Living with God

How can the eye of a hurricane stay calm amid turbulent winds? It stays focused on the Creator, remembering He created the hurricane for a good reason.



Falling in love with God

If you're dreaming and want to wake up, fall backwards (just to be on the safe side, make sure there's something soft behind you...).

Free-falling in a dream is a good sign. Don't worry, you won't crash, you'll wake up first. God's hand is there to catch you. Fall into it.

Why do we say "to fall in love"? To experience true love one must fall from the heights of one's ego. Egocentricity leaves no room for love.

The English verb *to fall* comes from the Hebrew verb *nafal* (נָפַל) which bears the same meaning. In Hebrew, this word is cognate to the word for wonder, *peleh* (פֶּלֶא). By witnessing wonders in nature and in our lives, we fall in love with our Creator.[1]

God is all and all is God

Chassidim say: "God is all and all is God."[2]

"God is all" means that nothing exists except God. "All is God" means that God's very essence appears in everything. "God is all and all is God" constitutes the Divine soul's "run and return"[3]—its cycle of ascent and descent.

To only run (saying only "God is all") results in nihilism. To do nothing but return (saying only "all is God") results in pantheism. Running and returning together elevate everything to its root in Divine nothingness.

Although God is all, the world, paradoxically, does exist. And although all is God, our physical senses deceive us in this *alma deshikra*, "world of deceit."[4]

This world is hard to enter and easy to leave. What comes hard has purpose. The moral: stay here, but don't take what you see at face value.

Close to God

The sign of having done a good deed is feeling close to God. Feeling far and estranged from God is the sign of having done something wrong.

The 11th of the 13 Principles of Faith written by Maimonides[5] is faith in reward and punishment. There is the reward and punishment of the future, in the World to Come, but there is also immediate reward and punishment in this world: feeling close to the Almighty, or feeling far and estranged from Him. There is no better feeling than the former, and no feeling worse than the latter.

If a person does a *mitzvah* (a commandment of the Torah,

a well-defined good deed) and still feels far from God (the Commander of the *mitzvah*) it must be that either he performed the *mitzvah* by rote, as a matter of habit, or that some egocentric motive entered his consciousness while doing it. Performing a *mitzvah* for its own sake—for the purpose of fulfilling God's will and completing one's mission in life—will always bring with it a sense of closeness to God.

Sometimes, you might experience a momentary high after performing a *mitzvah*, but then comes a fall in spirit. The Ba'al Shem Tov (the founder of *Chassidut*) explains that this is because the high was nothing but a sense of self-satisfaction, not true joy in having merited to do good, in God's service.[6] The sense of self-gratification that comes almost automatically with the performance of a *mitzvah* is likened to the venom of a snake biting your heel. The heel symbolizes the end of the deed.[7]

So, don't confuse the false, impure sense of self-gratification with the true, pure sense of feeling close to God. Closeness to God is gratifying, but it isn't about me being close to Him. It's about Him being close to me.

Someone defined meditation as,
"conscious utilization of one's attention."
Divine meditation is paying attention to God.

From afar, God appears to me

In one verse King David says: "I place God before me always."[8] But in another he says: "My sin is before me always."[9] How do they go together?

First, notice that the *gematria* of God's Name Havayah (י־הוה), together with my sin (חַטָּאתִי), equals always (תָּמִיד), the concluding word in both phrases. The word "always" is what creates the apparent mutual exclusion of the two phrases.

But how can we *always* place God's Presence in the foreground of our consciousness, while simultaneously seeing our sins staring us in the face?

I look towards God; I look for Him in everything I see. But all the while, my sin is there in the background, staring at me and reminding me of my existential lowliness, my distance from God.

What does it mean to see God against the background of my sins, which stare me down, never willing to take their eyes off me?

Were it not be for my awareness that my sins are staring me in the face, I could not experience God's infinite compassion for me. Though I am far from Him, He is so close to me, loving me and being compassionate, no matter what.

In Kabbalah, this dual, paradoxical experience of closeness to God by virtue of His infinite compassion, together with a sense of existential lowliness and distance from Him, is called the "unification of [God's] *mercy* and [our] *lowliness*," which is also described as the unification of the Almighty and the collective soul of Israel.

God created the world the way He did for the sake of our achieving this unification in our consciousness.

Jeremiah expresses this unification in four words: "From afar, God appears to me."[10] The first half, "From afar," corresponds to, "My sin is before me always." The second half, "God appears to me," corresponds to, "I place God before me always."

The *gematria* of the four words of From afar God appears to me (מֵרָחוֹק י־הוה נִרְאָה לִי) is the same as the value of Havayah (י־הוה), squared—a perfect manifestation of God in reality.

Loving with all our heart, soul, and might

When you feel a negative emotion in your heart—love God. In all situations, objective and subjective, one can arouse love of God in the heart.

There are three levels of love: *with all your heart*, *with all your soul*, and *with all your might*.[11]

Loving with all your *heart* means to love with both your inclinations, the good and the evil.[12] It also means to love with both *sides* of your heart, right and left. Today, the right means conservative and the left means liberal. Conservative love is to love as my fathers did. From them I learned to love God because it is a *mitzvah*. Liberal love is spontaneous. It is love at first sight, because *I* love, not because I was told to. Love with *all* your heart.

Loving with all your *soul* refers to situations that demand self-sacrifice.[13] It means devoting your life to your beloved, so much so that you would donate your organs to save their life. By devoting your life to God, you save His life, as it were. God's life refers to the revelation of His Presence on earth—His life among us. If God's Presence disappears, it's as

though He has passed away. He depends on us to keep Him here, with us, in our consciousness.

Loving with all your *might* means to love with all your wealth, with all the resources you've acquired through life.[14] The sages explain that for some, it is harder to give up their wealth than their lives. Rather die rich than live poor. Loving God with all your might reveals His very essence, not just His life-force. First you become nothing, empty. Then, you become part of His absolute being.

To love means to give. We must be ready to give all we have—our hearts, souls, and might—to our beloved. If we really love, it's easy.

Being one with all (eating lesson #1)

People with guts get things done. Without guts you're better off staying in bed.

Your guts are in your lower abdomen. That's the place to begin serving God.

Maimonides says that to serve God properly one must be healthy.[15] It all begins from the stomach. Cultivate proper eating habits.

The first rule: Don't overindulge in food. This is even more important than eating healthy. Eat the minimum your body requires, and don't forget to exercise.

To eat is to consume, to become one with the food. The root TO EAT in Hebrew (אכל) reads ONE ALL (אֶ֫כָל): one is all (there is), and all (there is) is one. Try to keep this in mind while you're eating.

Chassidim say: "God is all and all is God." When one eats with this in mind, the physical food goes straight to the

soul, sustaining and strengthening it, even before fueling the body.

Seeing God everywhere

The essence of Jewish meditation is the soul's concentrated effort to search for and find God in every experience of our lives. Every verse, every word, and every letter of the Torah is a Divine portal through which we can see the Almighty's infinite light.

God is all around you, present in all six spatial directions. Turn your inner eye upward and see Divine Providence in your life. Turn it downward and negate the existence of any power but God. Turn to your right and experience the love that resides in your heart's right side. Turn to your left and experience the fear in your heart's left side. To your front is an experience of unity, while to your back is purity of thought.[16]

You are an emissary of God on earth, entrusted with bringing His light and goodness to all. You do this through meditation and by walking is His ways.[17] An emissary must be faithful to the one that sent him on his individual mission. Try to hear how your name is being called from on high, directing you to act.

A piece of paradise

Four sages entered paradise (the *pardes*, literally "orchard"), but only Rabbi Akiva came out in peace.[18] But why not just enter paradise and stay there? Why must we leave?

God created us down here on earth for a good reason. We

have a mission to perform. Our mission is to make this lowest realm of existence a dwelling place for God.[19]

God wants to reveal Himself to us as He really is! He can't do that in the higher spiritual worlds, in paradise, He can reveal some of His light, but not His very essence.

To be yourself, your true self, without inhibition, you have to be in the place you really enjoy being, the place you most connect to. For God, that place is the physical world below, not the spiritual worlds above.

God wants to be where He was initially most concealed. He wants to reveal His true Self out of total spiritual darkness. For some mysterious reason that we cannot fathom, God identifies most with darkness (before creation He was in a state of absolute darkness), and that's where He wants to be—not swallowed up in the darkness, but revealed out of the darkness!

Our ascent to paradise is meant to bring a bit of heavenly consciousness—inspired awareness of God and His will—down to earth. We need that bit of light to illuminate our purpose in life, our Divine mission on earth. Knowing about paradise should teach us not to long for paradise, but to long for God, for the revelation of His essence here below.

God doesn't want us to remain in paradise. He needs us down here.

A cloud of glory, a pillar of fire

We each have a Tabernacle within our heart. A cloud of glory hovers over our tabernacle by day and a pillar of fire by night.[20]

Both the cloud of glory and the pillar of fire symbolize states

of *consciousness*—one in a setting of light (day), the other in a setting of darkness (night).

The cloud of God's glory is consciousness that everything God created in the world is "for His Glory,"[21] meaning that every aspect of created reality is ultimately intended to reflect and reveal the Creator's hitherto concealed Presence. This is daytime consciousness (described as knowing that "all is God.")

The pillar of fire illuminates darkness—that is, reveals the essence of darkness, the meaning of seeing nothing in the dark. It shows us that all of creation is dark, virtually non-existent, for only God truly exists. This is nighttime consciousness (described as knowing that "God is all.")

Chassidim conclude that you must have both, night and day. "God is all, all is God." This is the continual "run and return,"[22] the Divine soul's essential pulse and life-force.

Out there

In Hebrew, "Egypt" (מִצְרַיִם, *mitzrayim*) could also be read as "straights" (מֵצַרִים, *meytzarim*), alluding to psychological blocks and states of confinement. *Chametz* (leavened bread) symbolizes egocentricity.

Egocentricity is the source of all psychological confinement. No slave could escape the confining borders of Egypt.[23] The Exodus—the miracle of breaking out of Egypt's borders—is achieved by nullifying one's sense of egocentricity.

There really is something else out there. It's not *all* me.

Ultimately, the "something out there," the opposite of my initial sense of myself, is God, who encompasses me in His

positive egocentricity, so to speak. All (including the true me) exists within God's "I."

The Exodus culminated with the Ten Commandments, the first word of which is "I"—"I am *Havayah* your God who has taken you out of the land of Egypt from a house of bondage."[24] God's absolute "I" frees us from our psychological confinement as well as from our enslavement to our exaggerated sense of ego.

In the Song of Songs, that we read on *Pesach*, the bride, symbolizing the collective soul of the Jewish people, says to her groom, symbolizing God: "I have found you out there, I kiss you."[25] We kiss God "out there."

God's costume

God is referred to mainly by the two names, *Havayah* and *Elokim*. *Havayah* is the manifestation of God's transcendence. *Elokim* is the manifestation of His immanence.

God's transcendence manifests as miracles, His immanence as nature. They are one.

The laws of nature are "the custom of the world." A custom is no more than a costume. *Elokim* is *Havayah*'s costume. To truly experience God, you need to see past the costume.

Paying attention to someone is like paying him back a debt. I owe you my attention. This is especially true vis-à-vis God.