

The God of Maybe

By Mordechai Gafni

We need to reclaim uncertainty as a spiritual value.

The paradox of touching God through doubt is fundamental to an understanding of authentic spirituality. True, we talk about God all the time as if we knew him, but that is only because God contracts her essence to make herself known to us. Certainties describe the contracted God, but the absolute certainty which is God before contraction is beyond our reach. "Absolute certainty," mystic philosopher Abraham Kook tells us, "rests in the highest places. It is the God of the future, whose name is certainty and so is his praise."

In Kook's image, borrowed from the Zohar, God is the eternal source of the river of life. Other rivers are fed by this source on high, each one carrying a more "diluted" aspect of God's essence. Each river, each divine channel to the world, is defined according to Kabbalah as a sefirah—a particular stream of divine emanation. The river which reaches into our world is the lowest sefirah: the Shechinah.

Although schematically it is the lowest sefirah, the Shechinah is nevertheless the aspect of divinity which we humans can perceive. Kook points out that in the Zohar the Shechinah is called "nahar ulai—the Maybe River." The dear implication is that the highest form of God accessible to the world is uncertainty. Seen through Kook's eyes, uncertainty is not the absence, but the essence of God.

Chaim Vital, the most central disciple of Isaac Luria in the sixteenth-century school of Safed kabbalists, vainly attempts to move beyond the "maybe" of the Shechinah to pierce the secrets of the ultimate certainty beyond. He calls this ultimate source of divine emanation Radla, an acronym for risha delo yada udelo noda—the point of origin which is not known and cannot be known. Hidden in the obscurity of the higher realms (what the kabbalists referred to as Adam Kadmon, the configuration of divine lights patterned after the human image), Radla stands beyond even the kabbalist's ability to vision the constellation of divine lights. Vital is only able to suggest five different possibilities for the configuration of lights in Radla. The absolute mystical configuration of the ultimate certainty, Vital reluctantly concludes, is beyond our reach.

Moshe Chaim Luzatto, perhaps the most important post-Lurianic mystic philosopher, disagrees. He maintains that the fact that there are differing options for the configuration of Radla does not mean we do not know Radla. Radla is not to be found in one of the five suggestions, he says; Radla is all five suggestions together. According to Luzatto's understanding of Radla, the nature of divine certainty is the place where all possibilities of divine configuration exist in paradoxical unity. Ultimate doubt is our highest certainty.

While it reads like something out of a quantum physicist's handbook, this multiple truth model of Radla in fact has its roots in the study of the Talmud.

Talmud tells us that for three years there was a dispute between two opposing groups of scholars, the house of Shammai and the house of Hillel: "The former asserting, the Halachah [the law] is in agreement with our views, and the latter contending, the Halachah is in agreement with our views." Eventually a declaration issued from Heaven: "The utterances of both are the words of the living God, but the Halachah is in agreement with the ruling of the house of Hillel."

What does the Talmud mean when it says that two opposing viewpoints are "the words of the living God"? How can both be true? One teacher interprets this talmudic passage as making a methodological statement: in effect, there is only one truth, but in the open examination of all views we clarify more deeply that one truth. Through holding to uncertainty for at least a time, we reach a higher certainty.

However, there is a second position, expressed most powerfully by the Ritva, a medieval teacher who comments on this passage. According to the Ritva, "These and these are the words of the living God" is not an expression of methodology. Because we have no means of resolution we are not forced to accord legitimacy to both positions; rather, "these and these" is teaching that both possibilities are true. No one possibility, no one certainty, exhausts the truth. For the Ritva, the Talmud itself is a pool of infinite possibilities, and as such it provides a model for the uncertain multiple truth of the highest form: the absolute uncertainty of God in Radla.

Mordechai Gafni is a rebbe and scholar in Jerusalem. He serves as director of Minad and as the Melitz scholar-in-residence.

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