

We are thus brought to an ascertainment of the fact that there are levels of enjoyment. Every man to his pleasure. One is reminded of the story by Peretz about Bonsha Schweig, a lovable example of one of the wretches of the earth. Upon arriving in Paradise, after his death, he is told that he can ask for anything he likes. “Anything?” he inquires incredulously. “Yes, anything in heaven and in earth,” he is reassured. Upon which he thinks for a moment and says he would like a fresh roll with butter. That was the pinnacle of his capacity for enjoyment, a pitiful comment on the inequalities in our society. The Jewish instruction to ‘choose life’ is a matter of ever-greater refinement of pleasure, of developing the power to discriminate between the crude and the subtle, the higher and the lower. In learning to recognize the good, evil is automatically rejected; for there are the pleasures of the below and the pleasures of the above. Pleasure is the key.