

THE PATH OF YEARNING

Marc Gafni

THE MASTER LEVI ISAAC OF BERDICHEV RISES.

He wants to explain to his disciples not the wonder of creation or the mystery of the chariot, but the path of yearning. It is the time of the third Shabbat meal, *Seudah Shlishit*. Chassidim gather with the Rebbe as the last rays of the sun set on Saturday afternoon.

He begins his discourse with an elegant teaching from the Talmud demonstrating the reality of God. “Do you understand?” he queries.

“No,” they answer, heads hanging.

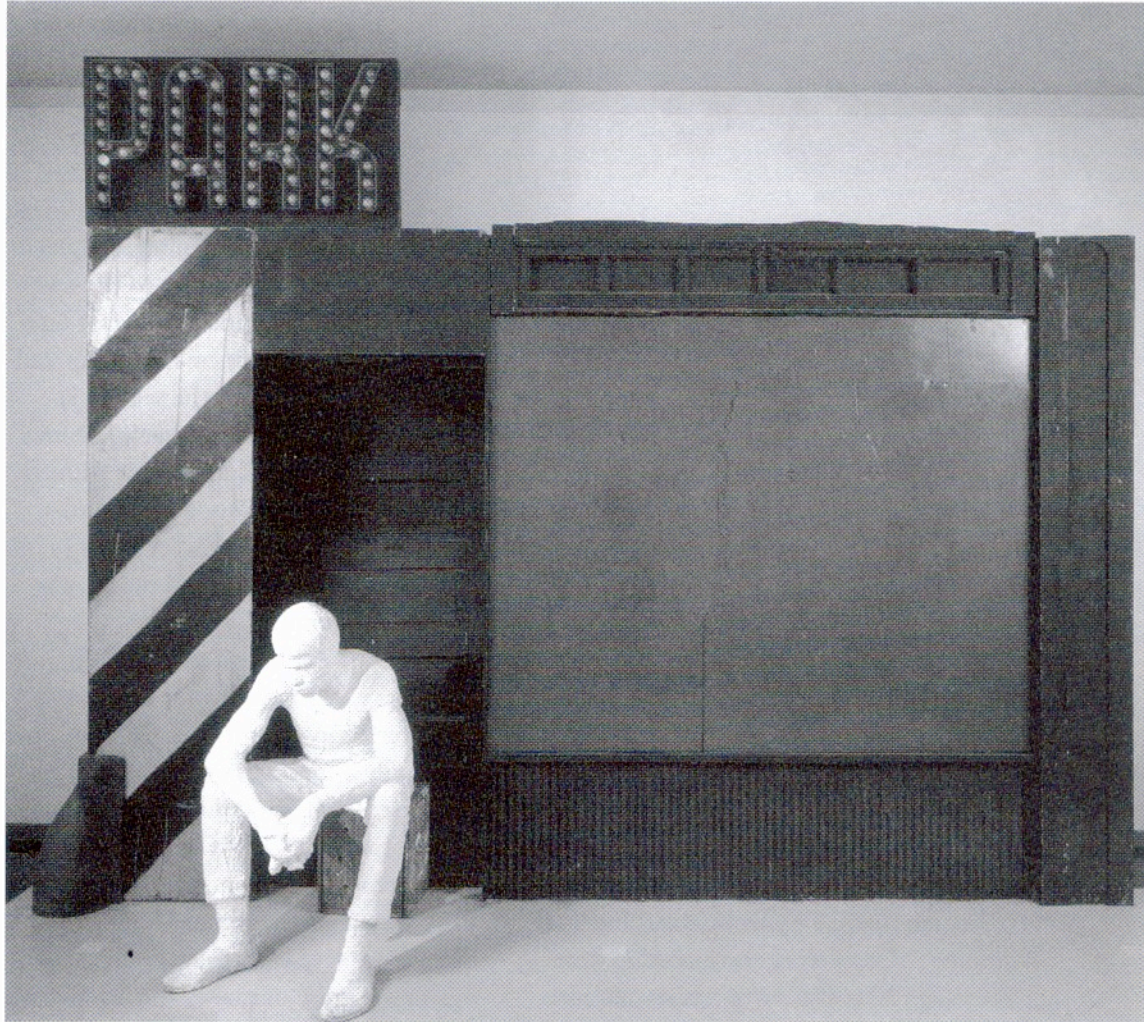
He then takes them on a dance of light intricately weaving the mysteries of the Zohar, illuminating God’s presence in the world.

“Do you understand?” “No,” they answer, heads hanging.

In desperation, he begins to tell tales revealing great mysteries. He looks around and sees the room is filled with the glow of dusk. It is the time of uncertainty, of *bein hashmashot*, the time between the clarities of sunlight.

“Now do you understand?” “No,” they answer, heads still hanging.

He becomes quiet. A melody emerges and fills the room and for a few moments he sings alone. A haunting tune, every breath a ripple in an ocean of yearning, pining, long-



GEORGE SEGAL (1924–2000)

"THE PARKING GARAGE" 1968. PLASTER, WOOD, LIGHTBULBS

ing for intimacy with God. Heads begin to rise, and slowly the room is filled with voices until they became one voice.

Each voice yearning, pining, longing.

It was then dark, and the song ended. The Rebbe did not need to ask.

They understood.

the path to self and therefore to the divine is through our *chisaron*, our deficiency. *Chisaron* according to the Ishbitzer means an emptiness, a lack. He teaches that all unredeemed passion is but an expression of a deeper desire unfulfilled. Just as astronomers look for unusual interference to discover the

black hole they cannot see, so too will distortions and lies lead to the gaping darkness of one's own emptiness. In the Ishbitzer's sacred teaching, however, it is precisely that emptiness, and the yearning it engenders, that leads to the deeper emptiness. The first kind of emptiness is vacuous and desperate; the second is empty of all that is vacuous and desperate; it is ultimate fullness and fulfillment.

Let's consider a text in Genesis: "And the pit was empty. It had no water."

Asks the Talmud: "If it

was empty, is it not obvious that it had no water? Why does the text add on seemingly unnecessary details?" The response: "Water it didn't have: snakes and scorpions it did." The point is that if I am empty of water—the symbol of Plato's eros, life, goodness, and vitality—then in its place will always come pathology in the guise of snakes and scorpions. Neither the psychological nor spiritual worlds allow for a vacuum. If one does not follow the yearning home to sacred eros then all forms of pseudo eros will come to nest tragically in one's life. If one does not live in the sacred emptiness then one will live in the superficial and destructive emptiness of snakes and scorpions.



MACCABEAN TERRACOTTA OIL LAMP
C. 200 BCE, JERUSALEM

DURING THE THIRD MEAL OF THE SHABBAT, the Chassidim sing "Beloved of my Soul," evoking the soul's quest to come home: "Let me run like a gazelle, yearning and pining." Every week the haunting tune of Psalm 23 is also sung, which declares: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I fear no evil." In the valley of the shadow of death I have not found the certainty of God: I am not bathed in the glorious light of certainty. It is in the longing, the pain of the lack of God, that God is found.

Morechai Lainer, known more popularly as the Ishbitzer Rebbe, writes that

All longing at its deepest level is a longing for the divine. No matter what we think we need, irrespective of who we think we are kneeling before, in the deepest place we are really on our knees to God. The Chassidim pine for the *Shekhina*, for the divine presence. In that yearning we find ourselves, recapturing our core certainty of being.

Biblical consciousness celebrates this lack and yearning. After persuading Eve to eat the apple in the Garden of Eden, the snake is cursed by God: "On your belly you shall crawl and dust shall you eat all the days of your life" (Genesis 3:14). A strange punishment, when we think about it. If dust or earth is what the snake is to eat as his source of nourishment, and he has to crawl on his belly with his mouth dragging in the mud, then it would seem that the snake has an infinite supply of what he needs to sustain him. Is this a curse? "Yes," says Kabbalistic master Menachem Mendel of Kotsk, "this is the most terrible curse: if everything I need is instantly available or easily accessible, then there is nothing for which I yearn." And yearning is the bridge to myself and to God.

TO YEARN FOR SOMEONE is to feel their lack: to yearn for another is not an expression of one's own deficiency but of one's own glimmerings of enlightenment. For in acknowledging that I miss someone or that I long for them, I am acknowledging that I am larger than I had at first thought. I realize my heart is wider and incorporates many other dimensions of reality, for which, if they were to disappear, I would yearn. When I miss someone, that melancholy tug at my heart indicates to me that I have incorporated this person's presence to such an extent that I feel incomplete without them.

Sometimes the only way we can truly judge the importance of someone in our lives is to be without them: in their absence their emotional presence can be appreciated more clearly. This is the Kabbalistic secret of presence in absence.

"I see God from afar!" exclaims the prophet Jeremiah. When the divine

WE ALLOW OURSELVES TO STEP INTO THE FULL EXPERIENCE OF THE SEPARATION.

WE ALLOW OURSELVES TO FEEL THE GREAT DISTANCE BETWEEN OURSELVES AND THE FULLNESS OF DIVINE REALITY... WE ALLOW OURSELVES TO STAY IN THE EMPTINESS AND TO FEEL OUR PAIN.

becomes a distant memory, we begin to remember. Only when I feel the absence of God does God become fully present. When my heart pines for a god who seems absent, the paradox of presence in absence collapses the distance into the most palpable and immediate presence.

THERE IS SOMETHING LURKING IN OUR SOULS. It fills us with awe even as it fills us with terror. It strips away all of our pretenses even as it whispers to our greatness. It is the inconsolable longing that beats in the breast of every human, burning sometimes bright and often dim in the recesses of the heart. It is the knowledge that ultimately this world with all of its dignity and majesty can never satisfy our ultimate longings. We possess a noble nostalgia for a reality that our conscious selves cannot describe and the cognitive mind cannot define. But we know with all of our being that it is there.

We might call it beauty. But it is not beauty. It is rather a more primal and basic memory that beauty stirs in our being. Wordsworth, followed by a host of contemporary doctors of the soul, identified it with moments of safety, acceptance, and full embrace hidden in the memory of our past. But it is not that either. If we would go back to those

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moments, we would see that they themselves are but glimmering of a more fundamental experience: a shard of a shattered vessel whose hidden sparks seek to be uplifted and absorbed into the one even as they retain their sacred separate identity. "As the gazelle yearns after the stream of clear water so does my soul long after you my God."

A CHILD TAKES A KITE TO A DISTANT HILL and sets it flying high in the sky. The child gazes at the kite, holding its string tight in his hand, and as the weather cools and clouds move in, the bright colored kite is hidden by the darkening sky. Still the child clutches tight to the string of his kite above the clouds.

Eventually the child grows older and hands the kite on to his child, who after many years passes the kite to his child, and he in turn to his.

One day a man approaches a boy holding tight to a string that reaches to the stormy clouds, and he asks, "Boy,

what are you doing?"

The child replies, "I am flying a kite."

Says the man:, "What do you mean, you are flying a kite? Have you ever seen it? I believe you are simply holding a string to make sure the clouds will not blow away."

Replies the boy calmly, "No, I am flying a kite."

The man: "How do you know there is a kite?"

And the boy says gently, "I know there is a kite because I can feel the tug. Do you understand, sir? I can feel the tug."

The certainty of yearning is to feel the tug. When nothing else is clear, and all that we hold dear is hidden from the eye, nonetheless we can feel the tug. In the core certainty of my yearning I am on my way home to my highest self and to God.

IN THE WORLD OF CHASSIDUT, all service begins with longing. But the Chassidim understood the great mystery of longing: that in relationship to God and to the God within, longing at some point collapses into union. One of the mystical techniques which I have tried to reclaim from the ancient sources that expressed this reality is crying. Crying, which acknowledges the chasm of separation and distance between ordinary consciousness and the realization of source. However, when we enter the distance deeply enough it always gives way to intimacy. Separation and alienation from within themselves become union and embrace.

We begin with longing. We give expression to that yearning in tears. Ultimately, the promise of divinity is that the crying of longing will become the crying of union. The transformation of the crying of longing to the crying of

union is part of the *Tikkun*, the “fixing” of tears. And this is the very process of redemption itself.

In the Chassidic court of Menachem Mendel of Kotz, teacher of my teacher, Mordechai Lainer of Izbica, at the third Shabbat meal there was a man who would walk behind the disciples to check their eyes. He would reach his hand around their back and touch their cheeks to see if tears were streaming from their eyes. If they were not crying they were asked to leave. This is the crying of longing. A core practice which I do regularly with my students is the intense meditative focus in on songs of yearning and desire. This is a very deep spiritual technique which is very different from the “I am” meditations of Kabbalah and Buddhism.

In this practice we allow ourselves to step into the full experience of the separation. We allow ourselves to feel the great distance between ourselves and the fullness of divine reality. We step fully into our longing for realization, enlightenment, and redemption. We allow ourselves to stay in the emptiness and to feel our pain. Not merely our individual pain, however. Rather we feel the pain of the *Shekhina* in exile. This is called in Kabbalah “the meditation on the pain of the *Shekhina* in exile.”

In Tibetan Buddhism, albeit in an entirely different—nontheistic—context, this is an important part of the Tonglin meditation, in which one breathes in the pain of existence and breathes out infi-

nite light and love. The point of the mystical technique of the crying of yearning, which is core to *Seudah Shlishit* on Shabbat and core to our spiritual practice at Bayit Chadash, is not to stay in the superficial emptiness. Rather, through the longing expressed in the *tear*, we enter the great tear, the rent in the



CHANUKAH LAMP, C.1650, BRONZE, VENETIAN

NOTE TWO DOLPHINS FLANKING THE TOP, INSCRIBED WITH THE BENEDICTION FOR LIGHTING THE MENORAH

Kosmos. But at some point, if we can avoid the temptation for superficial fulfillment and genuinely remain in the emptiness, the superficial emptiness gives way to *Ayin*, to *Sunyatta*, to the deeper emptiness which is empty of anything superficial and filled with the ultimate embrace of fulfillment and love. Crying of yearning gives way to crying of union. The separation itself—in its very depths—is revealed as but another disguise for union. The alienation magically gives way to total and utter merging. ||