

God = The Infinity of Intimacy: From the Infinity of Power to the Infinity of Intimacy

By Dr. Marc Gafni

Part 1

The Jewish mandate which demands that the human being enter into partnership with God, in the task of perfecting the world, emerges, paradoxically, not out of answers but out of questions. The fact that the human being can challenge, and that God accepts the human challenge, implies a covenantal partnership between the human being and God. Both the human being and God share an understanding of the good, and thus God can turn to the human being and say: 'I invite you, nay, I demand that you be my partner, my co-creator in the perfection of the world. I began the process of creation; I established the moral fabric of the world. It is up to you to take that cloth and to weave it fully. It is up to you to complete the tapestry, it is up to you to risk to grow, and to create a world in which good, love, justice, and human dignity flourish and are affirmed.' A human being who cannot be trusted enough to challenge evil can also not be a partner in fostering the good.

It is true that God very often seems silent in response to our challenge. Yet Jewish consciousness, expressed through Jewish text and tradition, affirms that God accepts the validity of the question. In doing so, God affirms our role as God's partners in history. If I am able to recognize evil for what it is, then I am *ipso facto* obligated in *tikkun olam* – the obligation to act for and with God in the healing of the world. Man is the language of God. We are God's adjectives, God's adverbs, God's nouns, and sometimes even God's dangling modifiers. We are God's vocabulary in the world. When I love, when I am able to be truly vulnerable and intimate with another human being, when I am able to share the pain of another and to rejoice in their deep joy, I am acting for

God. I become God's chariot in the world.¹ More than this: If I can wrestle with God, if I can express my uncertainty with God in the intimacy of challenging relationship, then paradoxically, I convert my doubt into the core certainty of Divine relationship.

The Question is the Answer

It is to this paradox that we will now turn. The Israel Moment is one of grappling with God within the uncertainty. Within the very recesses of the Israel Moment however is a powerful Yehuda Moment. The Yehuda Moment is when I experience the core certainty of self, and therefore of my Divinity – of my being loved by God.

This experience is not only not in contradiction to the question, but wells up from the question itself...In the question is God. The question IS the answer.

It is this paradox that Dostoyevsky in *Brothers Karamazov* does not fully grasp. He does not understand that the rage of Ivan is the rage of 'heresy that is faith.' Ivan, responding to Alyosha's certainty of belief, has just described to him the brutal murder of a child, torn apart by dogs for sport. Ivan's uncertainty burns with the fiery anger of faith. Although the passage is longer than what one would usually expect in a quoted text, it is so germane to our theme and so compelling that I did not shorten it. Thus, I invite my dear reader to experience the truth and power of Ivan's plea. We read him as a modern echo of Abraham's cry, 'Will the judge of the entire world not do justice?'

I must have justice, or I will destroy myself. And not justice in some remote infinite time and space, but here on earth, and that I could see myself. I have believed in it. I want to see it, and if I am dead by then, let me rise again, for if it all happens without me, it will be too unfair.

¹ This is the sense of the Rabbinic declaration 'The patriarchs; they themselves are God's chariot.'

Surely, I haven't suffered, simply that I, my crimes and my sufferings, may manure the soil of the future harmony for somebody else.

I want to see with my own eyes the hind lie down with the lion and the victim rise up and embrace his murderer. I want to be there when everyone suddenly understands what it has all been for. All the religions of the world are built on this longing, and I am a believer.

But then there are the children, and what am I to do about them? That's a question I can't answer. For the hundredth time I repeat, there are numbers of questions, but I've only taken the children, because in their case what I mean is so answerably clear. Listen! If all must suffer to pay for the eternal harmony, what have children to do with it, tell me, please? It's beyond all comprehension why they should suffer, and why they should pay for the harmony. Why should they, too, furnish material to enrich the soil for the harmony of the future? I understand solidarity in sin among men. I understand solidarity in retribution, too, but there can be no such solidarity with children. And if it is really true that they must share responsibility for all their father's crimes, such a truth is not of this world and is beyond my comprehension.

Some jester will say, perhaps, that the child would have grown up and have sinned, but you see he didn't grow up, he was torn to pieces by the dogs, at eight years old. Oh, Alyosha, I am not blaspheming! I understand, of course, what an upheaval of the universe it will be, when everything in heaven and earth blends in one hymn of praise and everything that lives and has lived cries aloud: 'Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed.' When the mother embraces the fiend who threw her child to the dogs, and all three cry aloud with tears, 'Thou art just, O Lord!' then, of course, the crown of knowledge will be reached and all will be made clear.

But what pulls me up here is that I can't accept that harmony. And while I am on earth, I make haste to take my own measures. You see, Alyosha, perhaps it really may happen that if I live to that moment, or rise again to see it, I, too, perhaps, may cry aloud with the rest, looking at the mother embracing the child's torturer, 'Thou art just, O Lord!' but I don't want to cry aloud then. While there is still time, I hasten to protect myself and so I renounce the higher harmony altogether.

It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little fist and prayed in its stinking outhouse, with its unexpiated tears to 'dear, kind God'! It's not worth it, because those tears are unatoned for. They must be atoned for, or there can be no harmony. But how? How are you going to atone for them? Is it possible? By their being avenged? But what do I care for avenging them? What do I care for a hell for oppressors? What good can hell do, since those children have already been tortured? And what becomes of harmony, if there is hell? I want to forgive. I want to embrace. I don't want more suffering. And if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price.

I don't want the mother to embrace the oppressor who threw her son to the dogs! She dare not forgive him! Let her forgive him for herself, if she will, let her forgive the torturer for the immeasurable suffering of her mother's heart. But the sufferings of her tortured child she has no right to forgive; she dare not forgive the torturer, even if the child were to forgive him! And if that is so, if they dare not forgive, what becomes of harmony?

Is there in the whole world a being who would have the right to forgive and could forgive? I don't want harmony. From love for humanity I don't want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would

rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it's beyond our means to pay so much to enter it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return Him the ticket.

A 3,500-year-old text anticipates Ivan. Moses says to God, 'You have promised to redeem the people in the future – but that's not good enough – for how does that help the babies being brutally killed and buried in the mortar of Egyptian bricks?'²

The outraged existential challenge which Ivan, Moses, and Abraham hurl *against* God, is also God's highest embrace. When we rage like Ivan, we affirm the dignity and validity of our rage. We recognize that the rage is holy, welling as it does from the deepest recesses of our being. We refuse to invalidate our core certainty of self and capitulate to the indifference of dogma that denies the uncertainty of evil. We refuse to deny our rage, and in so doing we affirm the holiness of our moral intuitions. In giving voice to our deepest uncertainties, we paradoxically confirm our inner certainty of the Divinity in ourselves. Dostoyevsky's mistake was only that he thought Ivan's speech to be heresy.

Where – is God?!

Another 19th Century Russian, R. Nachman of Bratzlav, in a profound and daring teaching, reveals the light shimmering in Alyosha's speech. It is a teaching on the word 'Ayeh.' *Ayeh* in Hebrew means *where*, in the sense of 'where is God?'³ *Ayeh* encapsulates in one word all of Alyosha's oration. I want to share with you R. Nachman's teaching directly, in my trans-

² Exodus Rabbah 6:7.

³ Isaiah chapter six verse three.

interpretation of the original Hebrew text. The bracketed words are my additions:

*'When one follows the path of intellect – (certainty)
one may encounter
multiple mistakes and pitfalls
There are many who fell
and who caused the world to fall
and all through their intellect (false certainty)*

*...when you fall into uncertainty
the fall per se
and the descent
are the ultimate ascent.
For all of creation...
derives sustenance from
the ten revealed utterances of creation (certainty)
but the place of the fall
derives sustenance
from the hidden utterance. (uncertainty)
(which is keter)
...in the place of the fall
certainty can give no nourishment
there, only the hidden utterance – uncertainty
gives nourishment.
When a person says 'Ayeh'
– where is the place of his glory –
when he realizes how distant he is
how deeply he has fallen into uncertainty
this – itself is his fixing.*

Nachman teaches that in the depth of uncertainty is certainty – the experience of worth, value, and being loved. In the anger at evil is the profound intuition that *our rage matter* – and that it is holy.

Certainty of Rage

Said differently, by holding uncertainty and not settling for explanations of suffering that our soul intuitively rejects, we reach a higher certainty – the certainty of rage. It may well be that in a century that has seen one hundred million people brutally killed, the only path back to God is the certainty of rage. Those who deny the holiness of our anger deny God.

Babies are part of our core certainty. They remind us of all that is pure. They somehow cut through our posturing and touch something deep inside us. Have you ever seen a baby brought into an office – no matter how serious the office, grown men and women almost immediately revert to baby talk – to goo goo gaga. Babies cry out for our protection. They call us to rise to our highest selves. Perhaps this is what Leah understood for the first time as she looked down at little Judah. Until Judah's birth Leah had been so intent on using her children to get Jacob that she hadn't really seen them. Only when she gives up her need for Jacob, is she able to see her baby. It is from this place that she cries out – 'I have found myself before God.'⁴

Babies being ripped apart – my mother's youthful vision – destroy that core certainty. 'Where Is God' writes Wiesel, 'he is hanging on the gallows'...in the body of a young boy. Incarnation is reversed in the horror of suffering. God becomes human and dies on the Gallows. In the reversal is the death of God about which some post-holocaust theologians⁵ wrote with such pathos. The Biblical response is different. Biblical men and women work their way back to God not through pious imprecations justifying God nor through pathos-filled announcements of God's demise, but through the certainty of rage. Ultimately,

⁴ See *Certainty*, chapter one for a deepening of this idea.

⁵ See Arthur Rubinstein.

as we studied a few chapters ago – ‘to struggle is to embrace,’ to cry out: *Ayeh?*

Part 2

The Ayeh Stories

R. Nachman, I would suggest, did not originate this understanding of *Ayeh* – rather it emerges out of a tradition of Biblical ‘*Ayeh*’ stories.

In the Book of Judges, a messenger of God comes to Gideon at a time in which Israel has suffered greatly at the hand of the Midianite nation. The messenger of God offers certainty to Gideon: ‘God is with you, hero of valor,’ and Gideon rejects this pat offer of security: ‘You tell me that God is with us? Then why is all this...’ He cannot even give it a name. The silent questions ring out in the spaces between the words: ‘Why has all this suffering, why has all this pain defined our lives for so many years? Why are men killed? Why are children orphaned?’ And the text goes on: ‘*Ayeh* – where are all of his great wonders which our fathers told us, saying God took us out of the land of Egypt. And now, God has abandoned us.’

Gideon the judge, in the tradition of Abraham, turns to God and says, ‘Does the Judge of the entire world not do justice?’ Gideon the Judge challenges God, challenges the messenger, and challenges the message. The Divine response seems unclear, enigmatic, and troubling; but also powerful, inspiring, and deeply directive. God answers Gideon: ‘Go with this strength of yours and save Israel ...behold, I have sent you.’ (Judges 6:12-14)

What ‘strength’ is God referring to? I would suggest, and at least one *Midrash*⁶ implicitly supports my reading, that God meant: ‘Go forth with *the power of your uncertainty*.’ God is confirming that if Gideon has the ability to doubt that this is the best of all possible worlds, this means he shares a common moral language with God. The wrestling with God in itself implies messengership on

⁶ See *Midrash Tanchuma* cited in *Rashi Adloc.*

behalf of the Divine: 'Behold, I have sent you.' God confirms the Chassidic tale that initiated this chapter: to grapple with God is indeed to touch God, and to enter into the wrestling ring is to be a representative of all Israel, to plead redemption for all the world.

Gideon says to God's messenger: 'Where, *ayeh*, are all of His great wonders?' – echoing Moses' and Abraham's uncertainty about God's dealings in the world.

The Second Ayeh Story

The pinnacle of *ayeh* cries out in the biblical story of the binding of Isaac. Isaac turns to his father and asks, '*Ayeh?* Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' Many commentators recognize that in asking this question Isaac is beginning to understand the nature of his silent journey with his father. For three days, he has walked beside his father in tense silence, and now without even meeting his son's eyes, Abraham asks the servants to stay behind as the two of them climb the mountain alone. Laboring up the incline with the kindling weighing heavily on his back, noticing the knife and firestone in his father's hand, Isaac feels a terrible darkness approaching. Can his father truly be intending to hurt him? When Isaac speaks, we feel the shattering inside, the destruction of the child within, the death of the child's innocence: '*Father!*' – he says – and father answers, 'Yes, my son.' '*Here are the firestone and the wood; but where – ayeh – is the lamb for the burnt offering?*'

For Lainer of Ishbitz, Isaac's *Ayeh* is the embrace of God in uncertainty.⁷

'*Ayeh?*' Isaac cannot suffer the uncertainty in silence. A child at the beginning of his life's climb through uncertainty, Isaac's question reaches the highest place.

⁷ See *Mei Hashiloach Genesis 22 Parhhat Vayera* – compare the different formulations of this idea in vol. 1 and 2.

Kabbalist, R. Isaac Luria, comments on this word *ayeh* – where is God – in the liturgy of Shabbat, when we paraphrase the text in Isaiah and say, ‘*Ayeh mekom kevodo?* – God, where is the place of your involvement in the world?’⁸ Just as *ullai* has become our indicator of deep uncertainty in biblical text, so can *ayeh* be seen as the code word for the deepest questioning of the justice of God.

Ten Sefirot

An early Kabbalistic text, *Bahir*, declares that there are ten levels which link the world of the Divine with the world of man. Each one of these ten levels of Divine presence represents another dimension of God in our world. They are referred to as the Ten *Sefirot*. When we perform a commandment, says Luria, we participate in one of these levels of the Divine.

Indeed, the mystical writers point out that the word *Mitzvah* has more than one meaning. Simply of course, it means commandment. The human, in doing a *mitzvah*, is thus seen as responding to a Divine command which comes from outside the human being.

There is however a second sense of the word *Mitzvah*. It means *Tzavtah* – to be together with. When one performs a *mitzvah*, one literally merges with Divinity.⁹ One is together with God. Each *Mitzvah*, in the mystical understanding, moves me toward merger with a different *Sefira*, a different level of Divinity. However, says Luria, we are only able to participate in the lowest seven levels. The human being, trapped in mortality, can never touch the highest three levels of Divinity in this world. And yet one word can reach the heights. *Ayeh*.

⁸ Efraim Orbach, in his masterful work, *Thoughts and Opinions of the Sages*, points out that the words ‘Divine dignity’ in biblical literature always speak of God’s involvement in the world. Efraim Orbach, *Emunot Vede’ot Shel Chazal*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press Jerusalem, 1978).

⁹ See Gafni, *Uncertainty* [Unpublished], for wider perspective on this etymology.

Ayeh in Hebrew has three letters, *alef*, *yod*, *hey*. *Alef*, says Luria, is the letter that represents *Keter* – the Divine crown,¹⁰ the highest *sefirah* – level of Divinity in the world. *Yod* represents *Chochmah* – wisdom, the second highest level. And *Hey* is *Binah* – intuitive understanding, the third highest level. When the human being cries out to God in uncertainty – *ayeh* – he expresses the highest three levels of Divinity and in so doing reaches beyond his mortal limits to touch ‘the highest.’ Luria affirms that the expression of uncertainty in God does not contradict spirituality, but rather is the highest expression of the human search for Divine connection.

Ayeh – where are you – the ultimate uncertainty – is then the highest level of religious authenticity!¹¹

Part 3

‘The Shechinah which is called I’ (Zohar....)

The implication of this kabalistic strain of thought needs to be unpacked more fully. One of the core ideas in the Lurianic understanding of the religious act is the need to identify with the pain of the *Shechinah* in exile. According to the talmudic masters,¹² the Divine presence – the *Shechinah* – is exiled with the Jewish people.

¹⁰ R. Nachman’s Torah on *Ayeh* emerges out of the Lurianic tradition – thus he similarly identifies *Ayeh* with *Keter* – the highest *sefira* in the hierarchy of Divine emanations.

¹¹ The *Ayeh* Genre both in Genesis and throughout the biblical corpus indicates a profound challenge to the entire system that is being addressed. When the Angels ask Abraham for Sarah – *Ayeh* – Where is your wife? – they are suggesting to him that there is something fundamentally wrong with the way he views his wife. She has become invisible- Abraham sees only Hagar. Sarah is in the tent hidden from his view. Only when Abraham is able to see Sarah again – after giving up the false dream of Hagar and Ishmael – can the story be successfully completed.

When the People of Sodom challenge Lot saying *Ayeh* – where are the men you brought into your home – they reveal a xenophobia which will ultimately destroy them. The stranger threatens them in the most primal of ways. Finally, when Judah sends his friend to collect his symbols of identity, which he has given to the prostitute by the way, and she is not there – the friend – speaking in a literary sense for Judah – cries out ‘Where is the prostitute?’ He understands that Judah’s inability to recover his symbols of identity threatens Judah’s essential destiny. See chapter three, volume one, *Certainty* – ‘Judah earns himself’ for expansion of this theme.

¹² See Meir Ayyal in his excellent article ‘The god who suffers in the suffering of Israel’ for a treatment of the rabbinical roots of this idea.

In one of the most daring affirmations of Divine intimacy, the Talmudic teachers and later the kabalistic masters insist that the transcendent God of the Bible becomes incarnate in the suffering of the Jewish people (and I would add, of all people¹³).

Indeed, the actual term for *Shechinah* in many kabalistic sources is *keneset yisrael* – the community of Israel. The community per se is an embodiment of the Divine. This identification achieves its most extreme form when God is described as suffering the pain of the people. Emerging from the verse in Isaiah, ‘In all your pain – he is in pain,’ the mystical writers develop at great length the very powerful notion that God suffers together with every person in pain. For the mystic, there may be much quiet desperation in the world but there is no lonely desperation. And being ‘with’ is always the beginning of redemption. One mystical writer turns God’s Infinity – which is understood by the medieval rationalists as being the expression of Divine perfection – on its head and talks not about Infinite Power but of Infinite Divine Pathos, intimacy and love. God loves us so much that when we suffer, he experiences our pain – infinitely. This explains why God is hidden in the world. For if God’s infinite

¹³ Clearly the kabbalistic masters talked in terms of the Jewish people. I believe that is because mystical vision emerges from one’s own existential-historical experience. For example, Christian mystics always see Jesus, Jewish mystics always see a feminine image of Shechinah or some other Jewish image...Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu mystics all vision from their tradition. As Steven Katz’s writes correctly about mystical vision, ‘There are NO pure (i.e. – unmediated) experiences.’ *Language, Epistemology and Mysticism* (published in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, Oxford 1978).

That a community set apart and despised and massacred will not experience Shechinah incarnate in the universal community of believers is not surprising. Indeed, it is the strong universalistic strain in Jewish thought from the Bible through Talmudic Medieval and Modern literature which is so amazing. The point, however, goes deeper still. I would suggest that existential posture of the mystic reflects not only psychology but ontology. Put simply, that means that the mystic was unable to experience the Shechinah universally in the community of the committed because there was no universal community of the committed for the Shechinah to dwell in. ‘Through my flesh I vision G-d.’ teaches Job. We explained at the beginning of our study that ‘my flesh’ for the Hasidic masters reinterpreting Job, is a code word for my existential personal reality as the prism which refracts divinity in my mystical vision. For a pre-modern Jewish mystic, ‘my flesh’ is not only, but absolutely cannot exclude, my unique and particular national spiritual community. When the way we think and feel God changes then God changes, at least the God of our perception, which is all we can refer to in using the word God. In other words, when were able to vision historically and existentially a true universal community of the spirit, then Shechinah (in all of her guises) indeed dwells in that community.

pain were to be revealed – if one Divine tear were to fall – it would surely destroy the world in an instant.¹⁴

God is not only the Infinity of Power but the Infinity of Intimacy.

This notion of Divine intimacy – together with a combination of two major ideas – one from Cordevero's and the other from Luria's Kabbalah – need to be transformed into a mandate for human spiritual activism. Luria teaches that a major *raison d'être* for the performance of *Mitzvah* is to participate in the pain of the *Shechinah* in exile. When I perform a ritual act, says Luria, I am engaging in far more than the fulfillment of a Divine command – I am rather empathetically identifying with the *Shechinah* in exile. Through this identification I contribute to her redemption.

This idea brings us full circle. The human being suffers. God abandons the heavens, risking his transcendence in order to create intimacy with the sufferer by fully participating in her pain. Even for God there is no intimacy without risk.

Yet intimacy demands response. We are called on to participate with God in her pain. As we discussed earlier, the act of *Mitzvah* is interpreted by Luria as a sort of *participation mystique*. For example, when we give charity it is not only an act of social justice. It is a movement of redemption – namely the redemption of the *Shechinah* (who is called 'the poor one') from her exile. According to Jewish Law,¹⁵ the dispenser of charity to the poor is commanded not only to give charity but to empathize with the pain of the poor person. According to Luria we experience the pain of the poor one on two levels, the actual poor person and the *Shechinah* who is called the poor one. God's

¹⁴ See *Aish Kodesh, The Holy Fire*, by Kalonymos Kalman Shapiro of Piacezna, written by the author, a Hasidic master, in the Warsaw ghetto shortly before he was deported and killed in Treblinka in 1943. See the final chapter of my friend, Nechamaya Pollens excellent doctoral dissertation, *The Holy Fire*, Aaronson.

¹⁵ Shulchan Aruch code of Jewish law – sec. yoreh deah 249.

redemption, according to Luria, takes place through our participating in God's pain.

Cordevero, in his classic work, the *Palm of Devorah*, teaches that *Imitatio Dei* – the imitation of God – applies to all God's revealed characteristics.

All theology – i.e. knowledge about God – is a challenge to imitate, to be like God.¹⁶ Therefore the knowledge of God's ways passed down by the spiritual visionaries of the generations – that God emerges out of herself to participate in human suffering – demands that we imitate God. Just as God merges *infinity into finitude* by participating in human suffering, so do we merge *finitude into infinity* by participating in Divine suffering.

How do we accomplish this? Clearly in the same way that God does – by participating in the pain of the other. Divine suffering is human suffering. We meet God in the pain of the other. God participates in the pain of suffering human beings. If we are challenged to imitate God by participating in Divine suffering, then we meet the challenge by feeling the pain of other. Human beings meet God in pain – not, however, in our own pain – but in our ability to expand the narrow boundaries of self and fully identify with and experience the pain of other.

God's Emotions

To go one step further – God feels the pain of the sufferer through the agency of human beings who feel the pain of other. God feels not only, but also, through human agency. We are God's emotions.

Based on this understanding a number of mystical writers provide us with the vocabulary to re-think the idea of God's Kingship. It was with this quandary

¹⁶ For a fuller treatment of *Imitatio Dei*, see ...the *Ullai* stories in Gafni, *Uncertainty*.

that I introduced the problematics of God-language in a world that suffers. How can we call God King?¹⁷

Borrowing a text from the *Songs of Songs*¹⁸ early Chassidic¹⁹ writers describe God as a 'King bound in chains.' God may be King but he is bound – waiting to be redeemed. The image of a King bound in chains refers to the *Shechinah* in exile.

In light of this tradition, we can now understand the ostensible proclamation of God's Kingship – *Hamelech* – which begins the morning prayer service of the Jewish high holy days. If it is interpreted simply as a declaration of God's kingship, then it is profoundly difficult to understand. For, as we noted at the beginning of our discussion, King means more than just relationship. Kingship is an expression of control. Kings rule overtly. They are not hidden. Kings decree and the decrees are obviously implemented. If God is King and his desire is for Good (God = Good)²⁰ then it is difficult to understand how we can declare God's kingship in a world ravaged by distended stomachs and unparalleled brutality. If God loves truth, and truth means that our theological language needs to be true to our experience of God in this world,²¹ then we cannot yet declare God to be King.²²

Indeed, I believe that the cry of *Hamelech* at the beginning of the Liturgy is not a declaration by the human being of God's Kingship.

It is far more profound. It is a human cry pleading with God to be King.

¹⁷ This is the question with which we opened the chapter.

¹⁸ Chapter 6:8.

¹⁹ See early teachers of the *Chabad* school for whom this textual fragment is a recurrent refrain, particularly see the writings of the *Chabad* school in interpretation of *Rosh Hashanah*.

²⁰ See for example Luzatto. In chapter 2 of his mystical handbook, *The Way of God*, where he declares that the purpose of creation is to allow God to express Divine goodness.

²¹ Ibid. *yoma* 69b.

²² It would seem that the prophet Zechariah agrees with this idea when he says, 'And God will be king over the entire land' – the implication being that in some sense God is not yet King.

‘God, cries out the human being, ‘reveal yourself as King!’ It is a plea for the redemption of world. Deeper still, it is a human plea for the redemption of God.

Echoing in *Hamelech*, however, is a second voice of overwhelming power.²³ *Hamelech* is the cry of *Shechinah*, of God, re-sounding through the mouths of human beings.²⁴ The *Shechinah* cries out to the assembled congregation – ‘Please, I beg of you, Let me be King...I am caught, bound In chains, free me...redeem me!’

God’s Language

The Zohar writes that the *Shechinah* is called ‘I.’²⁵ This is a particularly dramatic way of expressing the idea that the *Shechinah* speaks through the human voice. This means that whenever a person finds their voice on the deepest level, they are finding the voice of the *Shechinah*. The human cry to God ‘Please be King’ is also God crying out through the same voice, ‘Please I am trapped- bound in chains – free me and let me be King.’ God’s voice and our voice are one. The language of God is man.

²³ The second possibility which I believe is conceptually implicit in a long tradition of mystical sources beginning with the Zohar for example (va’era 25b, ‘When Moses came, the voice came’), through the Hasidic masters (see for example, Nahum of Chernobyl, *Me’or Anayim*, first essay on Leviticus, see also Netivot Shalom, section on Passover, essay 7) and culminating in Abraham Kook (see *Orot Hakodesh, Lights of Holiness*, 3:140, ‘I, I am the Lord your God.’) There is an understanding that the membrane separating the voice of God and man is permeable at best.

²⁴ The notion of the *Shechinah* speaking through the mouths of human beings has a long history In Jewish sources. It is taken as given in the *Talmud* and is one of the explanations offered for how God could be considered the author of sections of the *Torah* which would appear to be of mosaic origin. The language used to explain this paradoxical anomaly is, ‘*Shechinah Medaberet Metoch Gronon shel Moshe.*’ This can be understood in one of two primary ways. Moses as a human being is fully absent – God takes over and the key phrase is *Shechinah Medabert*. The second possibility, which upon researching the issue, I found to be the approach of many Kabbalistic and Hasidic authors, assumes that the key part of the expression is ‘*Metoch Gerono shel Moshe.*’ In this understanding, it is the unique spiritual proclivity of Moses which allows him to be the channel for the *Shechinah*. According to these authors, the rule of ‘*Shechinah medabertet*’ is not limited to Moses. Indeed, they apply it to figures throughout history up to and including Hasidic masters. See also the Zohar’s explanation of *Hillel* the Elder’s statement, ‘If I am here, all are here’ The Hebrew word for I is *Ani* on which the Zohar comments ‘*Shechinta deikra ‘ani*’ – the *Shechinah* which is called I (Zohar Vol. One 261b). The context of the *Mishnah* in *Sukkah* is a discussion of the ecstasy of the ceremony of water-drawing. In an ecstatic state, the human being can access and express the *Shechinah* that resides within.

²⁵ See *Tikuni Zohar* 469.

Precisely the same spiritual dynamic is at play when the human being cries out in question, in protest and even in rage against the evil and suffering that so defines our reality. *The question is not against God. The question Is God.* God is speaking through his creatures. The cry of question is the *Shechinah* in exile crying out for redemption. Our question, rage, and protest are our 'participation in' and 'expression of' the cry of the *Shechinah*.

We allow God's voice to resound in ours when we refuse to accept facile solutions to the great question of human suffering and instead cry out in protest and anger. This is the deepest meaning of the Zohar's declaration – 'the *Shechinah* which is called I.' God's voice and the human voice merge into one. Our protest is God's protest. Our rage is Divine rage. In some mysterious sense, our question is God's question.

Now we can finally understand the hidden implication of a seemingly straightforward teaching in the Zohar.²⁶ The teaching – 'When texts refer to God as the King – *Hamelech* – reference is being made to the upper three sefirot.' At first blush this is a typical *Zoharic* statement which identifies each Biblical name of God with a different *sefirah* or set of *sefirot*. That is, until we remember what Luria taught us – that the word *Ayeh*, *where*, as in 'where is God,' also refers to the upper three *Sefirot*. Then we have to add our understanding, based on a close reading of mystical sources, that the cry '*Hamelech*' is the merging of the human and Divine voice in a plea for redemption.

I would suggest that Luria's source for the poignant cry of *Ayeh* as the three upper *sefirot* is indeed this *Zoharic* teaching about *Hamelech*. The Zohar, far from being innocent, supports our radical understanding of *Hamelech* of the High Holy Days' liturgy as being not a statement but rather a question, a plea – *God, Hamelech, where are you, Ayeh?*

²⁶ See Zohar 1:229, Zohar Chadash 45d, Ohr Haganuz on Sefer Bair 9, 16, 24, 37 and Pardes Rimonim 23: 13.

This means that God's title itself, *Hamelech*, expresses not only certainty, but also the question. This last radical notion can be sourced in bold relief in a *Zoharic* teaching on *Genesis*. There the mystical text points out that the Divine name *Elohim* – is made up of two distinct Hebrew words – *Eleh* and *Mee* (*Eloh-eem*). The first three letters spell 'eleh' – which means 'this,' and the last two letters spell 'Mee' – which means 'who.' 'Eleh – this,' indicates knowledge and clarity, while 'Mee – who' is a question, expressing the uncertainty rooted in the Divine name Itself.²⁷ The Divine dances between the Judah Moment of certainty and the Israel Moment of question...And we dance along with it.

Part 4

Anger and Intimacy: On Secrets

In God's name is uncertainty. That this is true is mystery and mystery is esoteric – it is secret. Secret not because, as it is usually explained, it is forbidden to reveal the mysteries to the uninitiated – rather secret because it is not possible to reveal the mysteries.²⁸ For if the soul is not ready to receive the mystery then the secret cannot be transmitted. The holy energy of uncertainty is in the realm of mystery. I cannot fully explain. Yet two guidelines for those who would struggle to understand are in order.

The Rebbe of Kutzk teaches about the old man and the young baby. They both ask the same questions. How, When, What, Where – *Ayeh?*

Yet though the words are the same, worlds of wisdom separate them. For the baby asked his question and received an answer. That answer lead to him ask the same questions again – only at a higher level. He received answers – which in turn created a new set of questions – the same as before and yet so

²⁷ What I would argue is an existential recasting of this passage of the *Zohar*. See Joseph Soloveichik in 'Lonely Man of Faith.' Like the Zohar, he distinguishes between the What question and the Who question. His reading of the Who question is not far from R. Nachman's *Ayeh* question.

²⁸ See *Eish Kodesh* of R. Schapira of Piacezna for this explanation of *Sod*-secret; my *Chevruta* Ohad tells me that a similar understanding of *Sod* appears in R. Tzadok.

much higher. And this process repeated itself through the years until the little baby was an old man. At the end of his life the old man asks, How – when – what – who – where – *Ayeh?*

In every question there are a thousand answers. Every uncertainty embraces a thousand certainties. The uncertainty is the highest expression of all the certainties and...beyond. This is what the old man finally understood.²⁹

What does the old man know as he formulates the uncertainty of the end? He knows that he is uncertain. He knows also that no lower certainty can contain his soul. Only uncertainty can sing the praises of his God. It is a song of relationship. For uncertainty is about loving. Loving means to care enough to be uncertain.

At this point, the Yehuda moment of core certainty merges with the Israel moment of uncertainty.

The affirmation of the question comes from a profound affirmation of core certainty of self. Specifically, we affirm the dignity and validity of our rage. We recognize that the rage is indeed holy as it wells from the deepest recesses of our being. We refuse to invalidate our core certainty of self. We refuse to deny the holiness of our moral intuitions. We embrace the sanctity of our ethical knowing. We are capable of calling evil by its name. We do not need to deny self by refusing to identify evil by its name – because somehow that would damage faith principles – which are not of ourselves. We refuse to deny our

²⁹ The beyond is of God – for God – from the perspective of humanity is – uncertainty. The medieval adage attributed to Ibn Gabirol says: ‘If I knew him, I would be him.’ We don’t know God. To know God, is to know his unknowability. True – we talk about God all the time, as if we knew him. That however is because God contracts his essence – herself – to make herself known to us. That *tzimtzum* is the source of all our certainties about God. Certainties describe the contracted God. Yet all of us yearn to walk in the wide places. In the words of psalmist ‘my soul craves for the expanses’ express our innermost yearning. In the wide places however, there are no narrow certainties. In the expanse of the soul there is only uncertainty. Gods highest revelation in the Kabbalistic teaching is that of *Keter* – the crown. *Keter* is called the unknowable. It is uncertainty in Divine personification. The highest level is to know the unknowable – not through knowledge for that is not – but through uncertainty.

rage. We understand that at the deepest place our anger is God. It is holy anger.³⁰

The inner voice which refuses to accept the cruel certainties of the theological answers to why bad things happen to Good people – is indeed the voice of God. The ultimate paradox – the core certainty of self allows us to hold the holiness of radical uncertainty in the face of evil. And at the same time – radical rage in the face of evil affirms our core certainty about the Divine – in the world and most importantly – in ourselves.

This is the certainty of the Yehuda moment. This is the teaching of the Book of Job – which we have unpacked throughout the book – ‘through my flesh – I see God’ (Job 19).

In post-renaissance mystical teaching, particularly in the works of the Chassidic masters, this means that my core sense of self is real and it needs to be taken seriously. Forced theological constructs should never be allowed to overwhelm my primal intuitions.

Part 5

There Is a Spirit in Man

One of the most striking formulations of the Yehuda moment in *Chassidut* is the movements founder, the *Baal Shem Tov*’s teaching on a verse in the Book of Job. The verse in Job reads ‘There is a spirit in man – the breath of God – gives wisdom.’

These words, which appear towards the end of the book are spoken by Elihu in rejection of the ‘punishment for sin’ theodicy offered as a certainty by Job’s

³⁰ See *Tractate Taanit* 4a on the holy anger of the Rabbis. *Rava* said – when a young scholar becomes angry – it is the Torah which is causing him to be angry.

friends. The Baal Shem Tov interprets the verse. 'The breath of God is the spirit of man.'³¹

This is the intent of the prophet-poet writing in the sixth century before the common era. Jeremiah is describing redemption when he writes:

This shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel in the ultimate days...I will give my Torah through their inner selves, I will write it in their hearts...and no more will a man teach his neighbor and every man his brother; saying 'Know God,' for they shall all know me from the least of them to the most of them. (Jeremiah 31:32-3)

Indeed R. Kuk – philosopher-mystic of the early twentieth century whose writings we have had occasion to visit – in his spiritual journal, 'Mists of Purity,' published after his death – refers to the Jeremiah text in precisely this manner. No longer, he writes, will sources of spiritual authority and knowledge be outside of ourselves. Certainty is not taught. It rather comes from the inner certainty of the spirit which is the sacred birthright of every person. The passage from R. Kuk is too beautiful to relegate to a footnote.³²

*Anything that enters the soul
from the outflow of a sister soul
even though beneficial in some aspect,
for in the end the receiving soul acquires some knowledge,
or sometimes a good or useful feeling
at the same time it also damages her
in that it mixes in an alien element into her essence.
And the world cannot come together in wholeness
except through a stance of negation of the alien influence:*

³¹ His basis for interpretation: In Hebrew the word for breath is 'Nishmat' also meaning *soul*. Thus...their soul is the soul of God. It therefore is the source of all wisdom. In the formulation oft cited in Chssidic literature 'the soul of a person is his teacher.'

³² The *Lights of Holiness* 1:85; *Mists of Purity*, 61.

*'No longer will man teach his fellow
or a man teach his brother, saying: 'Know God.'
For all will know Me, from the smallest among them to the greatest.'
With regard to each individual,
the process that negates alien influence,
even though it seems to take destructive form,
this very collapse
is what leads to the most lasting and perfected structure.*

*And this is the only gateway to the World to Come,
for the Holy One Blessed be He makes a separate Eden
for each individual:
'Your Eden' is not written, rather 'Your Edens.'*

*The communal consciousness of the Nation
to guard against alien influences
is the essence of its revival.
It penetrates as individual agitation
which generates destruction,
makes revolutions
and builds new worlds,
everlasting and shining.*

This is the Yehuda moment – this is core certainty which allows us to hold the light of our uncertainty – without the vessels shattering.³³

³³ This Idea has important spiritual implications in modernity. The Rebbe of Satmar, whose radical anti-Zionism is repudiated by virtually every other stream in the Orthodox world, was asked how he was able to maintain his own position. He answered with a creative understanding of a verse in the book of Judges. "For there is no King in Israel – thus each man does what is straight in his eyes." Kingship – explains the Rebbe, citing a well-known talmudic passage - 'who are the kings, the rabbis' - is also a reference to rabbinical authority. Today therefore – since we have no great rabbis – each person must follow their heart. While I take issue the murmuring of the Rebbe's heart, I agree with his principle, i.e. that in modernity our internal spiritual intuitions are our most important compass. This idea received its pristine formulation in the thought of R. Kook. He explains that the reason he often does not quote sources for his ideas – is because truth needs no source. The source is the texts of our heart.

Three Truths

We began with three truths. God is good. God is powerful. Good people suffer. These are the three truths of Job. We hold all three. We can live in the deep and painful uncertainty of not always knowing how all three fit together. Those unable to hold the uncertainty emasculate God. This is Kushner's basic move. God can't do anything about evil – God is nice but not powerful.

Others unable to hold the uncertainty emasculate man. That is Gottlieb's move. He has theologically solved the problem of suffering. He denies the rage, the protest, the unanswered question which defines Jewish text. He cannot live with the uncertainty of the question, so he must argue that certainty has been achieved and the question answered.

Did He Blow Out the Candles?

It was late one Friday night, with the Sabbath candles flickering in the darkness, when the Rebbe stood up. He had been especially pensive this night: wrapped in thoughts and prayers of his own. He walked purposefully to the table, spat on his hands and according to one version of the story snuffed out the Sabbath candles. In the sudden darkness, the shocked Chassidim heard the cold fury and despair in their Rebbe's voice, resounding in the gloom as he intoned: 'There is no Judge, and there is no Judgment.'

Rebbe Menachem-Mendel of Kotsk then walked out of the synagogue, locked himself in his room, and never came out. For over twenty years until his death he remained in isolation and spoke not another word. But his Chassidim did not reject him as a blasphemer, nor a madman. In his silent solitary rage, the Rebbe of Kotsk became more respected, more loved than ever before, as the Kotsker Chassidic tradition flourished in all its contradictions.

Somehow the Chassidim understood that ultimate doubt, ultimate challenge, when conducted from within deep relationship, paradoxically can become the ultimate service, the ultimate worship, the ultimate intimacy.

To be close to God, to be intimate with God, to be Intimate with Self is to protest, to cry out even against God. Evil itself is a failure of intimacy. To heal evil, we must restore intimacy. The first step in restoring intimacy is to protest – even against God.

The second step is to be God – to be God incarnate in human form – and act for and as God. To act for and as God and participate in the evolution of intimacy in which no one is left out of the circle. For the only enlightenment is Intimacy with All Things, All Life, and All People.