Spiritual Meaning and Inspiration in Hasidic Teaching

Dr. Eitan Fishbane

The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet (Rabbi Yehuda Leib Alter of Ger), translated and interpreted by Arthur Green

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Dr. Fishbane has been a member of the Seminary faculty since 2006, participating in governance through his service on the Faculty Executive Committee, the Rabbinical School Council, the faculty committees of the Gershon Kekst Graduate School and the Department of Community Engagement, and as advisor for BA and MA concentrators in Jewish Thought. Actively involved in the mentoring of PhD, DHL, rabbinical, and undergraduate students, Dr. Fishbane seeks to integrate advanced scholarship and the cultivation of contemporary spiritual meaning. From 2017-2020, he served as Division Chair for Jewish Mysticism at The Association for Jewish Studies. Before coming to JTS, he served on the faculties of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion and in the Department of Religion at Carleton College.

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"Get you from your land, your birthplace, and your father's house" (Gen. 12:1). The Midrash quotes the verse: "Listen, O daughter; look and give ear. Forget your people and your father's house" (Ps. 45:11). Abraham our Father was a great sage even before this, as the holy Zohar tells us: "God gives wisdom to the wise."

Now surely [each] person was created for a particular purpose. There must be something that we are to set right. A person who achieves that is called righteous (tsaddik), walking a straight path of justice. But Abraham our Father is called a lover of God (ḥasid); he went beyond the line demanded by the law. The one who serves God out of love can arouse a desire within God to let flow the source of his own soul in a way
that cannot be comprehended by the human mind. Thus they interpreted the verse: "Those who fulfill His word to hear the voice of His word" (Ps. 103:20). By properly mending our deeds, we can come to hear more and more. This goes on forever, to go on hearing without end. This openness beyond all limit transcends all other meaning in life, even that of the tsaddik who has found his purpose.

There is a rare union here: the religious life and the creative life turn out to be deeply intertwined. The Sefat Emet says it in a way you might expect of a poet. The ability to hear and to follow, even beyond our capacity to comprehend, opens the inner well and allows the soul to spread forth. The hasid as poet can ask no more than this: to have the inner ear attuned forever, to go on hearing without end. This openness beyond all limit transcends all other meaning in life, even that of the tsaddik who has found his purpose.

In the Midrash: "Listen, O daughter, look and give ear. Forget your people and your father's house" (Ps. 45:11). A tale is told of one who was wandering from place to place and saw a certain castle that was on fire. He said: 'Could it be that this castle has no master?' The owner of the castle looked out at him and said: 'I am owner of the castle.'"

A person is essentially set aright when he forgets the vanities of this world—"Forget your people"—and remembers that he is sent into this world to do God's bidding. This is the meaning of "remember" and "keep" (in the two versions of the Sabbath commandment), referring to the positive and negative commandments.

This is also "remembering" and "forgetting," both of which a person needs to do. When we forget the world's vanities, we are able to remember and attach ourselves to a higher world. Of this the rabbis said: "Whoever is obligated to 'keep' is obligated also to 'remember.'"

The Sabbath, when all Israel cease from labor, is truly a time to forget this world. That is why we merit an extra soul; we remember and are attached to the world to come, for Sabbath is "something like the world to come." This is the meaning of "remember" and "keep" the Sabbath.

But Sabbath is really there to teach us about all the rest of time as well. A person always has to guard these two aspects of "Hear, O daughter" [remember] and "Forget." Abraham was the first one to cast all worldly vanities aside and thus to draw light into the world. Of him Scripture speaks when it asks: "Who caused the sun to shine from the East?" (Is. 41:2).

This is the meaning of the burning castle. This whole world was created only so that its vanities be forgotten and negated; this is the world's true fulfillment, since it is the corridor that leads into the great hall. It is the will of the castle's owner that it be burned and consumed. Thus it is with a candle: the white fire hovers over a black, consuming fire. The more the black fire consumes, the more the white light burns. "Remember" and "keep." This is why we light candles for the Sabbath.

"The Lord your God is a consuming fire." The burning Shabbat candles are here given an almost apocalyptic message: the very purpose of existence is that it be consumed, or restored to its oneness with God. Our task is to "forget" the outer world, to turn only to the Source of the fire that consumes it.
But this reading of Abraham’s burning castle does not suffice for us. We have seen our author’s entire world burned up and consumed in the fires of evil and hatred. For us the master who calls out from the burning castle is also the God we meet when we act to fight that fire, when we do what little we can to save the world from being consumed by evil flames. Here the balance of “remember” and “forget” has to be established in a new way. That is key to our religious task.

[Concerning the same verse and parable:] The human being is called a walker, always having to go from one rung to another. Habit makes things seem natural, and this sense of “nature” hides the inner light. This is true even of Torah and the commandments: when we do them out of habit, they become our nature, and we forget their inward meaning. Therefore we need always to seek out some new counsel.

That is why God “renews, in His goodness, each day, the work of Creation,” so that we not be overpowered by the sense of nature. This is the burning castle, this world of nature, and all that passes through it. Even though all of nature came to be only through the transcendent single point of life, it becomes stamped with the imprint of nature [the ordinary] and all things are thus consumed, as Scripture says [of the cows in Pharaoh’s dream]: “And you couldn’t tell that they had come inside them” [Gen. 36:21]. Therefore, the blessed Holy One renews each day the work of Creation. The person has to search and seek out this renewal, “to watch My doorways each day” [Prov. 8:34].

That is why Scripture first said “Hear, O daughter” and afterwards “and give ear.” Be ready to hear always. And therefore also: “Get you out of your land”—a person should always keep walking. “To [that which] I will show you”—always some new attainment. This is why the person is called a walker. Whoever stands still is not renewed, for nature holds him fast. The angels above are beyond nature, they can be said to “stand” [Is. 6:2]. But the person has to keep walking.

Thank you, Lord, for all that nervous energy. Life as an angel might have been easier—standing still to do Your bidding. But it is our walking, our ever climbing (and sometimes falling!) from rung to rung that makes us human. Despite all the struggle and pain that go along with growing, we wouldn’t have it any other way.

Human beings were sent into this world in order that all places be restored, that holy sparks be drawn forth from everywhere. This is the meaning of all Abraham’s wanderings from one place to another, and then to Egypt. Our sages said that this [descent into Egypt] was preparation for the children of Israel.

Scripture says [of Abraham after his return from Egypt] that he was “very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold” [Gen. 13:1]. These are the many holy sparks he brought out of there. “Silver” and “gold” stand for the love and fear of God, for he came out of there in love and fear. He did it all for the sake of heaven, and so everything was restored.

Silver and gold are not mentioned in the case of Lot; there it just says that “Lot too, who went with Abram, had flocks, herds, and tents” [vs. 5]. This is why Lot came to sin after the journey to Egypt, he did not have the proper fear and love. The same applies to Lot as to the “mixed multitude” that came up out of Egypt with Israel. And of Israel it says: “He brought them forth with silver and gold” [Ps. 105:37]. That is why “none of [Israel’s] tribes stumble” [ibid.]. These holy sparks that have come from the places of evil require careful guarding, lest they afterwards become the cause of stumbling.
Our love and our fear are indeed very precious, and we are very fragile as we bring them to You. They are the true shining sparks of "gold" and "silver" that we can offer up on the altar within our hearts. Ours is a God who wants us whole, with all of our emotions. Holding on to these in order to uplift them does not make the walking easier. The path is a more dangerous one than it would have been if we had left them all behind, but it is a path to greater wholeness.

On the verse, "Walk before Me and be perfect" (Gen. 17:1), the Midrash Tanhumah has Abraham ask: "Until now was I lacking something? And when I circumcise myself will I be more whole?"

An interpretation: this is the true wholeness, when a person diminishes himself in order to be negated unto God, to show that we creatures have no wholeness except that which flows into us from the Creator. This in itself bestows wholeness, here the negation of the thing is its very fulfillment.

That is why the mitsvah of circumcision was assigned to this particular limb, for it is the source of flow and generation. This [sexual and procreative] function is the most essential human power. It is here that there needs to be a sign of recognition that humans on their own are lacking, and that they need the Creator in order to be whole.

Therefore this mitsvah is called berit, or covenant, for it connects the receiver to the Giver, and that is true wholeness. That is why it was given to man [as a task]. The uncircumcised asked: "If circumcision is really so beloved, why was man not created that way?" The answer is that circumcision really does diminish the body, but it has to be undertaken by the person for the sake of [connection with] the Creator. In this way it makes for wholeness. That would not be the case if the person were created that way.

This explanation of circumcision, unlike so many, is offered without a shred of apology or defense. Yes, he recognizes that circumcision is a diminishing of the body. But it is one that we undertake for the sake of God. The organ of sexual union, that which will allow for the making of future generations, is the place where we are told to demonstrate symbolically our awareness that generation comes from God and is carried on for the sake of heaven. Life is a divine gift; circumcision is our way of saying that the new life comes from God, not only from our own act of union.
ךל ל

א

"ךל לקי" במשה (במדבר יב:18). "ךל" הוא מונח ממלכתי שבאה לפני עיר אֵזָד. "ךל" הוא הלחם של "ךלך" (כו"כ אֵזָד) ו"לך" (לך: לפנים דרום). "ךל" הוא מונח ממלכתי שבאה לפני עיר אֵזָד. "ךל" הוא הלחם של "ךלך" (כו"כ אֵזָד) ו"לך" (לך: לפנים דרום).

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ז

והאסמ שנותלת בצלוס הזוח לךملك ולקך כל המקומות, ולהציגה_mock
ה الشريفת הקדושה. והיה לכל הקלכות אברח באינו לחמ
למקום, יאום כל לבריס. כום שמארו๐ (בי"ע: מ"ח) שרית [וריד
מהרי"י] חכמה יין שלראת ובחבר [לעuben אברח ובחבר מפריך],"בכח
מק mysqli הקטן בכסף והב (בראשית ב"כ:ט)." שרית והן ביצות מצודים
משם. "INCLUDEDśniייו, המום לאלה היו, והם את משלי, לו, גנทด שמך.

רסיה (ורהא והבתיה) על שם שאינה, כל גנทด שמך.
בכל או גם כסה וזוה, כי גוסי להחי... היה צאן בוכר והאלים
(שם ה)." כל או לא צאן הנשה ממעיר אליהם עדת חסן, אולם הTextWriter
רסיה כראוי. ייומג נג וכס מתכון במלות בברךapollo גוורי זים (שמע
وصف "הלא"), ובזכיון שארד להם "ייצא Yosemite בכסף והב (תהילת ק"ה:ל)." רכש
 Ecology על שם, כולם יאיבשטיין (יול שארד) לאחר שארד.
השקה שכרモノ הכותב הסופר אבירא וריך🔍 שמריה רבה, עלול להב
 voks שלוחת אחר כל על דיתו. (1:54)

ה

לבדת שנותמל על פיקס "הנהלת בעוד יהודית מבשחת (בראשית י:ז)
אברח, "robe הענה את חסן, וכולם באים צלב יאיה שלשל: כי,"
פורוש: "שמא באחת השיטות, מה שאבדת מצור את עמרנים כדל לרבטל
לחשם תיבר, ולרמאו אלה יאש שלחך, הכר בחפשת החובה. זה
עצר ואותו התונת ולשהלהו ביבר על דור זה הקים.
ולכל נניחת המרצות בברך הארץ, בבר בחפשת והשתדלות של
אותו. זה עקר חמוד האות, וידך להחלש שאר אבות וMixin, כי זה
حسب ומעלם, ומדך לשהלה המזרת זכר...
ולכל内で בחמות, שיאוה אתקורות המקבל את המשמעי, ויהא שלחמה.
ונראה נני, כי זה אלדוע. והכח שלעילם: "אם תבנה המילה, למה לא
נברך מהלה?" כמון שמעון בברך; ייינ שביי"א: התריון: שבאתם
בכמלה זו ממער🔥, כי זו שראדה זהה ההעשות גאות מעבר הבירה,ז
אותו השלחמה. العدو לא שים שונית נברך כל. (1:45)

וירג

אתה "אביום בוחר ולא את הלכות (על פי שומת רבי נ:א:ג)." כי אם
"לא תתן רבי שיחותך עלילם ריגן (פסחים פ:י עב)." kínhו השמעת
כל הברוחים תלך. שיאוה זו בברך של אברח שקונסיניע ע彧י
המקומות שלקח והלכות. כל אנת נני זהה ציידל להומס
( dönüşו בברך)." אברחר הזה מחות עברא אמליאי כי "ברך שדיא
רצות לכל מלכיהן 야ות (מכות י:עב)." רואת בהר ולצד הורך, שמעתי
ListComponent של המילים, ויהא בברך, כי recomendations of the
מקומי קדיסים שניהם מקודם ויונלרים מוהל. ויהא עבדותי, כי