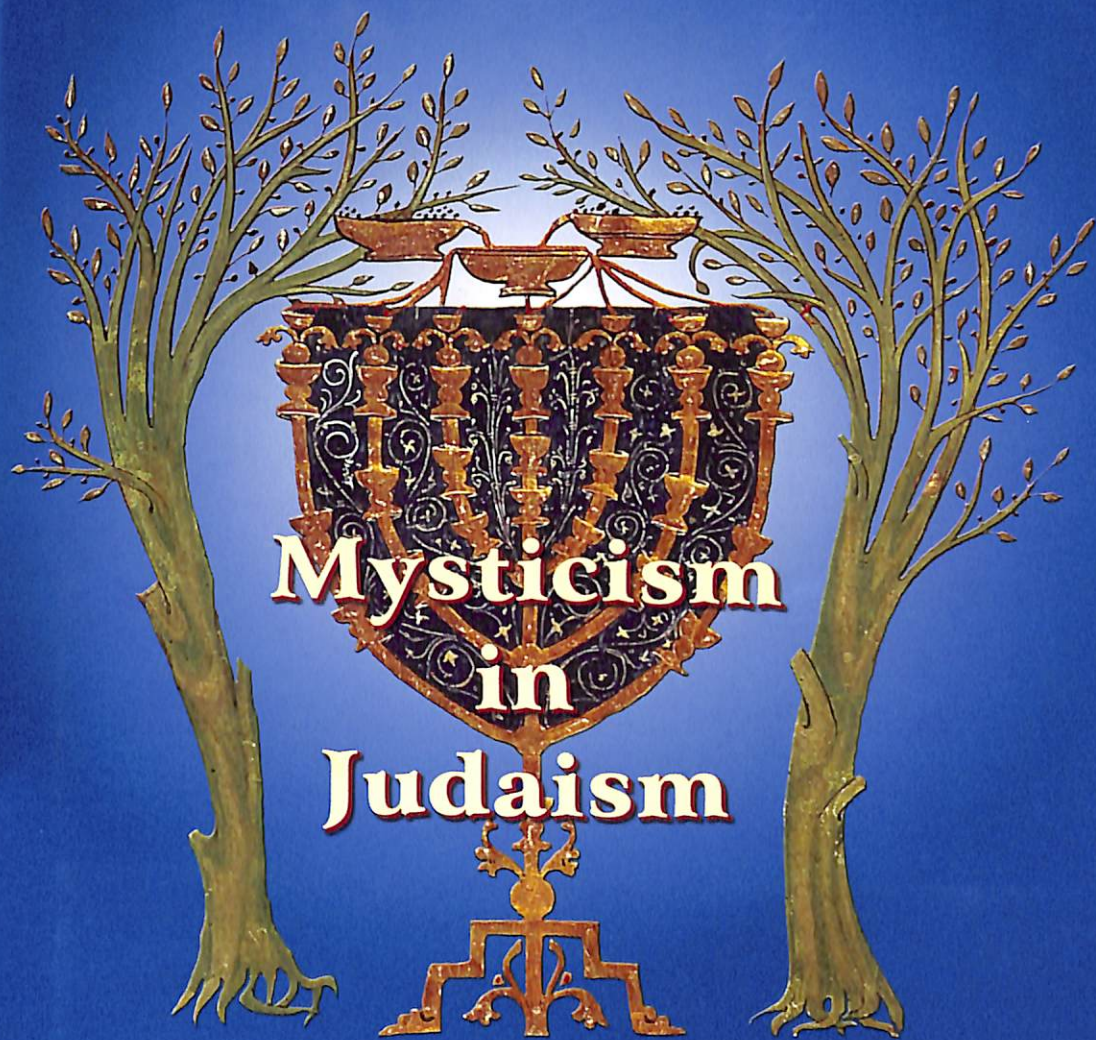


# The Holy Name



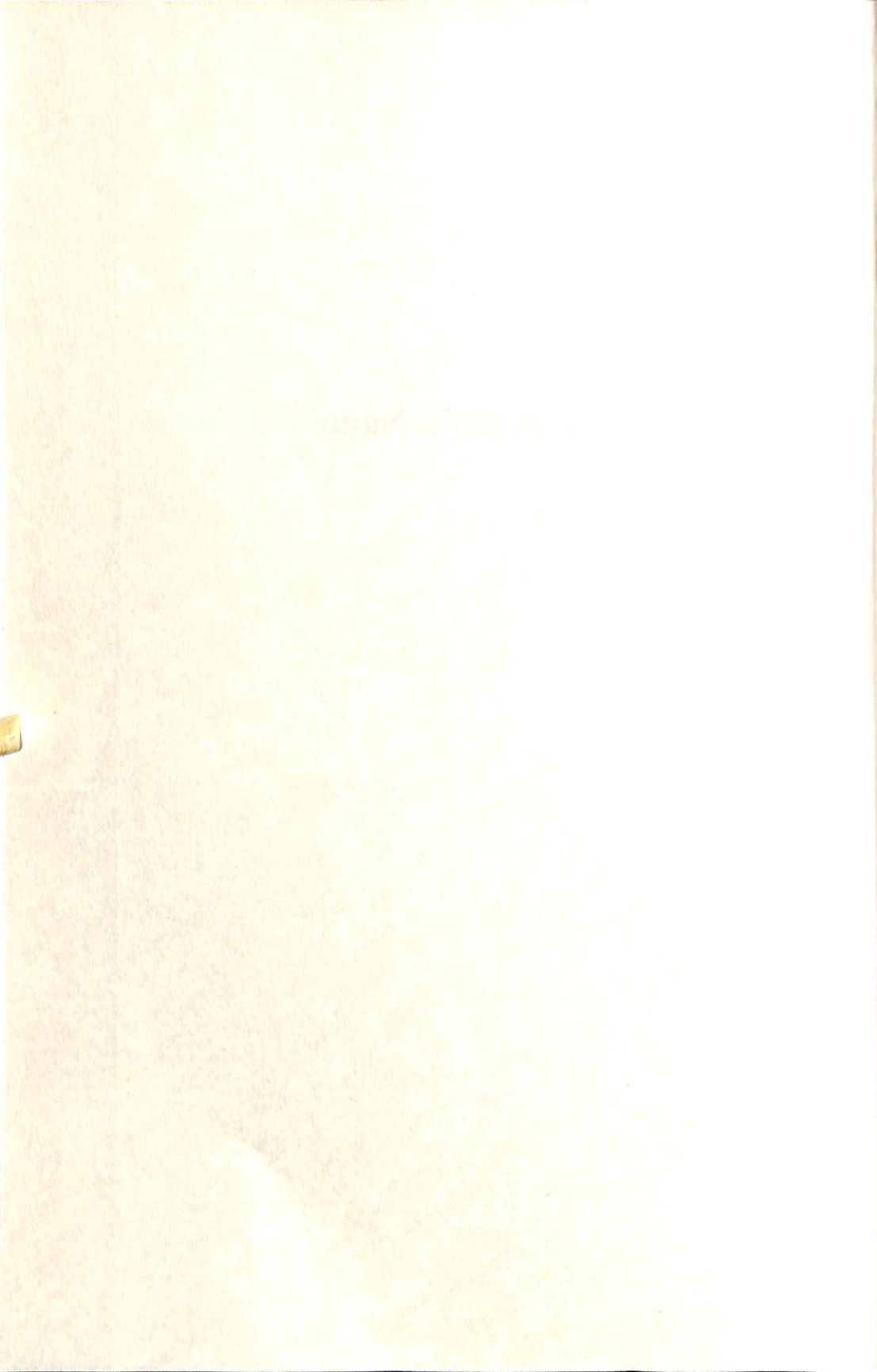
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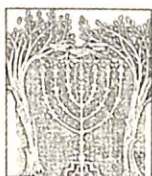
## The Holy Name



# The Holy Name

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Mysticism in Judaism



Miriam Bokser Caravella

RADHA SOAMI SATSANG BEAS





*To the memory of my father,  
Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser,  
who instilled in me a love for God  
and a spirit of open-minded inquiry.*

*To Maharaj Charan Singh,  
my beloved master,  
who initiated me into the path of Sant Mat,  
bestowing on me the gift of his radiant love.*

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Jagdish Chander Sethi, Secretary  
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## ORGAN DONATION – YOUR MOST VALUABLE GIFT

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## PREFACE

*The Holy Name: Mysticism in Judaism* explores the mystic truths common to Judaism and the teachings of the saints (*Sant Mat*). It covers several thousand years of Jewish mystic history and thought and provides the reader with a rich and varied compilation of writings collected from the prophets of the Bible, Jewish Sufis of thirteenth-century Egypt, the Kabbalists of Safed, the Hasidim of Eastern Europe, and many other Jewish philosophers and mystics.

In order to clarify and elaborate on certain concepts and demonstrate the commonality of mystic experience, the author includes quotations from such mystics as Rumi (Maulana Rum), Bulleh Shah, Kabir Sahib, Guru Nanak and Mira Bai. She brings references from Judaism and other mystic traditions to show that the practice of meditating on God's holy Name, or the inner sound reverberating within each one of us, is a timeless path to God-realization. She also affirms from mystic texts that we need the guidance of a living spiritual master or teacher for spiritual liberation.

The first edition of *The Holy Name* was published in 1989. Maharaj Charan Singh passed away in 1990, naming Gurinder Singh Dhillon to succeed him. Under the present master's

guidance, the publications department of the Radha Soami Society at Beas is revising many of its English titles in the context of the globalization of knowledge about different religions and spiritual paths.

This newly revised edition of *The Holy Name* thus reflects a decision by the publisher to minimize the use of Indian terms in books intended for a Western audience. Needless repetition has also been eliminated. In view of the explosion of interest in Jewish mysticism and meditation in the West, particularly in the U.S., the author has written a new introduction chronicling the history of mysticism in Judaism. She has also expanded the first chapter, "The Human Condition," by adding more information concerning the Kabbalah's treatment of the process of creation. The chapter consequently became disproportionately long, and so she has divided it into two: "God, Soul, and Creation," and "The Human Condition." Some minor editorial changes and corrections have also been made throughout.

This book will be of interest to anyone who seeks to understand more about the mystic tradition of Judaism and its place in the universal teachings of the saints.

Sewa Singh  
*Secretary*

Radha Soami Satsang Beas  
June 1999

## FOREWORD

The goal of all religions is the same—to help man know God. Rituals, prayers and ceremonies may differ from religion to religion, but they are all expressions of this universal human desire to meet the Creator.

In Judaism, great emphasis is placed on the transmission of religious values from generation to generation. The family, perhaps even more than the synagogue or religious school, serves as the vehicle for this purpose. In a traditional Jewish family like the one in which I was raised, almost every daily activity is given religious meaning and expression. In our home we recited blessings before and after each meal, on going to bed and awakening, and on many other occasions; we ate special foods and celebrated the Sabbath and holy days. Because my father was a rabbi and scholar, our conversations often centered around Judaism as both a religion and a culture. Books on Judaism in Hebrew, English, Aramaic, and other languages lined vast bookshelves. Until I entered college, I attended parochial schools where half the day was devoted to secular subjects and half to religious subjects—Bible, prophets, Talmud, creed, Hebrew language and literature, and Jewish history.



As a child, I found great beauty in the Bible and other religious books and happily adhered to the rituals, beliefs, and studies associated with Judaism. I would sit with my father and discuss the deeper meaning of many of the biblical narratives and stories, which, from time to time, provoked questions and doubts in my naive and curious mind. He instilled and encouraged in me a spirit of open-minded inquiry, and shared with me his deep and intuitive appreciation of the Bible and other religious texts.

As I grew older, I realized that I shared a common spirit with people who did not come from the same religious background. This spirit seemed to transcend our religious differences. I began to wonder if Judaism was my primary identity, and questioned whether something deeper and more universal existed, linking me with other people and with the Divine. I started asking the basic questions of human existence: What is my real identity? What is the purpose of human life? What is death? Is there a God, and if so, what is his relationship to me?

I wondered why some people belonged to one religion and some to another. My elders explained that God had instructed our ancestors to follow certain commandments, and that it was our duty to continue this tradition. I was taught that being Jewish was a special gift of God, as God had given the Jews a unique mission or purpose in the world. However, my best friend, with whom I felt a great closeness of spirit, was Roman Catholic. She performed different rituals and said other prayers. Yet she didn't seem any the less blessed by God, and I couldn't understand why I would be chosen for his special purpose any more than she.

It appeared that accident of birth was determining our religious allegiance and outlook. Our religions were telling us to worship God differently, but the God we were trying to worship was the same God—the ultimate eternal Lord, the



Creator, the source of everything. Why were there two ways to worship him if he was one? Were both ways equally effective? Both our religions sought to answer questions about death, justice, and mercy. How could there be different answers for different people to such universal questions? Was one right and the other wrong? And what relationship did our religious observances have to the closeness of spirit that we shared, which seemed to go deeper than religion? No one could venture a satisfactory answer. Yet I felt that there must be something deeper, more universal, at the core of both religions.

This experience was duplicated over many years in other relationships and arenas of life. In some people, I felt a spirit which drew me to them that had nothing to do with outer circumstances of religion, nationality, or cultural background. Religion began to seem like something that separated me from the people in whom I felt this kindred spirit, rather than being a source of love and harmony. Thus there came a time when the traditional answers did not satisfy, when the rituals no longer held me, and I was pulled from within to make a deeper and broader search.

Ultimately, that search led me to the teachings of the living mystic, Maharaj Charan Singh of Beas, Punjab, India.\* In 1970 he initiated me into the teachings of the saints, in India called Sant Mat, *Sant* meaning saints and *Mat* meaning teachings, the age-old method of uniting the soul with God through inner meditation practice.† Although Maharaj Charan Singh came from India, his teaching is universal and has been taught throughout history in all countries and civilizations.

---

\* Maharaj Charan Singh passed away in 1990, after appointing Baba Gurinder Singh Dhillon as his successor.

† *Saint* here does not refer to someone canonized by a church or religion. *Mystic*, *saint*, *guru*, and *master* are terms used to describe the spiritual master, teacher, or guide of the highest order.

The philosophy appealed to me immediately; it went to the depth of my being and struck a chord of truth. Suddenly everything made sense—like a jigsaw puzzle finally, easily, coming together, all the oddly shaped pieces finding their rightful places. After years of struggle, I now had the key to understand the contradictions and basic questions of life.

In 1977, at a family gathering, I met one of my cousins, who comes from a background even more orthodox than my own. A seeker of truth himself, he asked me many probing questions about the Sant Mat philosophy and how I was able to reconcile it with my Jewish background. His questions started me thinking that a book on the subject might have some value. Just as I had felt the need to make a deeper search into the true purpose of human life and the meaning of religion, I felt there were probably other spiritual seekers from a Jewish background who would benefit from my search as well. I wrote to Maharaj Charan Singh and proposed such a book. He approved the idea in principle, and in 1978 I embarked on the research that forms the body of this book.

Through his teachings, Maharaj Charan Singh bestowed on me the key to mystic understanding, deepening my appreciation of Judaism and increasing my awareness of the universal relevance of Jewish mysticism. On the surface it might seem that there would be little in common between traditional Judaism and the mystic path taught by a living master from India. However, as I pursued my research, I became increasingly impressed by how much these seemingly disparate teachings have in common.

Jewish mystics have always believed that a profound mystical meaning is hidden in the scriptures, for discovery only by those ready for the spiritual journey. They regard the literal text of the Bible as a shell which protects the inner essence, the spiritual meaning, from the uninitiated. Only one who is well



versed in spiritual knowledge can appreciate the true value and meaning of the Bible. The great hasidic rabbi, Dov Baer, the Maggid\* of late eighteenth-century Mezhericz, Poland, taught that the Bible's "inner essence is robed in stories, commandments, admonitions, and exhortations. Man's limited powers of comprehension necessitate these particularizations."<sup>1</sup>

In this light, I have studied the Bible and other religious texts to see where there are parallels with the mystic principles that are taught today by the spiritual masters in the Radha Soami line of mystics at Beas.<sup>†</sup> Many of the interpretations I have offered are traditional and can be found in the writings of the Jewish mystics; others are my own interpretations, based on my perception of universal mystic truths. I do not pretend to be a scholar of Jewish mysticism or of any other form of mysticism. My purpose is simply to share my discovery of the commonality to be found in Judaism and the teachings of the saints.

Historically, there is a great deal about Jewish mysticism that we still do not know. In recent years, researchers have unearthed the writings of many Jewish mystics that had been lost or hidden. The more we discover, the more we find similarities between Jewish mysticism and the mystic teachings of other religions. And thus many questions are raised about our assumptions and definitions of the limits and borders of specific religions. What researchers and scholars are discovering today will probably prove to have great bearing on our understanding of Jewish mysticism as a whole.

---

\* *Maggid*: Preacher, sage; literally, speaker, spiritual channel.

† Soami Ji of Agra, the first in the line of masters in which Maharaj Charan Singh was the fifth, used the term "Radha Soami" to describe the soul's relationship with God, *Radha* meaning soul and *Soami* meaning Lord—the Lord of the soul. Thus this contemporary line of true saints or masters is commonly referred to as the Radha Soami line of mystics who reside at Beas, in Punjab, India.

In this book I propose to introduce the main principles of the Sant Mat teachings as an expression of certain universal core concepts in mysticism and then elaborate on those core concepts by introducing parallels from Jewish mysticism. My purpose is not to compare Judaism with Sant Mat. I am not attempting to give a definitive interpretation or history of Judaism, nor am I implying that there is a coherent system of Jewish mysticism which is analogous to Sant Mat. Rather, I hope to present a mosaic of elements that are found in common in both systems, and which reveal the universal thread that can be found in all religions and spiritual paths. I believe that if we remove the surface layers of cultural and historical differences, we will find the common mystic message that God is one and that he can be found within oneself through inner mystic experience.

There is no need to give up one religion and adopt another in the quest for spiritual knowledge. Mystics come at all times and may appear in any religion, and there may be more than one true master living in the world at the same time. My purpose in writing this book is to awaken in the seeker the desire to find a living spiritual master who can guide him on the path back to God.

To present this material in as comprehensive a manner as possible, I have gathered quotations from many sources. My citations from Jewish sources are from the Bible and other texts representative of the great mystics and mystical movements in Judaism. In introducing the teachings of the saints, or Sant Mat, I have quoted from the writings of Maharaj Charan Singh. A number of English books of his discourses and letters are available, as are audio tape recordings and transcriptions of the question-and-answer sessions he regularly held with his Western disciples. I have also used citations from the writings



of the previous masters in this line of mystics, dating back to Soami Ji Maharaj of nineteenth-century Agra.

Relevant passages from the teachings of Muslim Sufi saints such as Rumi and Bulleh Shah, Indian mystics like Kabir, Guru Nanak, and Mira Bai, and some Christian sources have been cited as well. Use of quotations from Jewish, Muslim, Indian and Christian mystics is not an attempt to equate them or compare their levels of spiritual attainment. It rather stems from a desire to demonstrate that all these great saints and mystics have brought teachings of universal spiritual value.

Some unusual terms and references used in this book are explained below:

The term C.E. is used to refer to the Common Era (Christian Era) of time measurement. It is equivalent to A.D. B.C.E. is chronologically equivalent to B.C. and means Before the Common Era.

I have used the terms *Hebrew Bible* and *Bible* to refer to the scriptures generally called the *Old Testament*. I have not used the term Old Testament, as it implies that the Israelites' covenant, or testament with God, has been superseded by a newer testament or covenant. Understandably, this is a sensitive issue for Jews. The Hebrew Bible includes the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses), the Prophets, and the Writings. In Hebrew, the Pentateuch is called the Torah (literally, teaching or revelation).

Citations from the Hebrew Bible are taken from the translation published by The Jewish Publication Society of America in 1955. This version presents the original Hebrew and its English translation in facing columns on each page. The translation, commissioned by the Soncino Press of London, was completed in 1916. It takes into account previous translations but has as its aim faithfulness to the original Hebrew while presenting it in intelligible English. In the few instances where I felt

that the translation obscured the obvious mystical implications of the text, I have taken the liberty of retranslating certain words or terms from the original Hebrew. These are footnoted as my own translations.

Quotations from the Daily and High Holy Day prayer books use the editions translated by Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser and first published by the Hebrew Publishing Company in 1957.

My quotations from the Jewish mystics are drawn from many different sources. Because there are so many methods of transliterating the Hebrew alphabet into the Roman (English) alphabet, I found the same Hebrew terms spelled differently in almost every source I consulted. For the convenience of the reader, therefore, I have taken the liberty of making these spellings consistent, even in the citations.

In Hebrew, plural forms of singular nouns end either in *im*, as in *Hasid – Hasidim* (devotee – devotees), or *ot*, as in *sefirah – sefirot* (emanation – emanations). In many quotes and discussions I have felt it preferable to keep the Hebrew plural forms rather than trying to convert them into English.

I hope that those readers who are schooled in Bible and other aspects of Jewish studies will forgive any errors of scholarship or interpretation I may have made. In citing material from Jewish sources, I have done my best to use the most authoritative versions and commentaries, including the latest findings of biblical and historical research. There is always bound to be some difference in interpretation or emphasis, but I think that those seeking to understand and experience the most universal and spiritual aspects of Judaism will find a viable path to that goal in the teachings presented here. I ask the reader to approach this book open-mindedly and to consider each thought in the spirit in which it is written. As the Jewish mystic Bahya ibn Paquda wrote in the eleventh century:



When you read this book, O brother, and understand its import, take it as a talisman so that you may judge your soul. Repeat it often, drawing your own conclusions and keeping it close to your heart and soul. Correct every error you may find in it and amend each failure. Your purpose in it is to do as it directs, not to acquire knowledge which may bring you praise and glory. Be generous in forgiving me the faults and errors you may discern, as well as what may seem to you my shortcomings either in thought or in expression.... Know that human nature is limited and man's power is deficient in its pursuit of perfection.<sup>2</sup>





## INTRODUCTION: MYSTICISM IN JUDAISM

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.  
Now the earth was unformed and void,  
And darkness was upon the face of the deep;  
And the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.  
And God said: "Let there be light."  
And there was light.  
And God saw the light, that it was good;  
And God divided the light from the darkness.

*GENESIS 1:1-4*

With this dramatic and mystically significant account of the creation through the utterance or command of God, the Bible begins its chronicle of human history. From the creation, it moves to the mythic stories of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, which have long been understood as an allegory of the primal separation of the soul from God and its imprisonment in the physical plane.

Interpreting the Bible from a mystical perspective is based on a long-standing Jewish tradition of biblical interpretation. Jewish mystics since the time of the rabbis several centuries before the common era (B.C.E.) discussed the biblical stories and shared their mystical understanding of them. Centuries later, the medieval mystics of the movement called the Kabbalah also gave complex, symbolic interpretations of biblical texts in order to convey their mystic teachings. They believed that there were several levels of meaning embedded in the Bible, from the literal or contextual to the secret or esoteric. At the deepest level, the entire Bible (or Torah as it is called in Hebrew) is seen as a spiritual allegory. The stories that pertain to the creation and the history of the patriarchs and the ancient Israelites are understood as allegories of the soul's spiritual journey and evolution.

After the Garden of Eden, the Bible continues with the story of Noah and the great flood, understood on a mystical level as an account of the end of one cosmic age and the birth of another. The ark symbolizes the continuity of life through the cosmic cycles of creation, destruction, and re-creation. Noah is the archetypal savior of mankind, who carries the potential for life from one age to another.

We then move into early recorded history—the era of the patriarchs and matriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob; Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel—beginning in about 2,000 B.C.E. The Bible tells us that God commanded Abraham to journey from Mesopotamia, the “land of his fathers,” to the land of Canaan, and of God's covenant with him. The covenant between God and Abraham was an agreement that Abraham would worship only the one Lord. In exchange, God promised that a great and mighty people would issue from him, to whom he would bequeath a land “flowing with milk and honey,” if they continued to be faithful to him.

From a mystical perspective, this worship of the one God, or monotheism as it is commonly called, is the worship of the unity that is God. This is achieved through coming in tune with God's divine creative power, the inner holy Name resounding within all living beings. Later Jewish mystics remarked that the covenant, which was marked by the rite of circumcision, was Abraham's initiation into the inner spiritual practice of the Name of God. In fact, the term *brit millah*, commonly translated as covenant of the circumcision, also means covenant of the name. Abraham agreed to teach his descendants this inner worship, and in return God promised to take them to "the promised land," a metaphor for the higher spiritual regions. Not only is Abraham considered the father of the Jewish religion through his son Isaac and grandson Jacob, Muslims also trace their lineage to Abraham through his son Ishmael. Since Christianity emerged from Judaism, Abraham is the first patriarch of Christianity as well. Thus the followers of all three religions share in the Abrahamic heritage.

From Jacob's twelve sons and grandsons descended the twelve original tribes of Israel. They were initially no more than clans of related families. Through a series of events, the tribes ultimately moved to Egypt where they were treated as welcome visitors. With a change of rulers, however, Egypt eventually became unfriendly to the early Israelites, and they were subjected to forced labor and other hardships. After they endured a couple of hundred years in this harsh condition, the Bible tells us that God sent Moses to be their liberator. The revelation Moses experienced when God called him to this task—of the divine "voice" issuing from a "burning bush"—is a graphic account of God revealing himself in the form of light and sound.

This period of slavery in Egypt and the subsequent exodus mark the Israelites' evolution from a collection of families and



clans to a people with an identity and a unique religious orientation. As the outward stories of the Bible are often allegories of inner spiritual truths, so the events of the exodus may have taken place on the physical plane as a hint or reflection of the mystic teaching. Thus the period of slavery in Egypt would symbolize a period of spiritual constriction. (Literally in Hebrew, Egypt means constricted.) The exodus and forty years of wandering in the desert that followed would signify the soul's breaking away from the narrowness and oppression of material and worldly attachments and the beginning of its spiritual journey.

During their wanderings in the desert, the Bible recounts that Moses brought his people to the foot of Mount Sinai where he ascended the mountain and communed with God. God entered into a covenant with the Israelites, a renewal of his covenant with Abraham six hundred years earlier. The covenant is symbolized by the Ten Commandments, which Moses carried from the heights of the mountain. Through Moses, God revealed himself to the children of Israel.

Jewish mystics have long taught that this revelation was the experience of God's holy Name or divine creative power, which they also called the *memra* (utterance) and *logos*. Climbing the mountain is an ancient Near Eastern symbol for taking one's consciousness to the third eye, the point of concentration and gateway to the inner spiritual regions. The true Torah or revelation experienced by Moses may therefore be understood as his inner mystical experience of God, which he tried to impart to the people of Israel.

The mystic revelation of God's Name or Word is a theme repeated throughout the Bible—not only in the stories of the patriarchs and Moses, but also in the accounts of the lives and teachings of the later biblical prophets.



The Bible tells us of the intense relationship that developed between God and the people of Israel. There was a pattern where the people would lose faith in God and God would prove his love and protection through a miracle. For although they attested belief in God, whom they called YHWH, meaning "the one who is, was and will be," they would consistently lose faith and begin worshiping the deities of the peoples surrounding them. Even while Moses was at the top of Mount Sinai receiving the revelation of the Ten Commandments, we are told that the Israelites who were assembled at the foot of the mountain fashioned a golden calf to worship.

The Ten Commandments, in Hebrew called the tablets of the covenant (as they embodied the essence of God's covenant with Abraham as renewed during the time of Moses), were placed in a special "ark of the covenant" which traveled with the Israelites in a mobile sanctuary called the tent of the meeting. According to the Bible, a cloud of God's glory would hover over the tent, and that this cloud guided them on their journeys. The tent and the ark within it were a symbol of God's presence in their midst wherever they journeyed.

Their possession of the ark of the covenant gave the children of Israel a center, a focus for their trust in God. Even when the Israelites eventually entered the land of Canaan, the ark was carried with them in battle. Eventually, when the Temple was built in Jerusalem, it was this ark and the tablets within it that were kept in the innermost sanctum, called the Holy of Holies. The Temple, in fact, was originally conceived as the permanent tent of the meeting.

The Bible tells us that Moses died just before entering Canaan, and that the prophet Joshua succeeded him, leading the people into the promised land. Following Joshua, there were a series of religious judges and prophets who guided the

people mystically and morally. The next thousand years that are documented in the Bible reflect the struggle of the prophets to keep the people loyal to their duty of worshiping YHWH alone. But, as was the case earlier in Sinai, they consistently strayed to the worship and cultic practices of local Canaanite deities. So though the worship of YHWH was the official religion, the worship of other gods continued simultaneously throughout, with little exception.

Prophecy was a phenomenon known and documented in most ancient Near Eastern societies. During biblical times, the Israelite prophets served as channels for the divine Word or Name of God; they were also spiritual and moral guides to the people. In addition to Abraham and Moses, some of the other prophets whose teachings are conveyed in the Bible are Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, and later Isaiah, Joel, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. It was Samuel who anointed Saul as the first king of Israel; later, he anointed David to succeed Saul. The anointing signified God's will alighting upon a person. On a mystic level it may be referring to a spiritual initiation.

David himself, though not a prophet but a king, functioned as a kind of spiritual leader, and the spiritual hymns called the Psalms are ascribed to him. The Bible tells us that he was considered the "beloved of God." The events of David's life in the tenth century B.C.E. are the earliest information in the Bible that can be verified historically. He conquered the lands around him, including the city of Jebus (later called Jerusalem) which he made into his capital.

The Temple in Jerusalem was built by David's son, King Solomon. According to legend, he was a man of great "wisdom," and by tradition he is considered the author of the *Song of Songs*, *Ecclesiastes*, and *Proverbs*, which form part of the highly mystical wisdom literature of the biblical period. After Solomon's death, the kingdom established by David split in

two. The larger kingdom of Israel was made up of the ten tribes who had settled in the northern area of Samaria, and the southern kingdom of Judah comprised the two tribes in the area near Jerusalem and the Judean desert.

During the period of the monarchies, from the ninth century B.C.E. onwards, prophets like Elijah and Isaiah recounted their experiences of God's holy Name or Word and warned the people that other nations would conquer them unless they returned to the ways of the covenant and gave up their immoral behavior. The Bible tells us that at Elijah's death he ascended to heaven in a chariot of light. The description of his ascent was an important inspiration for later Jewish mystic seekers, who interpreted the account as his ascent to the inner heavens.

The prophet Jeremiah in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. lived through the exile of both Jewish kingdoms, instructing the people to accept their fate and prophesying that it would last only seventy years. Jeremiah denounced the corrupt Temple practices and hypocrisy of many false "prophets." He prophesied that God would create a new covenant to be written in the hearts of the Israelites. They would know it in their innermost beings, and so they would not need anyone to teach it to them. This covenant seems to be a reference to the inner path which God has placed within everyone, and that is natural and intrinsic to all humanity.

Ezekiel's prophecies were directed to the children of Israel at the time of their exile from Judea in the sixth century B.C.E. His teachings are dramatic and sensational, particularly the allegories of the valley of dry bones which come to life, and of the fantastic chariot made of six beings—part human, part animal, part angel—vibrating with lights, colors, and sounds, in which he ascended to the inner celestial regions, finally reaching the throne of God. Ezekiel's vision of the chariot was to serve as a model for Jewish mystics for centuries afterwards.



Much of the imagery and style of the biblical mystics is similar to the spiritual literature of the surrounding peoples of that period. Symbols such as the tree of life, the wine and the bread, for example, are common to the mystics of the Near East and are found in Canaanite literature as well as in the teachings of Jesus. The prophets often couched their teachings in parables and symbols so that the deeper meaning of their words would only be understood by the true mystic seeker. In some instances they also used current political or social issues as an allegory or symbol of inner mystic truths. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, a highly reputed modern scholar of Jewish mysticism, has demonstrated that many of the biblical terms describing the prophets' activities actually refer to specific meditation practices of repetition, remembrance, and contemplation.

Within a century after the exile, Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon. A Zoroastrian and enlightened king, he permitted Babylon's conquered and subject peoples to return to their homelands and rebuild their sanctuaries. Thus in 520 B.C.E. he permitted the Jews to return to Judea, and the work of rebuilding the temple commenced. But many Jews had grown comfortable in Babylon and preferred to remain there. So Babylon and nearby communities became a center of Jewish culture, religion, and mysticism for the next 1,500 years.

Before the exile, the priests of the Jerusalem temple were the primary authority in Judaism. They performed specific religious functions in the temple and in daily Jewish life centered in the home. Once the temple had been rebuilt they resumed their duties, but the role of the *rabbi* (literally, teacher or master) started to gain in importance, helping the community—increasingly complex and disharmonious—to define religious and social laws. By the first century B.C.E. the Academy or *Sanhedrin* in both Babylonia and Jerusalem became the political, religious, and judicial authority of the Jews, its rabbis considering issues

of both religious and worldly significance. With the destruction by the Romans of the second temple in the year 70 C.E., the power of the priestly classes significantly waned. The authority of the rabbis was consolidated by the second century C.E., becoming greatly strengthened during the period of Islamic rule, and continuing till today.

The priesthood was an inherited profession, while the rabbis were scholars and legal advisors drawn from the people. The rabbis used their study of the Bible to develop a guide for the numerous issues of day-to-day living. Religion was no longer centered in sacrificial worship in a temple on particular days of festivals and pilgrimage, but became a set of rituals and prayers conducted in the synagogue and an ethical code to guide people in their daily lives, even at home, whether they lived in Jerusalem or in a land many hundreds of miles away. It is this form of Judaism, rather than the priestly or prophetic, that forms the basis of the Jewish religion as it is practiced today.

The interpretations of the first generations of rabbis, compiled at the end of the second century C.E., are called the Mishnah (repetition, study). Subsequent generations of rabbis discussed the Mishnah and derived further interpretations. This was called the Gemara (completion). Together the Mishnah and Gemara are called the Talmud (study, learning). In addition to containing discussions of a legal nature, the Talmud also contains many legends and ethical and mystical teachings that give a holistic picture of the world of these early rabbis. The Jerusalem Talmud was compiled in the fourth century C.E., and the Babylonian Talmud, which is the standard reference, at the end of the fifth century. Layers of interpretation continued to be added right through the eighteenth century.

It is known that many of the rabbis of the Talmud were also mystics who were engaged in meditation practices. The literature they have left uses images and symbols derived from



the visions of the prophet Elisha of his master Elijah rising to the heavens in a chariot of fire, and of the prophet Ezekiel, who ascended to the inner throne regions on a chariot accompanied by lights, colors, sounds, and heavenly beings. One of the most well-known mystics of the Talmud was Rabbi Akiba. The Talmud tells the story of Akiba and his companions entering the king's *pardes* (orchard, garden)—a metaphor for the inner regions. These mystics referred to their inner journey as the journey of the chariot, and thus they were known as the *merkavah* (chariot) mystics. A similar literature was produced by the gnostic sects of the same period, but it is not known whether there was any direct connection between the gnostics and these ancient Jewish mystics.

Another important element in the development of rabbinic Judaism was the influence of Greek culture, especially after Alexander the Great's conquest of Judea in the fourth century B.C.E., and continuing into the later period of Roman occupation. A number of monastic and ascetic sects existed within Judaism during rabbinic times. Their doctrines and structured, regulated codes of living reflect a Greek influence. The Therapeutae and Essenes were two such groups. It is believed that John the Baptist and Jesus were in some way associated with the Essenes. The Dead Sea scrolls discovered in the vicinity of Qumran as well as other ancient documents may increase our knowledge of these communities.

Despite the fact that many of the rabbis of the Talmud were also practicing mystics, most rabbis were suspicious of mysticism. Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser explains:

Some teachers of the Talmud cultivated the mystical life, but ... while recording the views of those teachers who sought to cultivate mystical interests, the Talmud indicates that the religious authorities of the time tried to discourage

this tendency ... in some instances mystical pursuits became intertwined with magic, which was, no doubt, an additional factor that inspired the effort to discourage it.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary rabbi David Blumenthal explains that during the talmudic period, some of the rabbinic tradition rubbed off on Jewish mysticism, hence the intellectualism or "bookishness" of Jewish mystic literature. He says that the general concept of Judaism that we have today stems from rabbinic Judaism.<sup>2</sup> From then on, those rabbis who were devoted to the mystic life tended to be secretive about their teachings and practice, using esoteric symbols and stories that could be understood only by the "initiated." But still, Blumenthal explains, during the course of Jewish history there was often a give-and-take between the rationalistic rabbis and the mystics; and just as mysticism tended to be expressed in intellectual terms, often the scholarship of the rationalists became infused with a suppressed mystic yearning. "There is hardly a symbol, act, or belief in the rabbinic tradition which was not touched, and transformed, by the mystical tradition."<sup>3</sup>

The mystical side of Judaism during the talmudic period and continuing into the Middle Ages is represented for the most part in the *hekhalot* literature. *Hekhalot* literally means palaces, or halls. These works describe the meditation practices of Jewish mystics who were attempting to take the inner journey through the spiritual regions or palaces on the *merkavah*, the "chariot" of lights and sounds. Most of the works describing the *merkavah* journey were written between the first century B.C.E. and the tenth century C.E., and are called the Greater and Lesser Hekhalot.

The *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Formation), dating in written form from as early as the third century but probably existing in oral form for several centuries earlier, is an early meditative and



astrological manual. Only two thousand words long, it describes the creation as a series of emanations from the one divine Name, Word, or utterance. It outlines a system of meditation on the nature of divinity through the relationships of numbers, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and divine names. These methods were used over the centuries by mystics attempting to manipulate divine forces. Some legends even ascribe the creation of *golems*, or robotlike living creatures, to rabbis who engaged in these meditations.

Meanwhile, in Babylon and other Arabian cities, the Jewish community flourished and, from the time of Prophet Mohammed in the seventh century, became integrally involved with Islamic civilization and mysticism. There was a long history of mutual influences between Jewish and Muslim Sufi mystics through the end of the Islamic empire in the fifteenth century. Scholars trace a transmission of the mystic teachings from Muslim to Jewish mystics in Baghdad in the ninth through twelfth centuries; it was these Jewish Sufis who brought the teachings from Baghdad and nearby cities to European Jewish centers.

Jewish Sufi manuscripts discovered during the late nineteenth century in the Cairo Genizah (a hidden attic in an ancient synagogue) have shed great light on the close relationship between Jewish and Muslim mystics of medieval times. From the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, Jewish mystics freely quoted from Sufi mystical writings, which they copied into Hebrew characters,<sup>4</sup> and some pursued the spiritual path under the guidance of Sufi masters. Similarly, during almost the same period, Jewish mystics in Persia and Turkey shared a devotional spirit with the Muslim mystics of their time. Many read the works of Rumi and Saadi.<sup>5</sup>

The Jewish mystics in the Sufi tradition were sometimes called *hasidim* (devotees, pious ones). Although this movement, and the school of German Hasidim (*Hasidei Ashkenaz*)

that arose in Germany during the thirteenth century, were not connected historically with the eighteenth-century ecstatic movement known as Hasidism, they foreshadowed many of its elements, particularly its emphasis on devotion, spiritual inwardness, and personal experience of God.

Mystics in the Sufi tradition included Bahya ibn Paquda of eleventh-century Spain. His book *Hovot ha-Levavot* (Duties of the Hearts) deals with the life of the true servant, the devotee yearning for the mystical life. Writing in the same vein, Solomon ibn Gebirol (also called Avicbron), in his highly mystical work *Mekor Hayim* (Fountain of Life), describes the creation as a series of emanations from the primal source of light. Another important mystical work of the twelfth century was the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (Book of Brilliance), which appeared anonymously in Provence, France. The teachings and terminology of these works and of the much earlier *Sefer Yezirah* were echoed in the Kabbalah a few centuries later.

Moses Maimonides, author of the philosophic masterpiece *The Guide for the Perplexed*, lived in Cairo during the twelfth century. Although he was mainly known to later generations as a philosopher, physician, and rationalist, it is now believed that Maimonides was also a mystic who stressed the possibility of direct spiritual experience through inner practice. His son, Abraham, and grandson, Obadyah, are known to have been mystics in the Sufi tradition; Obadyah's *Treatise of the Pool*, a mystical work along Sufi lines, has recently been rediscovered and published.

The most renowned aspect of Jewish mysticism, which has almost taken on life as a religious movement and influence in itself, is the Kabbalah, which literally means received or transmitted knowledge. Kabbalah includes certain beliefs concerning the origin and structure of the creation, the nature of God and the soul, and the relationship between man and the inner



realms. There are also specific kabbalistic practices designed to achieve mystic union and knowledge of esoteric truths. The large body of kabbalistic literature dating from the thirteenth century consists mainly of esoteric and symbolic interpretations of texts and legends from the Bible and Talmud.

The most influential work of the Kabbalah is the *Zohar* (Radiance, Shining). Although it had been widely believed that the *Zohar* was written during the talmudic period by the legendary mystic Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, recent scholarship has shown that most of it was written in the late thirteenth century by Moses de Leon of Spain, and some smaller sections by other authors of that period. It was not uncommon in those days for authors of religious texts to claim that they had discovered manuscripts written in earlier periods. They sought the authenticity and credibility that came from authorship by an ancient, respected master.

Although de Leon may have been the actual writer of the *Zohar*, scholars and students of mysticism believe that he was indeed compiling, recording, and synthesizing mystical traditions dating from earlier times. Clearly, many of the *Zohar's* underlying principles coincide with universal mystic teachings—for instance, the theory of creation as an emanation from the original divine light; the concept of spiritual, astral, and physical levels of creation; reincarnation, and so forth. But the Jewish mystics who wrote the *Zohar* gave expression to their mystic experiences by linking them to biblical references and couching them in terms acceptable to Jewish tradition. Also woven into the *Zohar* are accretions of legend, ritual, and superstition that reflect the influences of the many cultures in which Jewish mystics and seekers lived after their exile from Judea in the first century.

Most of the works grouped in the Kabbalah impart knowledge about the nature of God and the structure of the various

realms and levels of the creation. They do not generally urge a devotional approach in pursuing direct experience of the Divine. In this sense, Kabbalah is similar to what the Indians call *gyan yoga*, the yoga of knowledge, whereas the Sufi or hasidic tradition is more like *bhakti yoga*, the yoga of devotion. As Bokser explained, the Kabbalah "proceeds through an intricate web of esoteric symbols, and its offering is primarily a *gnosis*, an esoteric knowledge which *in itself* is said to yield man the highest rewards of divine commendation."<sup>6</sup>

A notable exception to this approach was that of Abraham Abulafia and his students. Abulafia was a kabbalist of thirteenth-century Spain and Italy who had been influenced by Eastern mysticism, including forms of yoga such as *pranayam*, as well as by the German Hasidim. He taught his followers a complex system of meditation and concentration based on combinations and permutations of letters and words, with the goal of entering the inner spiritual realms and receiving "the descent of the divine influx." Because of his unorthodox practices, many of which involved repetition of divine "names" whose pronunciation had been forbidden, Abulafia was excommunicated as a heretic by the orthodox Jewish authorities of his time, and many of his manuscripts were lost for several centuries. Today modern researchers have been successfully unearthing and studying them, bringing to light a lost chapter in Jewish mystical history.

By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many kabbalists had gathered in Safed, Palestine. Rabbi Isaac Luria, who was known as ha-Ari (the Lion), was the center of this circle of Safed mystics. Also called the divine Rabbi Isaac, he was said to possess the holy spirit and to have been given the revelation of Elijah. Luria transformed the doctrine of emanation described in the *Zohar* into a more complex system. He taught that at the time of creation, there had been a primal cosmic



catastrophe, when the divine light broke its "vessels," became dispersed in the creation, and was entrapped by matter. The *sefirot* (divine emanations) were understood as representing divine forces, which could be brought into balance through the practice of particular unifications (*yihudim*) and intentions (*kavvanot*). The unifications involved focused repetitions of names or phrases, and intentions consisted of rituals performed with specific intention or purpose. The goal of the practices he taught was to raise the sparks of light and allow them to return to their source, to bring the divine forces into harmony and restore the balance in the heavenly spheres.

Although some Jewish mystics have claimed success in following these complicated repetition practices of letter and word combinations and permutations, there are also many stories relating the dangers and pitfalls experienced by practitioners. Despite the dangers, there were Jewish mystics who continued to teach these practices openly until the sixteenth century, when it became prudent to hide their use; by the eighteenth century they had almost died out. Since the 1970s, however, with the resurgence of interest in Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah, a number of seekers have begun attempting these techniques once again, using old manuscripts as models and guides.

The Kabbalah has been an influence not only on the Jews. Christian scholars looked into its symbols and allegories and found references to Jesus and his teachings. The Kabbalah is also the focus of Freemasonry and other secret societies, which have as their goal the discovery of a mystical knowledge they believe to have been handed down through the generations since the time of Adam. According to the Freemasons, the *Zohar* itself is the vehicle of the most profound religious mysteries, revealed only orally in previous ages, to which hints exist in secret manuscripts.

During the seventeenth century, a Jewish mystic named Sarmad settled in India. Born into a rabbinical family of Kashan, Persia, he came to India as a trader and experienced a spiritual transformation. Sarmad is still revered throughout India, yet little is known about the details of his life, and Western Judaism is largely unaware of him. From his writings, however, there is evidence that Sarmad was a mystic of the highest order, a saint who transcended the outer formalities of religion and found the Lord within himself. He wrote of union with the Name as union with the inner divine music. Some sources say he converted to Islam and then to Hinduism, but if one reads his *rubaiyats* (poems) carefully, it is clear that although he examined all religions, he rejected their external limitations, embracing the one inner experience which he recognized as the true teaching. He boldly sang of his unconventional love for the Lord and inspired others to do the same. In 1659–60, because of his unorthodox approach to worship, he was beheaded as a heretic by Aurangzeb, the Mogul emperor of India.

The most recent flourishing of mysticism in Judaism is Hasidism, which appeared in Poland at the end of the eighteenth century, a time when Jews were being heavily persecuted. There was deep yearning for God to reveal himself, for a religious renewal that would lift the soul out of the sufferings of the world. Hasidism fulfilled this need and in course of time transformed Judaism. During this time, many spiritual teachers appeared, who were called *rebbe*s or *zaddiks* (masters) by their disciples.

The first hasidic master, the Ba'al Shem Tov (literally, Master of the Good Name) was a simple, uneducated man—the antithesis of the traditional rabbi, who was generally a scholar and an intellectual. The Ba'al Shem Tov communed with God internally and preferred the stillness of nature to the



synagogue. It is said that he was able to speak to and understand the birds and animals. He spoke of seeing the divine light and taught his followers the importance of *devekut*, attachment or cleaving to God at every moment of their lives. There were many other hasidic masters who followed him, like Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav and Dov Baer, the Maggid (channel or preacher) of Mezhericz—spiritual teachers whose legends and parables are quoted even in present times.

At first the Hasidim were considered as heretics by mainstream rabbis and the community at large; some were even excommunicated and their writings put in *herem*, quarantine, and reading them was forbidden. Later, however, as the hasidic rebbes gathered more and more adherents, their teachings spread and gained strength among the people. Nowadays, the descendants of the Hasidim still follow the rebbes of their respective lines, but their teachings and practice have for the most part become another form of orthodoxy, although sometimes infused with an intensity, joy, and fervor that reflect their true hasidic origin.

At the end of the nineteenth century there was a decline in mystical seeking in Judaism, as the *Haskalah*, the enlightenment movement, took over. All over the world, science became the new god, and people rejected religion—especially mysticism—as superstition. However, in certain parts of Europe there were small groups of mystics who continued to study the Kabbalah, while some hasidic lines strove to maintain the integrity of their original purpose.

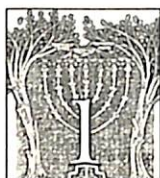
The late twentieth century has seen a resurgence in the study of Kabbalah and other Jewish mystical movements, and many seekers have attempted to follow their meditative practices. This is due, in part, to the rediscovery and publication of many lost or suppressed manuscripts as well as an increasing interest in mysticism in all sectors of Western society. Martin

Buber, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Aryeh Kaplan, and Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi are among the Jewish leaders who have emphasized once again the need for inwardness in spiritual devotion. This has led to examination of self and tradition. As Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser wrote:

The mystical spirit that craves for a direct encounter with God, for a fresh illumination of soul, is not content with pondering a tradition, even a mystical tradition. To gain this boon the mystic must travel the lone road of meditation, of struggling with his own opaque material self, to break the barrier that separates him from God and to enter directly into contact with the divine mystery.<sup>7</sup>







## God, Soul, and Creation

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### The Soul and the Lord

Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion;  
For, lo, I come,  
And I will dwell inside of thee,  
Saith the Lord.\*

*ZECHARIAH 2:14*

This biblical passage from the prophet Zechariah reveals the basis of God's loving relationship with humanity: the Lord has placed himself, his very essence, within us—he himself dwells in each and every human being! The human soul is identical with God, thus each person is the temple where the Lord resides. As the Maggid of Mezhericz, the great *rebbe* or spiritual teacher of eighteenth-century Hasidism, wrote,

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\* Author's translation. In Hebrew, *betohayh* means inside thee, but it is often translated as among you.

"Think of your soul as part of the Divine Presence as the raindrop in the sea."<sup>1</sup>

Maharaj Charan Singh, spiritual master in the Radha Soami line of mystics at Beas, India, explained the relationship of the soul to the Lord in a similar fashion:

Our soul is of the essence of the Lord. We are a drop of that vast ocean of divinity, a ray of that mighty sun.<sup>2</sup>

Mystics of the Kabbalah taught that the soul is a spiritual essence distinct from the body, which continues to live when the body dies:

What, then, is man? Does he consist solely of skin, flesh, bones and sinews? Nay, the essence of man is his soul; the skin, flesh, bones and sinews are but an outward covering, the mere garments, but they are not the man. When man departs [from this world] he divests himself of all these garments.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Kabir Sahib, an Indian saint of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, sang:

O Kabir, the soul is a particle of God;  
Though it is in the body, it is never destroyed.<sup>4</sup>

During the course of our lives here on earth, many of us feel a deep loneliness and yearning. We feel empty and incomplete. Mystics teach that this loneliness is actually the soul's longing to return to its divine origin, the original home from where it emanated at the time of creation. The soul feels this separation because originally it experienced oneness with God. The physical body is like a cage that imprisons the bird of our soul.

According to the mystics, God has placed this feeling of loneliness in our hearts in order to pull us toward him. It is the natural expression of the affinity between our soul and God. If we had not felt this longing and restlessness, this inner vacuum, we would not have turned from our involvement in worldly activities and embarked on our spiritual quest to find union with God.

Our soul will find contentment and inner peace only when it experiences spiritual union. The feeling of separation will persist so long as the soul does not return to its original home and meet its Lord.

In Judaism, we often read that we are in a state of exile. On a mystical level, the ultimate state of exile is the soul's separation from oneness with God. Man's goal is to overcome that state of separation and achieve divine union. Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, Poland, one of the great hasidic masters, wrote about the importance of returning to the spiritual source:

Eternal life is for God alone. He lives forever, and whoever merges himself in his source, that is, in God, praised be He, also enjoys eternal life ... Similarly there is no perfection except in God, praised be He, and everything outside of him is deficient, but whoever is merged in him also enjoys perfection.<sup>5</sup>

This separation and loneliness of the soul was expressed metaphorically in Judaism as the exile of the people of Israel from the promised land. The goal of returning to the promised land can be viewed as a symbol of the return of the soul to its Lord. The Ba'al Shem Tov, first of the hasidic masters, taught:

The soul of man has been separated from its source, wandering in exile in a strange land—"I am a stranger on earth"



(*Psalms 119:19*)—ever yearning to return to that from which it first sprang and cleave to the Soul of all souls.<sup>6</sup>

Over the ages, mystics have used many metaphors to convey the state of the soul's longing to return to its source. One of the strongest and most beautiful of these is the image of the bride separated from the bridegroom, the lover from the beloved. Thus, the *Song of Songs* of the Bible can be understood not only literally as a worldly love poem but as a mystic allegory of the soul's longing for union with the Lord:

I opened to my beloved;  
 But my beloved had turned away, and was gone.  
 My soul failed me when he spoke.  
 I sought him, but I could not find him;  
 I called him, but he gave me no answer.  
 The watchmen that go about the city found me,  
 They smote me, they wounded me;  
 The keepers of the walls took away my mantle from me.  
 I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,  
 If ye find my beloved,  
 What will ye tell him?  
 That I am love-sick.

SONG OF SONGS 5:6-8

How similar this passage is in feeling and tone to the songs of the sixteenth-century Indian woman saint, Mira Bai!

Dear One! Without you, sleep is torture.  
 Every moment stares at me like an age,  
 while within me burns the agony of separation.  
 Of what use is carrying this lamp of life,  
 if He does not come?

Ah, this candlelight sheds no joy on my path.  
My bed strewn with roses has turned to thorns,  
as I have lain awake all night.<sup>7</sup>

Arise, awake, O merciful Lord—  
I have been calling you for ever so long!  
My close relations have become my enemies;  
I am a burden to them all.  
Besides you, I have no one whom I can call my own—  
Pray, pull my boat out of the stormy sea!  
Beloved, without you I know no rest during the day,  
and I pass my nights in wakefulness.  
I stand knocking at your door.  
Pray, open it!  
The arrow of separation  
has pierced deep into my heart!<sup>8</sup>

Rabbi Isaac Luria, the renowned kabbalist of sixteenth-century Safed, Palestine, wrote of the soul as a spark of the divine light from which it had separated at the time of creation and with which it longs to be reunited. He spoke of the lower self as a *kelipah*, a shell or husk that encases the holy spark of our soul. Although we are of the same essence as the Lord, although we are truly spiritual, our imprisonment in these shells prevents us from knowing and experiencing our true spiritual essence.

The metaphor of the spark's separation from the divine light beautifully illustrates the process of the soul's separation from its source, the Lord, and its entrapment in the world of mind and senses. The purpose of human life, as Luria and later Jewish mystics described it, is to break the shells and liberate the sparks, freeing them to reunite with the original, eternal light.

This state of restoration is called *tikkun*—redemption or perfection.

The true spiritual masters come to this world to teach a method of freeing the soul—the spark—from the shell of mind and illusion, so it can merge back into God. This is the real unification, or yoga.

## The Creation

How did the soul become separated from the Lord? How did it get trapped in the human body? Saints and mystics explain that the story of the creation is actually a description of the soul's descent from the highest spiritual plane—where it had existed in union with the Divine—and its manifestation in the material plane. In a sense, creation represents the devolution of the soul, while the reverse of this process, the ascent of the soul to union with the Lord, is spiritual evolution.

### *THE AIN-SOF AND THE SEFIROT*

Mystics teach that before the creation, only the Lord existed. He was everything, and everything was contained within him. Nothing existed except him. Saints have called him nameless, timeless, formless, and self-contained. Since the beginning of the thirteenth century, Jewish mystics have used the term *Ain-Sof* to describe this divine, ineffable, eternal essence that pre-exists the creation. The Ain-Sof is the Supreme Being or realm which not only lies *beyond* the Creator God, it transcends even the *will* to create. Literally, Ain-Sof means limitless, endless, infinite,

absolute perfection in which there are no distinctions and no differentiations ... the domain of the hidden God that lies beyond any impulse toward creation: the concealed light,



indistinguishable unity, the essence ... above or beyond thought.<sup>9</sup>

The creation took place through the expression or projection of the divine essence of the Ain-Sof, which mystics have also called the Name of God. Nothing exists that he did not create through this Name. The holy Name is the first manifestation of the divine will expressing itself. This "self-expression" of the Lord gives rise to the creation. The *Zohar* identified this creative and sustaining divine principle with God's love.<sup>10</sup>

Jewish mystics read the biblical story of the creation as an allegory. The Book of Genesis begins by saying: *Bereshit bara Elohim*, "In the beginning God created." According to the *Zohar*, the word "beginning" refers to "the high and hidden point" of light, from which the divine power was projected. It describes this primal moment of creation:

When the King conceived ordaining  
He engraved engravings in the luster on high.  
A blinding spark flashed  
within the Concealed of the Concealed  
from the mystery of the Infinite,  
a cluster of vapor in formlessness,  
set in a ring,  
not white, not black, not red, not green,  
no color at all.  
When a band spanned, it yielded radiant colors.  
Deep within the spark gushed a flow  
imbuing colors below,  
Concealed within the Concealed  
of the mystery of the Infinite.  
The flow broke through  
and did not break through its aura.

It was not known at all  
 until, under the impact of breaking through,  
 one high and hidden point shone.  
 Beyond that point, nothing is known.  
 So it is called Beginning,  
 the first command of all.<sup>11</sup>

At the next stage of the creative process, the Bible says: "God said, 'Let there be light'" (*Genesis 1:3*). The fact that the creation happened when "God said ..." was understood by the later Jewish mystics to mean that the creation came about through the activity of the original speech, voice, or utterance of God. In fact, several early Aramaic translations of the Bible (dating from approximately the second century) consistently used the term *memra*, utterance, to translate the name of God "YHWH." The rabbis of that period referred to the great event of the creation as the divine creative speech. In the Jewish prayers, God is described as having created the world "only by his will uttered in a gentle sound."<sup>12</sup>

The Gospel of John uses the same terminology to explain the primal creative process. It says the creation took place through the Word of God (*John 1:1-3*). This Word is not a spoken word, but the projection of God's essence, his love, which is identical to his holy Name, or utterance. The Jewish mystics who preceded Jesus equated it with God's creative power, the source of all energy, all vibration, all creation. Indian mystics have called it the *Shabd* (word or sound), *Nam* (name), and *Hukam* (command).

The Jewish mystics of the Kabbalah (post-thirteenth century) describe the process of creation as a continuing series of ten emanations of the divine power of the Ain-Sof. The Kabbalah used the term *sefirot* to describe these emanations or projections through whose activity the various spiritual, causal,

astral, and material worlds were created. The sefirot are the divine emanations or powers by means of which God created the world and through which he reaches into the human realm. They are gradations of divine qualities which serve as a bridge between the spiritual and the material realms.

Most modern scholars believe the term *sefirah* (singular of *sefirot*) comes from cipher or number. The term was first used in the *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Formation), in which the creation is described in terms of mathematical relationships. Gershom Scholem, however, one of the twentieth century's foremost scholars of Kabbalah, derives the term from *sapir*, meaning sapphire, a reference to the brilliance and radiance of God, like that of the sapphire. Use of the term sefirot, therefore, implies that the creation took place by and through the divine light. The Jewish mystics describe the Ain-Sof as the first light from which all other light emanated. They understood the sefirot as projections of that light. The *Zohar* says:

He made ten lights spring forth from him, and which shed everywhere the light of a brilliant day. The Ancient One, the most Hidden of the hidden, is a high beacon, and we know him only by his lights, which illuminate our eyes so abundantly. His holy Name is no other thing than these lights.<sup>13</sup>

The sefirot are also called *orot* (lights), *kohot* (powers), *ketarim* (crowns, since they are the celestial crowns of the Holy King), *madregot* (stages), and *levushim* (garments).<sup>14</sup> The kabbalists considered the sefirot as *ma'amarot* and *dibburim* (utterances and sayings), and identified them with various *shemot* (names) of God. Each sefirah corresponds to a particular name or sound emanating from the original Voice or Word of God. Scholem explains:



The process by which the power of emanation manifests itself from concealment into revelation is paralleled by the manifestation of divine speech from its inner essence in thought, through sound that as yet cannot be heard, into the articulation of speech.<sup>15</sup>

The *Zohar* says:

Come and see. Thought (*Hokhmah*, Wisdom, the second sefirah) is the beginning of all, and in that it is ... internal, secret, and unknowable. When this thought extended farther it came to a place where spirit dwelt, and when it reached this place it was called *Binah* (Understanding, the third sefirah), and this is not so secret as the preceding, even though it is also secret. This spirit extended itself and brought forth a voice, comprised of fire, water, and wind (symbolizing the fourth, fifth, and sixth sefirot), which were north, south, and east. This voice comprised all the other powers. And this voice governs speech, and produces a word in its correct form, since the voice was sent forth from the place of the spirit, and came to govern the word, to produce correct words. And if you examine the levels [you will see] that it is thought, understanding, voice, and speech, and it is all one, and thought is the beginning of all, and there is no division; but it is all one, and all connected.<sup>16</sup>

In the Book of Genesis of the Bible, the creation is described as having taken place over six days. On each day, God created a different aspect of the physical world. The kabbalists understood the six days of Genesis as a symbolic reference to the projection of the sefirot from the Ain-Sof. To them, the Ain-Sof exists in a state of eternal concealment and transcendence, but it manifests itself through these graded emanations.

### SUBSTANCE OF THE AIN-SOF

The Ain-Sof is the supreme region or divine essence from which the creation was projected. Its "substance" was understood by kabbalists to be the energizing force sustaining all creation. Charles Ponce explains the relationship of the Ain-Sof to the sefirot. He says that if the sefirot are the branches of the tree of life, the Ain-Sof is the sap that energizes it. If the sefirot are qualities of the divine light, the Ain-Sof is the divine light itself, the source of all light.<sup>17</sup>

Moses de Leon of the thirteenth century used the metaphor of an interlinking chain to describe the relationship of the Ain-Sof and the sefirot:

God is unified oneness—one without two, inestimable. Genuine divine existence engenders the existence of all of creation. The sublime, inner essences secretly constitute a chain linking everything from the highest to the lowest, extending from the upper pool to the edge of the universe.

There is nothing—not even the tiniest thing—that is not fastened to the links of this chain. Everything is catenated in its mystery, caught in its oneness. God is one, God's secret is one, all the worlds below and above are all mysteriously one. Divine existence is indivisible.

The entire chain is one. Down to the last link, everything is linked with everything else; so divine essence is below as well as above, in heaven and on earth. There is nothing else.<sup>18</sup>

The sixteenth-century kabbalists of Safed taught that at the time of creation, the souls—which are sparks of the divine substance of the Ain-Sof—became contained by *kelipot*, the vessels or garments of the physical creation, which diminish in the level of their refinement the farther they are from the source

of emanation. Yet "behind these infinite garments there is not a single link in the chain where the substance of Ain-Sof does not remain present and immanent."<sup>19</sup> Rabbi Moses Cordovero of Safed explained:

First, you should know that the Creator, Ain-Sof, is the cause of causes, one without a second, one that cannot be counted. Change and mutability, form and multiplicity, do not apply to it....

The Creator is called one from this aspect: Ain-Sof is present in all things in actuality, while all things are present in it potentially. It is the beginning and cause of everything. In this way oneness has been ascribed to the Creator; nothing can be added to this oneness or subtracted from it....

Furthermore, you should know that Ain-Sof emanated the sefirot, through which its actions are performed. They serve as vessels for the actions deriving from Ain-Sof in the world of separation and below. In fact, its existence and essence spread through them....

Before these qualities emanated, they were utterly concealed within Ain-Sof, utterly united with it. No image can be applied to them—not even a point; rather, they were united with it....<sup>20</sup>

In the beginning Ain-Sof emanated ten sefirot, which are of its essence, united with it. It and they are entirely one. There is no change or division in the emanator that would justify saying it is divided into parts in these various sefirot. Division and change do not apply to it, only to the external sefirot....

... Imagine a ray of sunlight shining through a stained-glass window of ten different colors. The sunlight possesses no color at all but appears to change hue as it passes through



the different colors of glass. Colored light radiates through the window. The light has not essentially changed, though so it seems to the viewer. Just so with the sefirot. The light that clothes itself in the vessels of the sefirot is the essence, like the ray of sunlight. That essence does not change color at all ...<sup>21</sup>

### DIVINE REALMS

The kabbalists viewed the activity of the sefirot as taking place within a series of inner worlds or realms. Each such world was described as a projection or reflection of the one above. The highest of these worlds is called *Atzilut*, Emanation, signifying the spiritual realm in which the potential for the primal emanation of divine qualities exists.\* Below *Atzilut* is *Briah*, Creation, the realm where the divine will becomes active in creating the prototypes of the creation below. This is followed by *Yetzirah*, the world of Formation—the astral level. The lowest world is the physical realm of *Assiyah*, meaning Actualization or Making.

The *Zohar* gives its interpretation of the relationship between these various realms of projection and reflection:

Rabbi Simeon said: Alas for humanity, for they do not see and they do not understand. When it arose in thought before the Holy One, blessed be He, to create his world, all the worlds arose in one thought and with this thought they were all created. This is the meaning of "With wisdom have You made them all" (*Psalms* 104:24). And with this thought, which is wisdom, this world and the world above were created. He stretched forth his right hand and created the

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\* The name *Atzilut* derives from the Hebrew *etzel*, which means near, referring to this realm's closeness to God.

world above. He stretched forth his left hand and created this world. This is the meaning of "My hand has laid the foundation of the earth, and My right hand has spread out the heavens. I call to them. They stand up together" (*Isaiah 48:13*). They were all created in a single moment, at the same time, and He made this world to match the world above, and whatever exists above has its counterpart below, and whatever exists below has its counterpart in the sea, and all is one.<sup>22</sup>

The kabbalists grouped the ten sefirot into three triads of three sefirot each, with the tenth sefirah at the bottom. They taught that each of the worlds or realms—Atzilut, Briah, Yetzirah, and Assiyah—is made of successively lower intensities of all ten sefirot. They envisioned the ten sefirot of the world of Atzilut as active on the level of subtle potentiality, still contained within the divine unity. At the other end, they understood the ten sefirot of Assiyah as existing in the human body itself, with each sefirah corresponding to a particular function or energy center of the body.

Cordovero explains the relationship of the Ain-Sof, the sefirot, and the worlds:

Among the kabbalists, the most widely accepted depiction of the sefirot is as follows: *Keter* [Crown], *Hokhmah* [Wisdom], and *Binah* [Understanding] in the form of a triangle. Beneath them, also in the form of a triangle, *Hesed* [Loving-kindness], *Gevurah* or *Din* [Might, Judgment], and *Tiferet* [Splendor], followed by another triangle of *Netzah* [Victory, Eternity], *Hod* [Grandeur, Majesty], and *Yesod* [Foundation]. Centered beneath them is *Malkhut* [Kingship]. The upper sefirot need the lower ones, and the lower sefirot need the upper ones. So the power of the lower sefirot is in the upper ones, and the

power of the upper sefirot is in the lower ones. All of them need Ain-Sof, while it needs none of them....

Various channels have been ascribed to these sefirot, signifying the path of the ray of illumination from the first sefirah to its recipient, and the pathway from the recipient back to the emanating sefirah, so that it can receive. The joining of these two aspects of light constitutes a channel. The various types of channels are actually innumerable....

The light of the sefirot emanates and radiates from above to below in a direct path: Keter, Hokhmah, Binah, Hesed, Gevurah, Tiferet, Netzah, Hod, Yesod, Malkhut. Having descended to the site of its status, the light is reflected back, from below to above... Here lies the mystery of the reflection of light from below to above, the mystery of the reversal of light, striking a mirror and returning to its source....

The existence stemming from God, extending to the lowest point, is divided into four divisions. The first is *Atzilut*, Emanation, namely the ten emanated sefirot, through which spreads the light of Ain-Sof. The second is the realm of the Throne of Glory, called *Briah*, Creation. The light of the ten sefirot spreads through it—called here the sefirot of Creation. Thus the light of Ain-Sof clothes itself in them through the medium of emanated light.

The third realm comprises ten bands of angels and the celestial palaces. The light of the ten sefirot spreads also through them, through the light of the ten sefirot of Creation. This realm is called *Yetzirah*, Formation, and as the sefirot spread through them, they are called the ten sefirot of Formation. Thus the light of Ain-Sof clothes itself through emanated light.

The fourth realm is the heavens and the entire material world. This is called *Assiyah*, Actualization, and it includes



ten heavens. The light of the sefirot spreads through them, and they are called the ten sefirot of Actualization. Here holiness pervades physical matter.

So these four are called Atzilut, Briah, Yetzirah, Assiyah; Emanation, Creation, Formation, Actualization. Their acronym is *ABiYA*. Emanation transcends Creation, Creation transcends Formation, Formation transcends Actualization. All four divisions are found in each one, since the degrees descend from cause to caused.<sup>23</sup>

The kabbalists also used the image of the tree of life to describe the relationship between the sefirot when manifested in the human body. In Jewish meditational practices, the tree of life served as a map of the various steps or stations a practitioner would ascend in the course of his inner mystic journey to spiritual union. Similarly, Indian yogis and mystics describe a series of *chakras* or energy centers in the body, upon which they meditate during certain practices of physical yoga.

It is difficult to know precisely which activities of the creation took place in which realm, because the kabbalists themselves were not all of a uniform view. There were kabbalists who divided the ten sefirot into three realms of three sefirot each, with the tenth sefirah at the bottom, in the realm of Assiyah. There were systems where tens, even hundreds of series of the sefirot and the realms were placed within each other; systems in which microcosms of all four realms were placed within the macrocosm of each realm at respectively higher and lower intensities.

One thing that can be agreed upon, however, is that between the highest sefirah of pure spirit in the realm of Atzilut to the lowest sefirah of the physical plane, there are numerous intermediate realms where spirit and matter are intermixed

in varying degrees. The successive levels of creation took place according to the predominant qualities at each level.

#### TEACHINGS OF THE INDIAN SAINTS

The teachings of the Kabbalah concerning the creation, including the nature of the Ain-Sof, the sefirot, and the four worlds or realms, correspond in many respects with the teachings of mystics of different religions and cultural traditions. According to many Indian saints, for example, the creation came from *Shabd*—the divine Word, Sound, or Name. It is this divine energy, or vibration of life, that brought the creation into existence and maintains it. Through inner meditation practice, this divine spiritual energy can be perceived within oneself as spiritual sound and light. The *Shabd* is the true substance or essence of the creation, and corresponds to the Kabbalah's description of the Ain-Sof. Like the Ain-Sof, the realm of pure *Shabd* is considered the supreme reality or being, from which the creation was projected through several regions or levels—from the highest spiritual plane, to the causal, astral and physical planes, successively. The hierarchy of regions or planes of creation has parallels with the kabbalistic description of the sefirot and the realms of Atzilut, Briah, Yetzirah and Assiyah.

The highest realm of spirit is described by Indian mystics as *Sach Khand*, meaning true home or true abode. Soami Ji, first in the line of the Radha Soami masters, refers to the region of *Sach Khand* as follows:

This is the beginning and end of everything and circumscribes all. The love and energy of this region vibrate at every place.... In the beginning, the divine Will emanated from this region and came down in the form of *Shabd*. This is the region of the supreme Saints.<sup>24</sup>

The supreme region of Sach Khand is eternal and true; in other words, it is not subject to dissolution at the time the creation is withdrawn or ends. From Sach Khand, the divine will emanates in the form of Shabd through two spiritual regions, Bhanwar Gupha (the revolving cave) and Daswan Dwar (the tenth door). The unalloyed purity, the beauty and intensity of the light and sound of these regions, cannot be described.

Seen from the perspective of the individual soul, which is a particle of the divine Shabd, the first stage of the creation represents the soul's initial separation from the unexpressed Divine—where it had existed in a state of undifferentiated unity—and its projection as an individual entity through the regions of spirit.

After this initial descent, the soul enters the causal plane, where it takes on a certain degree of fine matter, in the form of mind. The sounds and lights of this region are brilliant and entrancing. This region is still largely spiritual; the divine Shabd prevails but has become mixed with matter. Often this process is described as the soul taking on a causal body.

The causal region is called Trikuti (three prominences) by Indian mystics. This region is the source of the entire material creation, including the causal, astral, and physical worlds.\* In Trikuti, the ideas or seed forms of the creation below are first manifested. The causal plane has been described as the place where "mind patterns were formed and designs of things to be were made, like architects make blueprints."<sup>25</sup> Whatever exists on the astral or physical plane, exists first on the causal.

Indian mystics generally refer to the lord of the causal region as Brahm. Since the material creation actually begins from here, they describe Brahm as the Creator, as he contains

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\* When used in this sense, matter and materiality include mind as well as physical matter.



the entire material creation within him. The realm governed by Brahm is often called Brahmand—the egg of Brahm. From the mystic perspective, it is a reflection of Sach Khand.

Jewish mystics sometimes explained the creation of the universe by using the image of *Adam Kadmon*, the “first man,” as the macrocosm from which the entire creation was generated. As such, the primal being contains the universe within him and may be viewed as being similar to Brahm. Mystics have used the metaphor of the primal man, who contains and generates the creation, to show how each world contains and generates the ones below.

The Chinese mystics, for example, also explain how the primal man contains the creation:

Confucianism of China says that long, long ago before the world was created there was nothing. Then something appeared. Out of something, P'an Ku [primal man] was created. He was very big and very strong and when he died, his last groan became the thunder, his last breath became the wind, his left eye became the sun and his right the moon. The blood of his veins became the rivers, his hair the forests. His flesh became the earth, the humans.<sup>26</sup>

The Indian mystics also refer to Brahm as Kal (literally, time), the “negative” power. Time is negative because above the causal region everything is unalloyed spirit, or Shabd, where time does not exist. From the causal region and below, everything is subject to time, change, and duality. Spirit (truth, eternity) has become mixed with matter (illusion, impermanence).

After passing through the causal plane, the soul continues its descent, becoming entangled in the denser vibrations of the mind. The soul's innate sound and light are increasingly smothered, yet spirit still activates it. The soul becomes like a

light bulb wrapped in a number of coverings which obscure its light.

Thus the soul descends to the astral region, where, already covered by the causal body, it takes on the astral body as well. This realm is called *Anda*; it is a reflection of *Brahmand*, and contains all the heavens and paradises as well as the creation below it. Indian mystics call the astral region *Sahansdal Kanwal*, the thousand-petalled lotus, because here the inner light appears as an intense central flame surrounded by a thousand petal-like flames. This represents the confluence of the currents of divine energy, before they finally separate and enter the prolific diversity of the physical world. Although the sounds and lights of this region are less intense than those of the higher regions, they are still far beyond the reach of a person's ordinary physical senses.

Continuing its descent, the soul enters the realm of gross matter. Here the spiritual sound and light can no longer be heard or seen because the soul has become completely smothered. This is the physical world. Indian mystics call it the realm of *Pind* (matter); it is a reflection of *Anda*.

As the soul descends to *Pind* in the company of the mind and senses, its energies are attracted increasingly downward and outward. Ultimately, under the influence of the mind and its desires, as well as the pull of the senses, the soul loses touch with its divine origin, with its spiritual identity. It becomes completely identified with the world of matter.

The divine will, or *Shabd*, the soul current, issues from the highest spiritual realm, *Sach Khand*. It descends through the various spiritual and mental regions until, as the individual soul, it enters the physical plane at the eye center, from where it sustains and maintains a person's physical, mental, and spiritual functions. At death, the current withdraws from the body at that point. As long as someone is alive, the soul current gives



life to the physical body and holds together its otherwise disparate elements. Its origin is God—beyond mind and illusion—yet it is present in the finite human body, providing a link with God and a means to return to him.

### CYCLES OF CREATION

The Indian saints teach that there have been many cycles of creation, punctuated by dissolutions (*pralayas*) of everything up to the causal plane. Beyond that, although less frequently, the mystics describe the *mahapralaya*, the grand dissolution, when the Lord withdraws the Shabd up to its source in Sach Khand and everything below is dissolved—the spiritual regions of Bhanwar Gupha and Daswan Dwar, as well as the causal, astral, and physical realms.

Within each creation, time is divided into four yugas, or ages: Sat Yuga or the golden age, the age of truth and mercy; Treta Yuga or the silver age; Dwapar Yuga or the copper age; Kal Yuga or the iron age, which is also described as the age of Kal or judgment. We are presently living in Kal Yuga.

Jewish mysticism also teaches that there have been numerous cosmic cycles and ages. The cosmic cycles of creation are called *shemittot*. According to the *Zohar*, "Before God created this world He created others and destroyed them."<sup>27</sup> Gershom Scholem explains the Jewish doctrine of the *shemittot*:

In the seventh millennium, which is the *shemittah* period, the Sabbath-day of the cycle, the sefirotic forces cease to function and the world returns to chaos. Subsequently, the world is renewed through the power of the following *sefirah*, and is active for a new cycle. At the end of all the *shemittot* there is the "great jubilee," when not only all the lower worlds but the seven supporting *sefirot* themselves are reabsorbed into *Binah* [the third *sefirah*].<sup>28</sup>



The kabbalists teach that with each *shemittah*, or cycle of creation, the quality of life differs markedly. They agree that presently we are living in the cycle of judgment, in which the principle of strict justice dominates. This period was preceded by the cycle of loving-kindness, or *hesed*, corresponding to a golden age. The Messianic period for which Jews have yearned is often understood as a future golden age.

Clearly, there are many correspondences between the notions of alternating cycles of creations and dissolutions in the descriptions of both Indian and Jewish mystics, just as there is a close parallel between the kabbalistic description of creation as a graded series of *sefirot*—emanations or projections of the divine substance of *Ain-Sof*—and the Indian mystics' description of the creation as *Shabd*, the divine power or Word, projected from the realms of pure spirit to the causal, astral, and finally to the physical planes.

### THE RETURN OF THE SOUL

Our material world, which we take to be real, is actually a coarse reflection of the upper worlds (astral and causal), and they in turn are reflections of the spiritual realms. Jewish mystics have taught that the soul is a spark of the divine light trapped here in *kelipot*, husks or shells of coarse existence. Whatever the image one uses, the reality is the same: the soul, in the process of separating from the Lord, took on coverings of mind and matter, and thus it entered, first the mental, and then the physical, material realm.

The goal of spiritual practice is to help the soul reverse this process of creation on an individual level, to free the soul from its imprisonment in matter and help it reunite with its divine source. The *tikkun*—the redemption of the soul to which the Jewish mystics allude—is described by Indian mystics as the merging of the soul into its divine source so it might never

again experience the pain of separation and imprisonment in the material creation. They teach that when we are filled with yearning to unite our souls with the Lord, he sends a perfect master, a true spiritual guide, to show us the path—the method of meditation on the Shabd, the sound current, God's holy Name—that will enable us to take our soul out of our body at will, withdraw it through the astral, causal, and spiritual regions, and experience its oneness with the Supreme Lord.

It is natural to wonder why the creation took place, why the Lord manifested himself into the material world and then why he chooses to dissolve his creation. We may question why spirit had to take on the coverings of mind and matter. However, the mystics teach us, until we learn to merge our soul back into the Lord, its divine source, we will never understand this mystery. Maharaj Charan Singh explains:

The purpose of creation cannot be understood at the level of intellect. You have to rise above the level of intellect; only then will you be able to understand the purpose of creation. So saints generally do not try to explain the purpose of creation. But one fact is before us: this world was created, and we are separated from the Father, and we are condemned to this separation. Unless we merge back into Him, we cannot escape from birth and death.

We have to grow spiritually within ourself to understand the purpose of creation. And then, perhaps you won't even ask the Father why He has created you, because you will be one with the Father, and will understand. In order to know the purpose of creation we must seek the Creator first, and then ask Him why.<sup>29</sup>





## The Human Condition

### The Story of Adam and Eve

According to the Bible, Adam and Eve were the first man and woman, the first human beings created by God. Their story is a parable of the human condition. It is an allegory of the entire creative process, for the descent of the soul from oneness with God to imprisonment in the physical regions.

Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden, which is understood by some Jewish mystics as a metaphor for the inner world of Briah, the causal realm. The rivers flowing from Eden to water the garden symbolize the nourishing current of divine energy which flows from God to sustain all creation.<sup>1</sup> Adam and Eve symbolize the state where the soul, still relatively pure, had not yet descended completely from the regions of spirit and mind into the material plane.

Several trees grew in the Garden of Eden. Originally, God had permitted Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of the tree of life, which grew in the middle of the garden. The tree of life



symbolically represents the life-giving current of the Word, the holy Name or creative power of God—man's spiritual essence. As Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan explained:

The tree also symbolizes man's spiritual essence, as alluded to in the verse, "Man is a tree of the field" (*Deuteronomy 20:19*).<sup>2</sup>

As it is the means through which the soul can reunite with its source, the metaphor of the tree of life was also used by Jewish mystics for the spiritual practice or technique used to achieve mystic union. Some Jewish mystics combined the metaphor of the tree of life with the inner path of the sefirot, in which the mystic would sit in meditation and draw his attention from the lowest branch or level to the highest.

Mystics often call the tree of life the middle path, as it goes directly back to God, deviating neither to the right nor left. God is the source of all life and being. Eating of the tree of life is a metaphor for coming in touch with the divine power and pursuing the inner path that reaches to the higher regions, back to the realms of pure spirit. It is called the tree of life because it leads to everlasting life. Once the soul unites with God, it will no longer suffer birth, death, and rebirth.

The thirteenth-century Jewish Sufi Obadyah Maimonides is one of many Jewish mystics who understood the story of Adam and Eve on a spiritual level. He viewed the tree of life as a symbol of "the ultimate felicity promised to the soul which, through knowledge and spiritual discipline, may return to its celestial source."<sup>3</sup>

It was the fruit of the second tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which God had forbidden to Adam and Eve. This is the tree of duality. It leads downward to the world of opposites, the material planes where we exist in duality—good

and evil, pleasure and pain. In the physical plane, the male and female principles become totally distinct, taking on separate bodies and becoming alien to each other. Tempted by the serpent, which symbolizes the mind and ego, Adam and Eve succumbed to desire and ate the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge of duality. Thus they entered the world of the senses.

After eating of the tree of good and evil, Adam and Eve suddenly became aware of their nakedness—"the eyes of them both were opened" (*Genesis 3:7*). They became self-conscious rather than God-conscious and thus lost contact with the Lord. Until that point they had been totally absorbed in the Lord, in the spirit. They had not been conscious of their own individual existence in separation from him. Now they became trapped in the illusion of duality, seeing two (man and God) where before they had seen only one (God).

"And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them" (*Genesis 3:21*)—God gave them "garments of skin," in other words, human bodies. The writer of the Bible has used a very strong image to tell us how the soul, bound by the desires of the mind, ultimately descends to the physical plane and takes on material form. Adam and Eve were thrown out of the spiritual regions and sent to the prison of the lowest material plane.

A similar mystical interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve appears in the *Zohar* and other works of Jewish mysticism. Adolphe Franck, nineteenth-century scholar of Kabbalah, summarizes the *Zohar's* interpretation:

Before Adam sinned, he obeyed only the wisdom whose light shines from on high; he had as yet not separated himself from the tree of life. But when he yielded to the desire to know the things here below and to descend to them,



tempted, he became acquainted with evil and forgot the good; he separated himself from the tree of life. Before Adam and Eve committed the sin, they heard the voice from on high, were in possession of higher wisdom, and retained their sublime and luminous nature. But after their sin, they could not understand even the voice from below.

Before they were beguiled by the subtleness of the serpent, Adam and Eve were not only exempt from the need of a body, but did not even have a body—that is to say, they were not of the earth. Both were pure intelligences, happy spirits like those dwelling in the abode of the elect. This explains the scriptural text where Adam and Eve are represented as nude during their state of innocence. When we are told by the writer of sacred history that God clothed them in tunics of skin, he means that God provided them with bodies and the faculty of sensation, so they might be able to inhabit this world to which they were drawn by an imprudent curiosity or the desire to know good and evil.<sup>4</sup>

The Bible continues: “In toil shalt thou eat ... all the days of thy life.... In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground” (*Genesis 3:17–19*). Living on the earth plane, a place of toil, sweat, agony, death, and rebirth, Adam and Eve must eat bread. Now that they have bodies and live on the physical plane, they will need physical food until they die. They can no longer be nourished by the spiritual nectar or Word. At death, their physical bodies will return to the earth, and their minds and souls will again enter the astral realms, awaiting rebirth.

And the Lord God said: “Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live



forever." Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So He drove out the man; and He placed at the east of the garden of Eden the cherubim, and the flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way to the tree of life.

GENESIS 3:22-24

Once Adam and Eve tasted of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they had become trapped in the illusion of duality—in I-ness, in ego. They were no longer absorbed in the unity of God. Thus they had become spiritually unfit to ascend freely to the inner realms. They could not partake of both trees; they could not live in both worlds—the world of ego and the world of the divine. So God had to keep from them all knowledge of the inner path. He placed the *cherubim* between them and the higher spiritual realms.

Kaplan explains that the cherubim are angelic guardians, the first beings one sees on the inner journey. In later Jewish mysticism they came to symbolize a level one had to pass through in order to ascend further.<sup>5</sup> Some Jewish mystics like Obadyah Maimonides equated the cherubim with our worldly obsessions—"the lure of matter"—as they obstruct the way to the inner path, which is symbolized by the tree of life.<sup>6</sup> The Bible also tells us that along with the cherubim, God placed a "flaming sword that burned in all directions" at the entrance to the inner regions, "east of the Garden of Eden." The flaming sword symbolizes God's cleansing power and might, keeping those who are unfit from progressing to the inner realms.

The story of Adam and Eve is a parable explaining why we are all separated from the Lord, why our souls cannot freely enter the higher regions and merge into the divine source. But the Supreme Lord, who is the source of our soul, is all mercy and love. Once we tire of life in the material plane and yearn

to be free of the illusion of duality, he sends the spiritual masters to free us and take us out of the realm of mind. Through the meditation practice given by a true spiritual master, we cross the obstacles of the cherubim and the flaming sword; we traverse the various stations or branches of the tree of life, and we eat its life-giving fruit—the inner nectar, the Word, the Name—and ultimately we merge back into the Supreme Lord and live forever. Thus we transcend duality and exist enraptured in the love of God—the state that Adam and Eve had originally experienced in the Garden of Eden.

## Good and Evil

What is the nature of good and evil? Is evil created by God, or is it distinct from him? If we say that everything is created by God, we would have to include evil. But how can we say that God, who is all goodness and love, would create evil?

The resolution of this problem lies in a close examination of the nature and organization of the creation. The spiritual regions are pure spirituality, with no admixture of matter or mind. In these regions we can find only love and truth. Since the spiritual regions are not subject to change or duality, we call them eternal and true.

Below the realm of pure spirit there is matter, and matter is subject to change and disintegration. These regions—the causal, astral and physical planes—rest on a foundation of duality: spirit is there, mixed with matter; love is there, but tempered by negativity, or impermanence.

The creator lord of the causal plane, the highest of the realms below pure spirit, is called Kal, which also means time. Since Kal, or Brahm, has emanated from the Supreme Lord, evil, in effect, has emanated from the good. Kal surged forth in separation from the Lord and thus his realm was created,



just as the individual soul (the drop) separated from the ocean (the Lord) and found its own identity.

Kal is the archetype of the human ego, which desires identity, otherness. And this desire for identity, in separation from the Lord, is the intrinsic nature of evil. In the Kabbalah, Satan and Samael were the names given to the negative power of desire; they were identified with the serpent that seduced Eve of the Bible.

In Judaism, human beings are said to have two inclinations or impulses: the good inclination and the evil inclination. The good inclination is associated with the soul, which is our essence and is thus our primary inclination. The evil inclination is associated with the mind and body, which are matter or negativity, and represent our base inclination. Thus there is a conflict between the two impulses—between the soul, which is always yearning to merge in God, and the mind, which seeks self-expression through the body and senses. A Jewish mystic wrote, "The soul has the freedom to incline toward the good impulse, but because of its dependence on bodily action, there is great difficulty in overcoming the evil impulse."<sup>7</sup> We often say that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

Since the Lord, the pure spiritual being, is light, to obscure that light results in what we call evil. Dr. Julian Johnson, in *The Path of the Masters*, discusses the nature of evil in these terms:

Evil is only a lesser good. In other words, there is no such thing as evil per se.... evil is but a shadow, a lesser light....

Just as shadow is a lesser light, so evil is a lesser good.<sup>8</sup>

In the Bible there is a clear reference to the fact that both evil and good emanate from the Supreme Lord:



Out of the mouth of the Most High  
Proceedeth not evil and good?

*LAMENTATIONS 3:38*

Hasidism incorporates the philosophy that since everything comes from God, both evil and good are good—although from our level we do not always perceive them that way. Charles Ponce explained this aspect of the hasidic philosophy:

Once one understands that God is in all things, one can then come to understand that the evil and unhappiness existing in the world is only man's faulty view of things and not in the things themselves. The joy and celebration through prayer of the Hasidim has to do with their recognition of God being everywhere.<sup>9</sup>

The mystics give us a simple gauge by which we can measure our actions. Whatever pulls us away from the Lord and realizing him within us is evil; whatever leads us towards him is good. The ethical and moral laws incorporated into the codes of conduct of all religions and civilizations are based on an implicit understanding of this principle.

## Karma and Reincarnation

We often feel a yearning to be one with the Creator, to unite the individual spark of our soul with his divine light. Yet generally we feel separate from God, caught up in the problems and pleasures of life, in our emotions and passions. Naturally, we wonder what keeps us separated from the Lord. Why can't our soul merge into his?

Mystics tell us that we feel separated from God because we are caught in the web of illusion. When our soul separated from

its divine source, it took the mind as its companion, and the mind is the slave of the senses. It pursues sensual and material pleasures and has no control over its actions. Because the mind and soul are knotted together at the eye center, the soul suffers for the mind's actions.

Every action has its reaction. Our condition is dictated by this great law of nature: for every cause there is an effect and for every effect there is a cause. This is the law of *karma*, which literally means action. Nothing happens randomly, without a cause. There are no accidents. As Maharaj Charan Singh explains:

This world is a vast field of actions and reactions.

Cause and effect are truly its warp and woof.<sup>10</sup>

The law of karma is also called the law of compensation. In the Bible, this principle is used to explain the appropriate punishment for sin:

But if any harm follow, then thou shalt give life for life,  
eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,  
burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

EXODUS 21:22-24

Here the Bible is describing the basis of justice in the material world. It is explaining the cosmic law, the karmic law; if we do *x*, we will get punishment of equal weight; if we do *y*, we will get the reward appropriate for that action.

Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein;  
And he that rolleth a stone,  
It shall return upon him.

PROVERBS 26:27

The law of karma is also demonstrated in a short parable from "Ethics of the Fathers," a collection of stories and sayings from the rabbis of the Talmud in the first to third centuries:

He [Hillel] once saw the skull of a man floating on the face of the waters, and recognizing it, said: Because you drowned others, they drowned you. And those who drowned you will in the end be drowned.<sup>11</sup>

Thus we are caught in this cycle of action and reaction. We have come to this world many times, incarnated in many bodies, in order to reap the results of our actions. We cannot complain that people are treating us unjustly, because every situation we find ourselves in—every circumstance of our life—has been created by our own actions in earlier times. The Indian mystic, Guru Nanak, said:

Do not blame anybody;  
Our own deeds are responsible  
For whatever happens.  
As I did, so do I fare;  
Why then blame others for it?<sup>12</sup>

In "Ethics of the Fathers," Rabbi Akiba uses the metaphor of financial accounting to explain the law of karma:

Everything is a loan given against a pledge, and the net is cast over all the living so that none may forfeit paying by escaping. The shop is open; the shopkeeper extends credit; the ledger is spread out and the hand makes entries. Whoever wishes to borrow may come and borrow, but the collectors make their rounds daily and exact payment, whether or not one is aware of it. They go by an unfailing record, and the



judgment is a judgment of truth. And everything is made ready for the final accounting.<sup>13</sup>

Closely linked with the law of karma, then, is the law of reincarnation, which teaches that the soul does not die at the time of physical death; it reincarnates in another body. The law of karma does not apply only to this life; we continue reincarnating to reap the results of the karmas we have already created.

All our relationships are karmic in nature, created by our actions in past lives. We cannot imagine the extent of our interconnectedness with others. Every single exchange, every simple conversation, every situation, is the result of previous actions, in this life or in a past life. And we have no idea how many times and in what variety of forms we have taken birth. Once we realize the implications of the karmic law, we will realize the significance of everything we do or even think, because we will have to reap its results later in this life or in a future life.

Whether we do good or bad deeds, they will bring us back to this world to reap their rewards or punishments. At the time of our death, we will be assigned to that life form—human, plant, animal, or any other—where we can best pay off the consequences of those actions. While living through the results of our actions, we constantly perform new actions, and we will have to reap their results too. So, we are imprisoned in this cycle of birth and rebirth, and we come and go and come and go in a multitude of different forms.

If we spend our lives doing bad deeds, we will have to undergo suffering after our death, and then we will be reborn in a form that will allow us to suffer for the wrongs we have committed. Good deeds may entitle us to spend time in one of the heavens or paradises after our death, or to be reborn as rich or

powerful people; they may give us wealth and good health. Good deeds may allow us to exchange our chains of iron for chains of gold, but still we will be in chains. Maharaj Charan Singh teaches:

Both good and bad karmas are required for a human birth in this world. If we had all bad karmas we would be in hell; if we had all good karmas, we would reap our reward in paradise before again being sent into this world according to our destiny. This destiny, or fate, is carved out for us from our huge store of reserve karmas which have accumulated throughout the ages and from which a certain amount is taken as fate, or destiny, for each birth that we take. During each lifetime we perform still more good and bad karmas, and these again determine our future destiny. So it is an endless chain. That is what is meant by saying that everybody is born in sin, or in other words, with his own particular fate karmas, or destiny.<sup>14</sup>

There are subtle references to *gilgul*, reincarnation, in the Bible, and even more explicit references during the rabbinic period (first to third centuries) and in the writings of the Jewish mystics after the twelfth century. In the Bible we read:

I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation....

EXODUS 20:5

God would not be so unmerciful as to make children and grandchildren suffer for the sins of their parents and grandparents! Jewish mystics, therefore, see this passage as a reference to the laws of karma and reincarnation. It means that we will



be responsible across many lifetimes for the sins of one life. Today we are parents; tomorrow we may incarnate as the children of our children and have to suffer the consequences of our earlier actions. Our karmic attachments can keep us bound within a small circle. The law of karma is unrelenting, inexorable; in conjunction with the process of reincarnation it assures that final payment is made for all our actions.

In *The Jewish Mystical Tradition*, Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser gives the history of the Jewish belief in reincarnation:

The belief in the soul's reincarnation is first encountered in the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, but it received fresh emphasis in the later strata of the Kabbalah. It fit in especially with the Lurianic teaching, which saw in the soul's wandering from incarnation to incarnation another instance of the disorder that followed "the breaking of the vessels" at the time of creation [thus releasing the divine sparks into the world]. This belief reappeared in Hasidism and we find it in many expressions of popular religion.<sup>15</sup>

In Judaism, reincarnation was used to explain man's quest for spiritual betterment. It was seen as an opportunity, another chance to fulfill life's calling. Bokser continues:

A soul may be subjected to a series of reincarnations until the person whom it inhabits heeds the soul's call to enlist in the struggle for the liberation of the divine sparks from their imprisonment. The cycle of reincarnations is a kind of exile for the soul, and when it is finally permitted to return to its divine source, then it has found its peace.<sup>16</sup>

In the *Zohar*, reincarnation is described as one of life's great mysteries, for normally we are not aware of our soul's journeys



through many lives. The *Zohar* says that the soul is shot like a stone from a slingshot—once it begins its flight, it circles around and around before coming to rest:

Truly, all souls must undergo transmigration, but men do not perceive the ways of the Holy One, how the revolving scale is set up and men are judged every day at all times, and how they are brought before the Tribunal, both before they enter this world and after they leave it. They perceive not the many transmigrations and the many mysterious works which the Holy One accomplishes with many naked souls, and how many naked spirits roam about in the other world without being able to enter within the veil of the King's Palace. Many are the worlds through which they revolve, and each revolution is wondrous in many hidden ways, but men neither know nor perceive these things! Neither do they know how the souls roll about "like a stone inside a sling" (*I Samuel 25:29*).<sup>17</sup>

The laws of reincarnation and karma explain why some people are born into easy circumstances in life and others into difficult ones; why some people are talented in certain areas, others in other areas, and still others in none. Why else would a child be born with deformities? What did he do in this life to merit that severe handicap? And what did his parents do to deserve such anguish and be burdened with his care? Clearly, there is a hidden cause. Saints tell us that the child in his past life performed certain actions that resulted in his being born with those deformities, and the parents had a certain relationship with him previously, which forced them to bear the responsibility for his care and education in this life. As the *Sefer ha-Bahir* explains:

Why is it that there is a righteous person who enjoys good, and there is a righteous person who suffers affliction? It is because in the latter case that righteous person was formerly wicked, and he is now suffering punishment.... I do not refer to misdeeds in the course of the person's life. I refer to the fact that that person pre-existed prior to his present life.... How long does this go on? He said to them: For a thousand generations.<sup>18</sup>

How long do these karmic threads stretch? The *Bahir* says: "For a thousand generations," meaning, beyond our ability to count.

Whatever we experience in this world—wealth, poverty, intelligence, talent, disabilities, health, illness, pleasures, grief—all these come to us because of previous karmas. Even if we are happy today, we may suffer pain tomorrow, and vice versa. As long as we are living on this plane where the law of justice rules, where duality exists, we will experience change and uncertainty, death and rebirth. We will never know peace.

However, if we truly long for God-realization, we can find release from this field of karma, this realm of duality. Out of his compassion, God sends his emissaries, the spiritual masters, to teach us the real purpose of human life and guide us on the road to soul liberation.

## Free Will and Predestination

Since the soul initially surged forth in separation from the Lord, since the first action was committed by the first human being, everything has been the reaping of those first karmas. To express this concept differently, we can say that since the first "thought" or "idea" of the creation appeared in the "mind"



of God, everything has been predestined. In the Bible, the author of Ecclesiastes says:

Whatsoever cometh into being, the name thereof was given long ago, and it is foreknown what man is; neither can he contend with Him that is mightier than he.

*ECCLESIASTES 6:10*

In the *Zohar*, also, the issue of predestination was clearly discussed:

Just as all the things of this world, in their proper form, were present in God's thoughts before the Creation, so before coming into this world did all human souls exist in the presence of God in heaven in the form which they have here below; and all that they learn here, they already knew before coming here.<sup>19</sup>

Elsewhere the *Zohar* says:

The righteous see into the distant future and God crowns them with his own crown. That God sees the future we learn from the verse: "And God saw all that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (*Genesis 1:31*), which means that He foresaw all that was to happen before it was commenced. In the same way all the generations of the world from one end to the other stand before Him before they come into the world.<sup>20</sup>

How can we be held responsible for our actions when everything in our lives—the circumstances of our birth, our education, our family—are all predestined? The mystics agree



that from the higher perspective, from the level of the Lord, we have no free will, as everything we think and do is conditioned by our actions of the past and their results. We cannot change our destiny, the fate karmas which we have to pay off in this life.

Still, from our perspective, as we go through life, we do appear to be making choices. We do have a little free will and we have to make use of that will. That is the arena God has left to us. Mystics explain that we have limited or conditioned free will, and ultimately we will be responsible to account for every action we commit. We should not use karma theory and predestination to excuse our actions. In "Ethics of the Fathers," the same thought is expressed:

Everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is given. The world is judged mercifully, yet all is in accordance with the preponderant quality of the work.<sup>21</sup>

We cannot change the destiny that we have to face in life. However, the mystics explain, with spiritual practice we become detached, so that we can go through our karmas smilingly. Maharaj Charan Singh says:

We are all just like puppets who are dancing, and the strings are being pulled by Him according to our karmas. The realized souls and the unrealized souls are all dancing in the same way. The only difference is that the realized souls know that He is pulling the strings and the unrealized souls think they are dancing by their own effort. So, we have to act in this world with detachment to our role in life, knowing that He is pulling the strings and whatever is to happen will happen, but all the same doing our best under all circum-

stances. Thus we make ourselves receptive and become good puppets in his hands.<sup>22</sup>

The subject of free will and predestination is difficult to understand intellectually, because we have to look at the same situation from two perspectives—from the perspective of our own individual life, which exists in time and is subject to the law of cause and effect, and from the point of view of the Divine, in which everything exists simultaneously, timelessly, as an emanation of the divine will. In going through life, if we try to remember that we are an expression of the Divine, then it will be easier for us to go through the events of our lives, to reap the punishments and rewards of our karmas, without falling into the trap of believing that we are in control.

## The Human Condition

The operation of the law of karma, of action and reaction, is the underlying principle of life in this creation. The human condition is governed by this reality, which implies that all we experience in this physical plane is subject to change and that we have no control over our destiny. There is only one way to find permanence and peace—by getting in touch with the spiritual essence, which is our true nature and lies within us. True saints or masters teach us how to do this.

The Indian saint Soami Ji warns us to face reality and recognize that this world and, indeed, our own bodies are transitory and illusory. He counsels us to stay aloof from the world and use the human body for its true purpose, to find God:

You have got the human body at last;  
Now do something for yourself.



Do not get involved in this world;  
Take it as a night's dream, no more.  
The body and the home, all are false;  
Why be consumed in illusion?<sup>23</sup>

In the same vein, the biblical poet of the Psalms laments our human predicament and asks God to reveal the secret of death:

Lord, make me to know mine end,  
And the measure of my days, what it is;  
Let me know how short-lived I am.  
Behold, Thou hast made my days as hand-breadths;  
And mine age is as nothing before Thee;  
Surely every man at his best estate is altogether vanity.  
Surely man walketh as a mere semblance;  
Surely for vanity they are in turmoil;  
He heapeth up riches,  
and knoweth not who shall garner them.

*PSALMS 39:5-7*

If we reflect carefully on our own experience, we will become aware that life is made up of cycles of happiness and grief, pain and pleasure, health and illness, wealth and poverty. Try as we might, we cannot control the events of our lives. Illness and death can strike us at any moment.

In the Jewish memorial service for the dead, a passage reminiscent of the biblical Book of Job is recited; it reflects a true understanding of the precariousness of the human condition. Even if we achieve a certain degree of happiness in life, we are soon to die. Nothing of this world goes with us at death.



Man's days are as the grass. As the flower of the field so he flourishes. The wind blows over him, and he is gone.... O that we were wise to consider this. If we but understood our latter end. For when we die we take nothing with us. Our glory does not follow us into the grave.<sup>24</sup>

In the book of Ecclesiastes, the king Koheleth's anguish at having to live in the midst of a never-ending repetition of worldly phenomena, ruled by desires which can never be satisfied, sounds like the desperate cries of a contemporary seeker trying to find meaning in life:

All the rivers run into the sea,  
yet the sea is not yet full;  
Unto the place whither the rivers go,  
thither they go again.  
All things toil to weariness;  
man cannot utter it:  
The eye is not satisfied with seeing,  
nor the ear filled with hearing.  
That which hath been is that which shall be.  
And that which hath been done  
is that which shall be done;  
And there is nothing new under the sun.  
Is there a thing whereof it is said: "See, this is new"?  
—it hath been already,  
in the ages which were before us.  
There is no remembrance of them of former times;  
neither shall there be any remembrance of them  
of latter times that are to come,  
among those that shall come after.

*ECCLESIASTES 1:7-11*

Koheleth further gives way to frustration and sadness, concluding that every human activity is worthless—"all is vanity and a striving after wind":

I Koheleth have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven.... I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

*ECCLESIASTES 1:12-14*

The objects and scenes that give us pleasure are short-lived and transient. The pleasure we gain from them is also short-lived. Often we become attached to our possessions, and then if they are lost or stolen we become terribly unhappy. Even the typical joys that people expect out of life may bring unhappiness. Marriage can become a hell of bickering, jealousy, and disharmony of all kinds. Children can sometimes turn into a burden and a continual source of worry. Our attachment to them may keep us off balance most of our lives. Sense pleasures and indulgences, which at first make us so very happy, often result in terrible distress—illness, loss of mental control, even death.

To acquire wealth and possessions, we often stoop to levels so low that we would be horrified to admit what we are doing. We give up our health and comfort in the pursuit of money. Then, when we have it, we fear it may get stolen. Often family members destroy each other in their desire for wealth. We go to great lengths, sacrifice our ideals and peace of mind, enduring all kinds of pain to earn money, yet it fails to bring happiness. And then we have to leave it all behind when we die.

Sometimes we think power and authority will give us happiness and stability. But we find that the political leaders of today are the prisoners and pariahs of tomorrow. The status and esteem we enjoy one day often mean nothing on the next.

In "Ethics of the Fathers," the rabbis point out man's ephemeral and transient nature. Only those who trust in God will be saved:

Man is like unto a breath;  
His days as a fleeting shadow.  
In the morning he flourishes,  
In the evening he fades and withers away....  
The Lord will redeem the souls of His faithful,  
And none of those who trust in Him  
will be condemned.<sup>25</sup>

Maharaj Charan Singh poignantly summarizes the human predicament and tells us where to look for relief:

The entire creation is heavy-hearted and in trouble. Its cup of misery is ever full to the brim. Peace and bliss are for those alone who are wedded to the Lord and depend entirely upon his support.<sup>26</sup>

The Indian mystic Tulsi Sahib taught:

A tortured mind, a suffering body,  
Such is the lot of some;  
And there be others on whom melancholy  
Has set its potent seal.  
One sorrow or the other  
Does ever prey upon mankind;  
Happy alone is the devotee of the saint.<sup>27</sup>



Tulsi Sahib is saying that only the disciple of a true master is content because he is striving for union with the Lord. The disciple is aware that the search for worldly happiness and success leads to the cycles of pleasure and pain, happiness and melancholy; thus he is happy in his spiritual pursuit. He tries to live in the world but not get consumed by it, as he is aware that the world is transitory and only the spiritual quest is real and permanent. Mystics urge us to follow the examples of the lotus flower that floats on top of the water, or of the bee that sits on the edge of the jar of honey but is careful not to get stuck in the honey itself.

All worldly happiness will be transformed into pain at some time; the only real and true happiness comes when the soul merges into its source, the Lord. Only when we become devoted to God can we enjoy the objects and pleasures of this world without becoming attached to them.

A simple story illustrates this concept: A child, accompanied by his father, goes to an amusement park. As long as the child holds his father's hand, he feels secure and can enjoy everything he experiences—the roller-coaster, the merry-go-rounds, the shops that sell candy and ice cream, the dazzling lights, the games of skill and chance. The child imagines that his happiness is coming from the things he is experiencing at the fair. But if he loses his grip on his father's hand and gets lost in the crowd, he becomes frightened and unhappy. The fair with its lights, games, and music continues, but the child is crying inconsolably. Nothing gives him pleasure now. He realizes that he can enjoy the fair only as long as he is holding on to his father's hand. Similarly, we can only enjoy happiness in this world when we are devoted to the Lord and remember him at all times—holding his hand tightly.

## State of the World

Social activists and other idealists strive to improve the world in the belief that illness, war, and the threat of disaster can largely be overcome. In Judaism, many people hope for the coming of the Messiah, or the Messianic Age, as it represents a time when people will learn to live together harmoniously in the world, when disease and social evils will disappear, and all human beings will worship the Lord. Some branches of Judaism and Christianity look forward to the establishment of the kingdom of Heaven on earth, and a few feel it is imminent. Many people believe that with the spread of communications and other scientific developments, we will soon experience an age of love, an age of Aquarius, when we will escape the exigencies of the human condition.

This type of thinking, however noble and commendable it may be, is misleading. The human condition of transience and duality is indeed the nature of life on this plane. Saints say that human beings are meant to help each other—otherwise they cannot even be considered human—but they should recognize that the world cannot be changed very much.

It is the combination of good and bad karmas that shapes our destiny and brings us to the world. We all have our own karmic debts to pay, and we have incarnated here in order to settle those accounts. This world is meant to be a plane of karma, the arena where reward and punishment are meted out as payment for previous actions. The world is not meant to be a paradise; it never was and will not be one in the future.

In the Bible, once Adam and Eve had eaten of the tree of good and evil, thus entering the physical plane, they (and all humanity descended from them) were sentenced to experience lives of pain and toil:



Unto the woman He [God] said: 'I will greatly multiply thy pain and thy travail; in pain thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.' And unto Adam He said: '... Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life.... In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground.'

*GENESIS 3:16-19*

Once Adam and Eve took on bodies, they became trapped in the cycles of duality—pain and pleasure, illness and health, wealth and poverty. They lost inner peace and happiness. This is the human condition, as ordained by God. We cannot escape the karmic law. It is the divine law, the divine principle that orders life on the material plane.

The biblical prophet Samuel strongly describes the changing cycles of our destiny as we go through life, and attributes them to the Lord's will:

The Lord killeth, and maketh alive;  
He bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up.  
The Lord maketh poor, and maketh rich;  
He bringeth low, He also lifteth up.  
He raiseth up the poor out of the dust,  
He lifteth up the needy from the dung-hill,  
To make them sit with princes,  
And inherit the throne of glory;  
For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's,  
And He hath set the world upon them.

*I SAMUEL 2:6-8*

The world will never improve very much. Any expectations that our outer life can become perfect are ill-founded.



Our purpose in life is to concentrate on attaching ourselves to the Lord through spiritual practice and thus detach ourselves from the world. We should try to rise above the level of the senses and the mind, thus escaping the curse that kept Adam and Eve—and keeps all humanity—prisoners at the level of duality. Maharaj Charan Singh gives a tangible illustration of the situation:

If we were to try to remove the thorns of the world, we would never succeed; but if we were to put on strong shoes, the thorns would become completely ineffective. The problems of this world will always remain insurmountable. No one has ever solved them for all time to come, nor will anybody do so in the future. By following the teachings of the saints or masters, however, we can rise above the sphere of matter and mind so that pleasure and pain do not affect us.<sup>28</sup>

If the world could be made perfect, there have certainly been enough saints, social reformers, and statesmen throughout the ages to have brought this about. But if we study the history of the world, we will find there has always been misery, war, famine, disease, dissension; it has never been free of the opposites of wealth and poverty, happiness and suffering. In fact, despite the great scientific achievements of our day, in spite of global communications bringing people closer together, we are seeing more human cruelty, a greater "poverty of love," as Mother Teresa put it, than perhaps we have ever seen.

The true saints and mystics do not come to bring happiness on the worldly level. That happiness can never be permanent. By teaching their disciples to develop love for God, they teach them to be more loving on a human level as well. But they make it clear that the basic reality of the cycles of pleasure and pain, illness and health, war and peace, cannot be avoided.

Saints come to teach their followers how to get out of this world and satisfy their spiritual yearning. Some people may object and say that the saints are being hardhearted: what kind of saints are these, if they don't improve the world? When people are suffering so much, why can't their lot be improved? But true saints do not interfere with the workings of the karmic law, because the world is meant to go on as it is, with appropriate payment (reward or punishment) meted out for every action. It is the saints who teach us how to leave this world behind and become eternally free by merging in God. If we could understand the level on which the saints are operating, we would also understand that they are the most kindhearted of all. The following illustration resolves this paradox:

Imagine a prison in which a large number of prisoners are incarcerated. A philanthropist visits the prison and sees that the prisoners do not have running water; he therefore arranges for a truck to bring fresh water to the prisoners every day. He has greatly improved the prisoners' lot.

Another philanthropist and social reformer goes to the prison. He becomes disturbed over the quality of food they are receiving and makes arrangements for nutritious, well-balanced meals to be brought in from outside. The prisoners feel very grateful, as he too has really improved their lives.

A third philanthropist visits the prison and realizes that its heating system is inadequate. He arranges for a large supply of good-quality blankets and quilts, as well as warm sweaters and other woolen clothes. He also has done a very good deed and the prisoners feel grateful to him as well.

All these philanthropists have done their best to improve the lot of the prisoners. They have been elevated from being *C* class to *A* class, but still they are prisoners. However, a fourth philanthropist comes with the keys to the prison. He frees the

men forever. He is the greatest benefactor; instead of improving their situation within the prison, he has given them liberty.

The true saint or master is like the fourth kindhearted man; he is the true Messiah expectantly awaited in Judaism. He comes with the keys to the prison of this world and shows us the way to freedom. He creates in us love for the Supreme Lord who transcends duality. His service is far greater than that of the ordinary social reformer or philanthropist who simply tries to improve our conditions but has no idea how to free us from this prison of darkness and ignorance.

The teachings of the spiritual masters and the way of life they advocate lead us beyond the realms of matter and mind, where we experience pleasure and pain, to the realm of the spirit, where there is unity, love, and peace. Here we can finally eat the fruit of the tree of life.





## The Path Home

### The One Lord

O let us come, the living God adore;  
He is, He was, He will be ever more.  
His oneness is a thing of mystery,  
No man can fathom his true unity.  
He is without a body's form or frame,  
No mortal lips his essence can proclaim.  
He reigned before this teeming world was wrought,  
He was when all the world as yet was naught.  
Our God created every living thing,  
All creatures owe their love to Him, their King.<sup>1</sup>

Written by a Jewish mystic of fourteenth-century Rome and recited daily during the evening prayers, this beautiful hymn sums up many important truths of the mystic path: God is timeless, formless, and eternal. He is the ineffable unity which cannot be described with the intellect because he tran-

scends the level of our minds. The Lord created everything; nothing was created by anyone else. The entire creation worships him with love.

Many of the prayers and hymns that make up the Jewish liturgy and are recited during the religious services express this mystic truth of God's oneness and permanence. Every morning, for example, pious Jews pray: "Thou didst exist before the world came into being, and Thou hast been the same since the world came into being."<sup>2</sup> And several times during the day, during every service, Jews repeat, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (*Deuteronomy 6:4*).

Similarly, followers of the Sikh religion recite the *Japji*, a hymn composed by the sixteenth-century mystic, Guru Nanak, and regarded as the epitome of his teachings. In tone and scope it is reminiscent of these Jewish prayers and hymns:

He is one, He is the first.  
He is all that is.  
Eternal Truth is his Name.  
He is the creator of all.  
Fearing naught,  
Striking fear in naught;  
Timeless is his image.  
Not begotten, He is self-existent....

He was in the beginning;  
He is through all ages;  
He shall be the One who lives forever.  
Beyond thought, no thinking can conceive Him.<sup>3</sup>

In the "Akdamut," a hymn recited during the Jewish holy days, the mystic-poet expresses his inability to praise God adequately:

At His command is infinite power,  
Words cannot define Him.  
Were all the skies parchment  
And all the reeds pens,  
And all the oceans ink  
And all who dwell on earth scribes,  
His grandeur could not be told.<sup>4</sup>

Guru Nanak used similar terms to express the inadequacy of language in describing the greatness of God:

Were there ton upon ton of paper,  
Saith Nanak,  
And had I absorbed the wisdom  
Of volumes without count;  
Had I a supply of ink inexhaustible  
And could write  
With the speed of the wind,  
I would still not be able  
To measure Thy greatness,  
Nor signify the glory of Nam, your Name!<sup>5</sup>

The Lord is self-created, permanent, the source of all life. Everything else is ephemeral, including this human body. Everything we try to possess, every idea we become attached to, is subject to time and change. Only the Lord, eternal and true, is worthy of our friendship and love.

Although we may be born into different cultures and religions and have different ways of worshiping God externally, yet he is one and we are of his essence. It is not surprising that mystics of different places and cultures praise him in a similar fashion.



## The One Path

Just as there is one Lord for everyone, so the soul, which is his essence, is one and the same in everyone. The Muslim mystic Sheikh Saadi said, "All men are born of the same one essence and are brothers to one another."<sup>6</sup> Although we often define ourselves in terms of the narrow categories of nationality, religion, class, or color, the mystics teach that these differences are illusory, as the same Lord is within all of us, and the way to find him is also one. Though our bodies may differ superficially, the spiritual essence that gives us life and sustains us is the same. We must get in touch with this essence, the divine Name, which is the life of each one of us.

When we die and stand before the Lord, no one will ask our religion or nationality. It is only our love for God that will matter—how well we have brought ourselves in tune with the divine essence, the particle of himself that he has placed within us. "Love alone counts in the court of the Lord," the Indian saint Paltu taught.<sup>7</sup>

Meekness and humility are prerequisites for obtaining love and devotion. People who are proud of their status, family connections or intellect, social class or caste, nationality or religion, race or color, put up obstacles between themselves and the Lord. Rabbi Chaim Vital, a Jewish mystic of the sixteenth century and disciple of Rabbi Isaac Luria of Safed, wrote:

Let heaven and earth serve as my witness that whether it be man or woman, a Cuthite or an Israelite, male or female slave—the holy spirit rests upon each of them, to the extent that their behavior merits it.<sup>8</sup>

No one should think that belonging to a particular religion or tradition gives him a monopoly on God's love. From a

mystic point of view, the concept of chosen people cannot refer to only one nationality or religion. That would be to ignore the universal oneness and interconnectedness of all humanity. From the mystic perspective, God's chosen people are those individuals whom God has chosen to bring back to him at any time or place, through the inner path of mystic union. The way to worship the one God is one for all humanity. He loves us all equally.

In the book of Jonah in the Bible, this truth is demonstrated. God became angry at Jonah because he refused to warn the people of Nineveh of the impending destruction of their city. Jonah felt separate from the people of Nineveh, disconnected from the suffering they would have to experience if they were punished. That is why he didn't feel inclined to invoke God's mercy on their behalf. To teach Jonah the lesson of compassion, God used the symbol of a gourd that is eaten by a worm:

Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow, which came up in a night, and perished in a night; and should not I have pity on Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons ... and also much cattle?

*JONAH 4:10-11*

God has love and compassion for all humanity; they are his children. He loved the people of Nineveh as much as the people of Israel. The Lord, who has no nationality, religion, class, race, or color, would never instill in us a feeling of pride because of our religion, nationality, race, or any other circumstance of birth. Those allegiances are man-made, not God-made. Only by worshiping the eternal divine essence, by

merging in the ultimate source that is present in all of us equally, can we realize the highest Lord and achieve perfection.

Mystics and saints appear in human form, and thus they may seem to belong to a particular country or religion. But their real being is universal; it is the creative power or holy Name—the Ain-Sof, the Shabd. Their teaching is the one spiritual truth that is the same for all mankind. Maharaj Charan Singh wrote:

Saints have come to the world in every age, and whatever their country or religion may have been, their message has always been one and the same: to know God and to seek release from the cycle of births and deaths. The founding of new religions, creeds and sects has never been the purpose of their teachings. Creeds and sects breed passions which invariably lead to quarrels and conflicts, while the essence of the saints' teaching is love and harmony among the people of the world.<sup>9</sup>

## The Lord Is Within

The basis of all religions is the same: the spiritual truth that God is one. In every age, mystics teach their disciples a meditation practice that will allow them to experience this oneness within themselves. However, with the passing of time, people get caught up in illusions and forget the inner spiritual truths the mystics had taught them.

The kabbalists and other Jewish mystics described the soul as a spark of the divine light entrapped in the *kelipot*, the husks or shells of the body and worldly existence. In the present context, the *kelipot* can be understood as the actions, the karmas that we create through the mind and the senses, which bind us



to the creation. These karmas act as coverings over the brilliance of our soul, the divine spark. Our purpose in life is to free the spark of our soul to return to its source. When we get caught up in particularity and differences, forgetting the mystic truth of God's oneness, we lose sight of the universal inner light. Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser wrote:

The quest of the mystic is to penetrate the shell of existence and to establish contact with the inner light, which is truly the dimension of divinity, the hidden grandeur of all existence.<sup>10</sup>

We must look within our hearts to find God. The Lord, the light, is within us. His essence, the soul, was implanted within us at the time of creation. As we read in the twelfth-century work, the *Sefer ha-Bahir*:

People want to see the King, but they don't even know where to find his house. First they [must] ask, "Where is the King's house?" Only then can they ask, "Where is the King?"<sup>11</sup>

The King's house is the human heart. Elsewhere in the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, we are told that the heart has the thirty-two paths of wisdom hidden within it.<sup>12</sup> In Jewish mysticism, the concept of the thirty-two paths is a symbolic representation of the stages of the inner journey to God-realization. Wisdom is the divine Word, the projection of God's will.

The *Bahir* is saying that before we can see the King, we must realize that our heart is his abode. The human body is the palace, or temple of God. It is a laboratory where we can conduct the great experiment of realizing the Lord within, rising on the thirty-two paths of Wisdom. The microcosm (the individual human being) contains the macrocosm (the

Lord) just as the seed contains the tree. In order to experience the macrocosm, mystics teach that we must enter the temple of the human body, the microcosm. C. W. Sanders wrote in *The Inner Voice*:

Our body is a wonderful house. It is the epitome of all creation. Man is the microcosm and the universe is the macrocosm. They are interrelated. The macrocosm is reached and studied through the microcosm. When the threshold of the temple is crossed, the soul finds itself in new and exceedingly attractive worlds. *There* is the transcendental knowledge and the divine treasure. *There* is the living God with all that He has created.<sup>13</sup>

In a similar vein, the *Zohar* says:

Man ... is, in himself, a noble epitome of the cosmos. And he is this by reason of the infinite association of his soul with the sefirot. The "upper" and the "lower" world both find their meeting point in him. He is a ... Divine Presence on earth.<sup>14</sup>

All people are the same before the Lord. All are his children and none are better than any other. All are struggling souls, searching for happiness, but are caught in the prison of their self-created karmas. Mystics come to give us all the opportunity to find God. They teach a method of meditation through which we can experience spiritual union, where we can meet the King within. The Lord's light and splendor are the heritage of all humanity, and can be found by us all equally if we search for him within ourselves. If we search for his love through outer practices and allegiances, we will one day ultimately find ourselves empty-handed and empty-hearted.

We may wonder, however, if this divine essence is already within, why we can't see it and feel it easily. Why do we need to learn a meditation practice to get in touch with it? If the divine universal light is so brilliant and glorious, why do we not automatically prefer it to the darkness of separation? If the body is the temple of God, why don't we meet him constantly within? Maharaj Charan Singh describes our paradoxical condition:

Both the Lord and the soul live together in the same house, yet the two do not meet. The soul is within the body, and so also is the Lord; but the soul has neither seen the Lord, nor has it met him.<sup>15</sup>

## The Barrier of Mind

The barrier that stands between us and the Lord is our mind, manifested primarily through ego, or pride, an illusionary sense of me and mine. This is the obstacle that prevents us from experiencing spiritual reality.

Mystics describe four other weaknesses or "perversions" of the mind which also keep us bound to the material creation. They are lust, anger, greed, and attachment. Ego expresses itself through these four. These perversions of the mind represent an exaggeration or negative expression of natural human qualities and instincts.

The ego seeks individuality, separation, difference. It does not want to merge into universality; it does not want to submit to a higher will. The biblical book of Job demonstrates the strength of ego. Job is a righteous man, yet his very righteousness blinds him to the fact that he is living in the illusion of his own importance and righteousness. In a sense, Job believes he is the center of the world. He forgets that he is living in God's



world and that his understanding of God's actions may be limited. Job does not doubt God's power, but he assumes that God is being arbitrary in making him suffer, and he prays for his life to be taken. He does not understand that there is a divine plan and that his suffering is an expression of it. Because he does not see a reason for his suffering, Job assumes there is no higher good in it. Job is arrogant; he cannot subdue his will to the will of the Lord with faith, trust, and humility.

Even if we were to conquer the human weaknesses of lust and anger, greed and attachment, ego would remain to trap us, the mystics say. This indeed was the case with Job. Ultimately, his egotism kept him from realizing God's divine essence. His ego was the obstacle to God-realization.

The ego also manifests itself by always seeking more. Its need for self-gratification through worldly possessions, power, and pleasure can never be satisfied. Because of ego we identify with me and mine, while if we were aware of the reality, we would understand that all belongs to the Lord. He has given us life in the creation for a short period of time. Our attachment to it blinds us to the fact of our transience.

In the Bible, the king Koheleth eloquently explains how our attachment to the world stands in the way of our meeting God:

I have seen the task which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith. He hath made every thing beautiful in its time; also He hath set the world in their heart, yet so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end.

*ECCLESIASTES 3:9-11*

Ecclesiastes declares that God has "set the world in their heart"; in other words, God has created us with a tendency to become attached to the objects and ideas of the world. Naturally

we have to ask what it is in us that becomes so attached to the world. And the answer, of course, is our mind. The mind, expressed through the ego, creates attachments. Our sense of self binds us to the world.

Our mind is out of control. Its desires are too numerous to be described. Under its influence, we create problems for ourselves—arguments, infidelity, abuse, disease—even war. Saints say that we cannot know the Lord until we can control the mind. Once the mind is under our control, it is no longer our enemy but our best friend. Like fire, it is a good servant but a terrible master.

Often the mind fools us into believing that we are acting in the Lord's will, when we are actually acting according to the dictates of our ego. This was the problem with Job. He thought he was righteous, acting according to the Supreme Father's will, while in truth he was carrying on with his own egotistical desires and wishes. His mind was blinded by delusion. By the end of the book, Job realizes his failing and submits to the Lord's will—he controls his mind, he subdues his ego.

What do we mean by controlling the mind? Mystics teach that the soul is the essence of the Lord and comes from the highest spiritual region. The mind is also very powerful and originates in the second realm, the causal plane, the region of universal mind. The soul, in its descent from the spiritual regions, took on the coverings of mind; and then, as it descended still further in the material realms, it took on the astral and physical coverings, which include the body and senses. This is the mystic significance of the story of Adam's banishment from the Garden of Eden. The mind keeps us involved in this creation through what Indian saints call *maya* (illusion), the appearance of reality, which prevents us from understanding that the world and its phenomena are transitory and that only the spiritual is real.

The soul, coming as it does from the highest region, should be in control of the mind, which was created only for the purpose of serving the soul when the soul enters the regions of mind and body. The body, in turn, should serve the soul and mind. But the process has become reversed. We are out of balance because the mind controls the soul and drags the soul wherever it goes. The body and senses drag the mind to do their bidding, as they are slaves to the objects of sense. The energy of the mind is centrifugal and not centripetal. Centrifugal force keeps everything flying away from the center; centripetal force brings everything toward the center. To realize the Lord we must become centripetal.

It is a pathetic situation: the soul, which is life itself—all light and all music—has become the slave of the objects of sense, which are lifeless matter and dross. When we learn to control the mind, we will get free of the spell of maya and gain knowledge of our true selves, our spiritual essence, which is presently imprisoned by the activities of the mind and body. Then we will liberate the divine sparks imprisoned in the shells of gross matter and allow them to reunite with their source.

No one is free of the grip of the mind. Morality, knowledge, duty, virtue—all bend before the ego. Job was righteous, but ego was his weakness. King David of the Bible was known for his mercy and his noble reign; yet he stooped so low as to take another man's wife and have her husband killed. Even David, whom God loved greatly, was not immune from lust, one of the perversions of the mind.

On the other hand, the patriarch Abraham of the Bible can be viewed as an example of the totally obedient disciple whose mind is under control, as illustrated in the story of his sacrifice of Isaac. God asked Abraham to sacrifice his young son, "thine only son, whom thou lovest" (*Genesis 22:2*), as a burnt-offering.



Abraham obeyed without question, journeying to the appointed place and preparing the sacrificial altar. At the last moment, God told Abraham to release Isaac, "for now I know that thou art a God-fearing man, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me" (*Genesis 22:12*). In this moving account, Abraham demonstrated the perfect obedience and mental control that can only come from total devotion to and faith in God. Mystically, Isaac may also be understood as a symbol for Abraham's ego—what he was most attached to and valued most.

Many traditional religions incorporate practices aimed at subduing and controlling the mind and its negative tendencies. Readings from scripture and recital of prayers, as well as fulfillment of certain rituals, prohibitions, and commandments, have as their goal the channeling and control of the mind. Some people give charity, thinking it rids them of ego. Others burn incense, light candles, or sound rams' horns. They go on retreats and live in caves, forests, or deserts. They endure periods of fasting or enforced silence.

But saints tell us that if we want to subdue our mind, we must first study its nature. If we look at the history of man and religion—indeed, if we observe ourselves and our acquaintances—we will see that enforced discipline is a losing game. By strong willpower and discipline we may succeed in subduing the evil tendencies of the mind for a certain period of time, but in so doing we build up our pride. Eventually our minds will rebel and rebound and become attached to the world with even greater tenacity than before. Ultimately, we will realize that we cannot detach our mind from anything without attaching it to something else, more attractive and superior.

The more we suppress anything, the more it revolts. Disciplining the mind by force is like putting a snake in a basket. As long as the snake is in the basket, we are safe, but if it escapes

it will be even more angry; it will surely bite us and its venom will kill. When we put ashes over a fire, the fire seems to die down. But when a gust of wind blows, the fire starts up again. In the same way, when the storms of passion break loose, the mind will go out of control and run into the world with greater force. Similarly, if a criminal is put in jail, we are safe from his dangerous actions, but once he is released or escapes, he often resumes his life of crime. Unless he reforms by finding more constructive alternatives, he will automatically resume his anti-social activities.

True saints and mystics remind us that the mind can never be controlled through forcible discipline. We may gain a certain amount of peace of mind for a limited time, but we cannot control the mind permanently in that way. The mind is fond of pleasure; it is also fond of variety. The moment it comes across a new pleasure, it leaves the old. The mind is not loyal or constant in its attachment to pleasures. Today we may desire something intensely, but as soon as we possess it, our mind will discover something new to desire. One day we are attached to our parents; they are soon replaced in our affections by our spouse and children. Soon we may tire of them and become obsessed by career, hobbies, nationality, and other allegiances. It is the same love, but during the course of our lifetime it takes on many forms.

In order to wean the mind from the pleasures of the world, therefore, we will have to attach it to a greater pleasure. The true spiritual masters say that the only pleasure that will satisfy the mind eternally is the taste of the holy Name of God—the divine inner music—which is so sweet, transcendent, and captivating that on experiencing it our mind automatically becomes peaceful and calm. Only by becoming attached to that inner Name or Word, which the Indian mystics call *Nam* or *Shabd*, will the mind get satisfied, as that attachment implies

real experience of the Divine. When we experience the pleasure of union with the Divine, when—as the psalmist sings—we “taste and see that the Lord is good” (*Psalms 34:9*), we will achieve true happiness.

Reading scriptures and performing rituals cannot subdue the mind and overcome its five perversions of lust, anger, greed, attachment, and ego. However, once the mind experiences the sweet and captivating music of God’s holy Name and sees its beautiful inner light, it sheds its love and attachment for the world. That is why in the Bible, God’s holy Name is referred to as man’s salvation—the source of light, wisdom, and peace:

And it shall come to pass,  
that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord  
shall be delivered.

*JOEL 3:5*

The mind becomes purified, delivered from its negative propensities, by attachment to the Name. Instead of expressing itself through the five perversions, it manifests the five virtues of chastity, forgiveness, contentment, detachment, and humility. Some mystics have used the analogy of cream rising on milk to emphasize how natural this process is.

The mind is the most difficult enemy to subdue. In the Bible, King David demonstrates that the greatest battle of the warrior-king is to subdue his passions. As Obadyah Maimonides of Cairo wrote in the thirteenth century:

Thus David the Anointed of the Lord of Jacob proudly declared his conquest and destruction (of the evil inclination), saying “he smote the two altar-hearths of Moab; he went down also and slew the lion in the midst of a pit in



time of snow" (*II Samuel 23:20*). The Sages of blessed memory have likewise said, "Who is mighty? He who subdueth his passions as it is said, 'He that ruleth over his spirit is better than he that taketh a city'" (*Pirke Avot 4:1, Proverbs 16:32*).<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, the Indian saint Paltu Sahib has described the person who has conquered the mind as a fearless warrior:

He who liberates the fort of the body is a true warrior.  
He indeed is a true warrior,  
for he sets ablaze the enemy's stronghold.  
He tames the five passions  
and subdues the tendencies of mind and matter.  
He storms the fort of the body  
and entrenches himself therein.  
He fights the mind—a great cheat—to the finish;  
He takes it captive and vanquishes it completely.  
Lust and anger, greed and attachment,  
pride and ego—  
Spilling rivers of blood,  
he severs the heads of them all.  
O Paltu, in the highest region,  
the God-intoxicated fakir dwells in ecstasy.  
That man indeed is a true warrior  
who liberates the fort of the body.<sup>17</sup>

Our mind likes to drift and wander, and becomes attached to many objects, ideas, and pleasures. It expresses itself through ego, which craves separateness and distinction. But when the mind comes in contact with the holy Name of God, it becomes still and serene forever. By devotion to the Name, the soul

eventually overcomes the mind and merges into the Supreme Lord, thus fulfilling the purpose of human life. As Maharaj Charan Singh explained in a letter to a Western disciple:

Life has a meaning and a purpose. The grand aim of human life is to foster, develop and guide those spiritual homing instincts and try to return to the spiritual Home whence we came. It is only in human life that this is possible. This is the aim of evolving and perfecting that wonderful instrument, the brain, which has spiritual centers. These centers can be developed by proper means. All realizations come from *within*. The kingdom of God also is *within*. We must therefore go *in*, that is, turn all our attention and thoughts to the proper inner center so that we might realize ourselves and then realize God.<sup>18</sup>



## The Name of God

Bless the Lord, O my soul;  
And all that is within me, bless His holy name.

*PSALMS 103:1*

O Lord, our Lord,  
How glorious is Thy name in all the earth!

*PSALMS 8:2*

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet,  
And a light unto my path.

*PSALMS 119:105*

I rejoice at Thy word,  
As one that findeth great spoil.

*PSALMS 119:162*

In the scriptures of all religions, prophets and mystics have used the terms *Name* and *Word* to describe the divine creative power, the spiritual truth, the manifestation of God in the



creation. Many contemporary students of the Hebrew Bible agree that the holy Name of God was regarded as the source of the biblical prophets' experience of the Divine. In his article "The Name of God," Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser explains:

The rabbis who lived in the centuries following the destruction of the Temple often ascribed independent powers to God's name. Indeed many actions of God as described in the Bible are reinterpreted and traced to the efficacy of the name. God is said to have acted by means of his name, and the miracles God is said to have performed are traced to the potency which men evoked by pronouncing his name. Creation itself is said to have occurred by the application of the potency which resides in God's name.<sup>1</sup>

What is this holy Name of God, this divine Word? How can a word or name have power to create and sustain? How can it perform miracles? By word or name, is the Bible referring to a spoken or written name, or to a divine essence, a spiritual truth that is beyond language?

In this chapter, we will attempt to resolve these questions by examining the teachings of Jewish mystics and mystics from other traditions. We will explore the experiences of Moses, Ezekiel, and other biblical prophets, and briefly look at some of the qualities of the Name that they described.

## The Holy Name of God

Mystics tell us that there are two kinds of names associated with religious experience. There are the outer names of God that we encounter in prayer and scripture, which can be read, written, and spoken. Examples from the Hebrew Bible and Jewish prayers are YHWH, El, El Shaddai, and

Elohim. God, Lord, the Supreme Being, Allah, Tao, Wahi-guru, and Ram are outer names that have been used by mystics of other religions to describe the divine Being or power. All these names arose at particular times in history and are an expression of the devotion of the people of that time for the Lord.

However, there is also an inner Name, the divine reality which the prophets of the Bible and mystics throughout history have actually *experienced*. It is the spiritual power, the manifestation of God in the creation—the true Name or holy Name of God. This Name is a power and it is inexpressible. It cannot be spoken or written. It transcends time and history.

In modern terms we can say that it is a type of spiritual energy or vibration that is inherent in all life. Spiritually evolved souls can experience it within themselves. They are always aware of its presence. The many names of God found in different scriptures and religious books are attempts by the mystics and prophets of the past to describe it.

In the Bible, YHWH was the name of the Supreme Lord whom the Israelites worshiped and for whom they gave up the gods of their ancient Near Eastern culture. The name YHWH itself gives a sense of the ineffable, timeless quality of God. Literally, YHWH is a unique conjugation of the Hebrew verb “to be,” using past, present, and future tenses at the same time. It means that he was, is, and will be simultaneously. YHWH was also called El (Exalted, High), Elohim (plural of High), El Shaddai (Exalted Giver), El Elyon (Highest of the High), and Adonai (Lord).

But YHWH, Elohim, El Shaddai, Adonai, and all the other names can be traced historically; they can be spoken and written. Although they are attempts to describe God’s ineffable essence and qualities, they are outer names and not the ineffable inner Name or divine power itself.

In India, approximately ten thousand years ago, people began remembering the Lord as Ram, after the Lord Ram Chandra. When the Prophet Muhammad appeared in Arabia, people started remembering God as Allah. With the advent of Guru Nanak and his line of mystics in the Punjab, God was called Wahiguru. After Soami Ji appeared in Agra, India, only a century ago, his disciples used the term Radha Soami, the Lord of the soul. We often forget that before any one of these prophets or mystics appeared, there were people living in the world who remembered the same Lord by still different names, most of which we no longer know.

All names that can be read, written, and spoken, and whose history can be traced, are called *varnatmik* (outer, external) by the Indian mystics and saints. These *varnatmik* names are terms of convenience and affection, invented to refer to the divine creative power, the source of life, the ultimate essence, which people perceive as controlling their lives. These names reflect the culture and time in which they appear, and thus they change from era to era, language to language, place to place.

However, the Name that is praised in the Bible and scriptures of all religions, and which prophets and mystics glorify as the source of their experience of the Divine, is a reference to the spiritual essence that created and sustains the entire creation. True mystics of all traditions have described the same spiritual essence. The Indian saints have called this true inner Name the *dhunatmik* (inner melodious) Name, as it can be heard within the body as spiritual sound or music.

In the Hebrew Bible and other works of Jewish mysticism, this spiritual essence is called the holy Name of God, *davar* (word) or *memra* (utterance), *Ain-Sof* (infinite), voice of God, fountain of living waters, wisdom, *Shekhinah* (indwelling presence), *shefa* (abundance, divine flow), *makom* (place), and by many other terms. In fact, early Chaldaic and Aramaic transla-



tions of the Bible by Onkelos and Jonathan rendered the name YHWH wherever it appears in the scripture as *memra*. Philo Judaeus, living in first-century Alexandria, Egypt, wrote of the *logos* or Word of God as the divine creative power and the essence of God's revelation to the children of Israel.

Some Jewish scholars have attempted to differentiate between the various terms for the Word or Name as designating different aspects or stages of the divine creative power. However, since the experience of the divine Name transcends sensory and intellectual understanding, words cannot describe it—for instance, it has been described as both spiritual sound and light in the same ineffable experience. It would be an exercise in hairsplitting to insist on definitions that try to draw distinctions between one aspect and another. We would lose perspective on an experience whose all-embracing totality is its primary attribute. As it says in the *Zohar*:

And if you examine the levels [you will see] that it is thought, understanding, voice, and speech, and it is all one, and thought is the beginning of all, and there is no division; but it is all one, and all connected,... And this is the meaning of: "The Lord shall be one, and his name One" (*Zechariah* 14:9).<sup>2</sup>

In the New Testament, the spiritual reality—this *dhun-atmik* or inner, melodious Name—is referred to as the Word, the Holy Ghost, the Comforter. Hindu saints have called it *Ram Nam* (God's name), *Ram Dhun* (God's inner music), *Shabd* (word) and *Nad* (sound). In the ancient Hindu Vedas it is called *Vak* (word). The hymns of the *Adi Granth*, regarded by Sikhs as their scripture, call this divine reality the *Nam* (name), *Shabd* (word), and *Hukam* (order, command). Muslim mystics refer to it as *Kalma* (inner word), *Ism-i-Azam* (the greatest

name), *Bang-i-Asmani* (the sound from the sky), and *Kalam-i-Ilahi* (the voice of God).

It is contact with this inner Name that gives salvation in face of adversity, that gives immeasurable strength and faith, that enables us to control the mind and free the soul from the grip of desire and karma, that helps us know our true selves and thus realize the Lord. No spoken or written word can bring about such a transformation.

This Name is true because it is eternal, deathless, and changeless. The biblical prophets frequently say that God's Name is truth, meaning that it is eternal and not transitory. Throughout the Bible there are stories of how the prophets received God's command, God's Word, that they heard God's voice. God spoke directly to them. This is the inner speech, the inner Word of God—the inner sound, or *dhunatmik* Name. God did not speak in any outer words or human language. God revealed himself to the prophets through the inner sound of the Word. The Bible says:

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying: Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say: Hear the word of the Lord, all ye of Judah, that enter in at these gates to worship the Lord. Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel.

*JEREMIAH 7:1-3*

The true Name, or inner Word, came to Jeremiah; in other words, he was filled with the holy spirit. Being filled with this holy spirit, Jeremiah had direct perception of the will of God, that he was to "stand at the gate of the Lord's house." This is a beautiful image, suggesting that Jeremiah practiced meditation on the Word, in which he would bring his attention to the third eye. Mystics call this point the tenth door or the

gate to the Lord's house, since it is the point in our body (the Lord's house) to which we must bring all our attention before we can enter the inner regions. There, with his attention at the third eye, Jeremiah had knowledge of the Word of God within him. The Word or Name is the will of God, which Jeremiah experienced as the Lord's order or command. He felt it urging him to teach the children of Israel that all who enter these gates to the inner realms in order to truly worship the Lord will hear the Word of the Lord through its inner sound or music. They will themselves experience the holy divine Name. Thus spoke the Lord God of Israel.

In the Book of Samuel there is the same allusion to the Word as the means of divine communication: "... for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the Lord. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel" (*I Samuel 3:21-4:1*). In many other books of the Bible, we are told that the prophets hear the Word of the Lord, and the Lord puts his Word and Name in the people. "... the word of the Lord came expressly unto Ezekiel the priest ... and the hand of the Lord was there upon him" (*Ezekiel 1:3*). This is the inner Word or Name of God. When the prophets experienced the Word, they attained God-realization.

For the biblical prophets, this Word or Name of God was the source of strength for themselves and their disciples—the children of Israel:

The name of the Lord is a strong tower;  
The righteous runneth into it, and is set up on high.

*PROVERBS 18:10*

I called upon Thy name, O Lord,  
Out of the lowest dungeon.

*LAMENTATIONS 3:55*



The prophet seeks strength from the inner Name in his struggle to cope with the depths of his spiritual alienation and separation from God—metaphorically, the lowest dungeon. An outer or spoken name does not have this power.

Our soul hath waited for the Lord;  
He is our help and our shield.  
For in Him doth our heart rejoice,  
Because we have trusted in His holy name.

PSALMS 33:20, 21

Even in the daily Jewish prayers, the true, holy Name of God is extolled.<sup>3</sup> “The essence of Thy word is truth...”; “True and enduring is Thy word, upright and faithful, beloved and precious”; “May the Lord’s name be praised from now and to all eternity. From the rising of the sun to the going down thereof the Lord’s name is to be praised.”

Maharaj Charan Singh discusses the deep, ineffable spiritual quality of the *dhunatmik* Name and its relationship to the *varnatmik* names:

The physical eyes do not see this Nam [Name], nor do physical ears hear it. Neither do our feet carry us there, nor can it be caught by our hands. To attain it and to meet the Lord we need to die while living.\* The *varnatmik* names are our means, while the *dhunatmik* Name is our end and object. For the love of mere words we need not become involved in disputes and dissensions; instead, we should try to discover the true Name with their help.

Unfortunately, what do we see in this world? Those who remember the Lord as Wahiguru begin to call themselves

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\* For an explanation of the term “die while living,” see the Glossary.

Sikhs, while those who remember him as Allah call themselves Muslims, and those who remember him as Ram call themselves Hindus. We become so intolerant that it becomes difficult for us even to meet each other. Where this wrangling over words is leading never occurs to us. If today, however, we were to merge with the true Name, all strife and discord would come to an end.... Conflicts last only while we are deaf to the music of the true Name and are in love with the names expressed in words.<sup>4</sup>

There is conflict only when we dwell on the names expressed in words (the *varnatmik* names)—which reflect our differences of history, nationality, language, and culture—and forget the music of the true Name (the *dhunatmik* Name), which is universal, no matter what our individual background may be.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook offers these profound thoughts concerning the limitations of the outer names of God when compared with His infinite nature. He urges the true seeker of knowledge of God to break free of an “idolatrous” worship of outer names and letters:

All the ideological controversies among people and all the inner conflicts that every individual suffers in his world outlook are caused by the confusion in the conception of God. This is an endlessly profound realm and all thoughts, whether practical or theoretical, are centered in it....

All the divine names, whether in Hebrew or in any other language, give us only a tiny and dull spark of the hidden light to which the soul aspires when it utters the word “God.” Every definition of God brings about heresy; every definition is spiritual idolatry; even attributing to his intellect and will, even the term *divine*, the term *God*, suffers from the limitations of definition....

The greatest impediment to the human spirit, on reaching maturity, results from the fact that the conception of God is crystallized among people in a particular form, going back to childish habit and imagination. This is an aspect of the offense of making a graven image or likeness of God [idolatry], against which we must always beware....

The tendency of unrefined people to see the divine *essence* as embodied in the words and in the letters alone is a source of embarrassment to humanity, and atheism arises as a pained outcry to liberate man from this narrow and alien pit....<sup>5</sup>

## Prohibition on Pronouncing God's Name

During the talmudic period of Judaism (first to fifth centuries C.E.), the rabbis laid down a prohibition on "pronouncing" the name of God YHWH. This prohibition was based on one of the Ten Commandments against "taking the Lord's name in vain" (*Exodus 20:7*). This taboo on speaking or pronouncing God's name continues till today.

In many ancient religions there was a taboo on uttering the name of the divine power out of fear and respect. The rabbinic prohibition may have its roots in that primal taboo. However, when the Bible warns against taking the name in vain, we should consider that it may have been intended as a warning against the use—for worldly purposes—of spiritual powers gained from meditation on the inner Name.

The prohibition in Judaism on pronouncing the outer names of God may, in fact, imply the earlier existence of a meditation practice on the Name of God through which the ancient mystics attained certain spiritual or miraculous powers. The biblical warning against using the Name in vain is similar to the warning that, even today, a true spiritual master would



give his disciples, namely, not to use any powers gained from their meditation to perform "miracles" or make changes in worldly events or phenomena. To do so would squander those powers and lead to increased ego. A true master would tell his disciples to keep within themselves all knowledge and power they gain in meditation, so they might make further spiritual progress.

The rabbis also considered pronouncing God's name to be blasphemous because, as the *Zohar* says:

Before having created any form in the world, before He produced any image, He was alone, without form, without resembling anything, and who could conceive Him as He was then, before the Creation, since He was formless? It is therefore forbidden to fashion for Him a form or image in the world, not with the letter *he*, and not with the letter *yod*, and not even with the Holy Name, and not with any letter or vowel-point in the world.<sup>6</sup>

This passage, which is echoed in the selection above from Rabbi Kook, reflects the mystic truth that the reality or true essence of God cannot be represented adequately by any name or form. It also suggests a holy and awesome aspect to God's name. However, it appears that the distinction between the outer *varnatmik* names of God and the true, inner *dhunatmik* Name was lost. The awe due to the inner or holy Name became attached to these outer names, and a prohibition on reciting the outer names was instituted. Recitation of the outer name was taken as an affront to the formless and nameless quality of the Lord.

In instituting this prohibition on pronouncing or speaking the outer names of God, the name of the thing was mistaken for the thing itself. The outer name of God is just a designation.

It is like a label. To prohibit people from pronouncing the label gives no respect to the reality the label designates. To prohibit pronunciation of the outer name gives power and other characteristics of God to his label, but the label is man-made and has nothing to do with God himself. The word *flute* has no relation to the sound of the flute. The sound is indescribable and unpronounceable. To prohibit saying the word *flute* out of respect for the nameless, indescribable quality of the music is meaningless.

These outer names of God are expressions of the love of the devotees of the Lord for their beloved. In reality, however, He is nameless. As Rumi the thirteenth-century Sufi mystic, wrote in the *Masnavi*: "I begin with the name of Him who is nameless, but who answers to whatever name one may use."

## Word as Creator

In the biblical book of Genesis, we read that God spoke, and the world was created.\* As mentioned earlier, the rabbis referred to the creation as having taken place through "the divine creative speech." In the "Akdamut," a hymn written by a Jewish mystic of Germany in the eleventh century, God is described as having created the world "only by his will uttered in a gentle sound."

It is the inner Word or Name, not a spoken word of God, that is the source of the entire creation. The Word creates matter and gives it life; when the Word is withdrawn, the creation dissolves and disappears. As Guru Nanak says in the *Adi Granth*:

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\* "And God said: 'Let there be light.' And there was light" (*Genesis 1:2*). In the passages that follow in the Bible, God is described as creating each phase of the creation through his speech.

Through the Word  
All creation emanates,  
By the Word it is dissolved;  
And through the Word  
It is created again.<sup>7</sup>

According to Indian philosophy, all creation is comprised of five vital (life-giving) elements or components: earth, water, fire, air, and ether.\* The degree to which each element is active in relation to the others determines the different forms of life. By their very nature, the five elements are antagonistic to one another. But in living creatures, they are held together and sustained by the indwelling power of the Word. When this immanent power is withdrawn, water dissolves earth, fire dries up water, air depletes fire, and ether consumes air. Created matter, in this way, is dissolved.

Our human form, for example, is constituted of all five elements. As long as we have this divine Name within us, we remain alive. But when this power is withdrawn, our body dies and decays. The five elements will again separate from one another, and we will cease to exist. As we read in Ecclesiastes: "And the dust returneth to the earth as it was, and the spirit returneth unto God who gave it" (*Ecclesiastes 12:7*).

The creator of the universe is the ineffable holy Name, which is the source of everything. This holy Name, or Shabd, is active in the world at all times and can be experienced by any sincere spiritual seeker. The kabbalists called this divine essence the Ain-Sof, the infinite, which created the world through projections of its essence as spiritual sound and light. The Ain-Sof is the divine love manifesting itself and giving life.

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\* Ether, used here to translate the Indian term *akash*, should not be confused with the chemical substance. This component endows life forms with the power to discriminate.



A passage from the *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Formation), written sometime between the third and sixth centuries, eloquently sums up the creative role of the divine Name: "All that is formed and all that is spoken emanates from one Name."<sup>8</sup> The biblical Psalms also sing eloquently of the Word or utterance as the creator:

By the word of the Lord were the heavens made;  
And all the host of them by the breath of his mouth.

*PSALMS 33:6*

He sendeth forth His word, and melteth them;  
He causeth His wind to blow, and the waters flow.

*PSALMS 147:18*

For He spoke, and it was;  
He commanded, and it stood.

*PSALMS 33:9*

Similarly, the Persian mystic Rumi wrote:

Through the sound,  
the world came into being.  
Through the Word,  
the carpet of light was spread  
for His presence.<sup>9</sup>

The Gospel according to Saint John in the New Testament begins with the same thought:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God  
and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning

with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

JOHN 1:1-3

The *Sefer Yetzirah* proclaims the unity of God, the Name, and the Word:

Ten Sefirot [emanations] of Nothingness:  
One is the Spirit [Breath] of the Living God—\*  
Blessed and benedicted is his name  
Of the Life of Worlds.  
Voice, spirit, and speech,  
And this is the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

These few lines sum up the essence of all mystic teachings: The creation is composed of many levels or planes, and most of them lie beyond the perception of the physical senses. There is one spirit alone that permeates these regions, that gives life to them. Blessed is this spiritual essence, the eternal imperishable Name, which is the voice of God, the true Word. This is the Creator, the spirit of the living God.

A passage from the *Zohar* further illuminates the relationship of the Supreme Lord and the creation:

The Most Ancient Holy One is at the same time the most Hidden of the hidden. He is separated from all things, and is at the same time not separated from all things. For all things are united in Him, and He unites himself with all things. There is nothing which is not in Him. He has a shape, and one can say that He has not one. In assuming a shape, He has given existence to all things. He made ten

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\*In Hebrew, the word *ruah* designates spirit, breath, and wind.

lights spring forth from his midst, lights which shine with the form which they have borrowed from him, and which shed everywhere the light of a brilliant day. The Ancient One, the most Hidden of the hidden, is a high beacon, and we know him only by his lights, which illuminate our eyes so abundantly. His Holy Name is no other thing than these lights.<sup>11</sup>

Thus the *Zohar* summarizes the teachings of the kabbalists regarding the nature of the divine essence, the Ain-Sof—and describes the creation as a projection of gradations of light from the original divine light. It corresponds precisely with the teachings of the Indian mystics regarding the creation as a projection of Shabd.

In the passage that follows, Maharaj Sawan Singh, the master at Beas from 1903 to 1948, suggests the similarity of the Indian and Judeo-Christian notions of this creative power:

“Word” is the translation of the Greek word *logos* which in its turn is translated from the Hebrew word *memra*. The ancient Hindu words Shabd and Nad, which in English mean “sound,” were used to convey the idea of the Divine Power that created the universe. These are more clear and expressive. Shabd or Nad means “sound,” “order,” or “voice.” I think this same idea must have been expressed by the original word which was translated as *logos* in the Greek Bible.

The Bible says that all things were made by the Word and without Him was not anything made that was made. Similarly, Soami Ji says, “All creation was made by the Shabd (the sound).” The Granth Sahib says, “The earth was created by Shabd, and so was the sky and the firmament.



Shabd created the light. The whole of the universe was created by Shabd, and that Shabd resounds in every heart." The meaning of these two terms, *Word* and *Shabd*, is so very identical that one is led to believe that the original word in the language that Christ spoke and in which the Bible was first written must be similar in meaning to the "potent sound" of the Upanishads.<sup>12</sup>

The sages and seers of ancient India also said that the world was made through *akash bani* (the sound from the heavens). Similarly, the Chinese mystic Lao-Tse taught that the world was created by the *Tao*—the Word. This divine essence, this spiritual reality, projected the creation from itself. It is the Ain-Sof, the limitless spiritual reality that permeates and sustains the creation. It is the Shekhinah, God's indwelling presence, which can be experienced within the human body.

## Mystic Revelation of the Torah

The Bible says that God revealed to Moses his Torah, which is ordinarily translated as his word, law, or teaching. Understanding the nature of this revelation is crucial to an understanding of the mystic core of Judaism. Some people maintain that God spoke the actual Hebrew Bible as we know it today, word for word—the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses), the Prophets, and the Writings. Others say that God inspired Moses and the prophets, revealing the principles of the Torah, and that then Moses gave it language and form. Many kabbalists believe that the real Torah is the *Zohar* (the esoteric work which forms the main body of the Kabbalah), and that the outer Torah—the Bible—was a hint to the esoteric teachings of the *Zohar*. They felt that God gave the *Zohar* and other kabbalistic works for

those initiated into the inner mysteries, and that the Bible exists as a hint to those esoteric teachings for those who are ready.

However, all these interpretations view the Torah only on a literal level, as a teaching that can be reduced to language. This is true whether they believe it to be a scripture literally spoken by God or one inspired by him, whether the Bible or the *Zohar*. But Moses was a true mystic who received the inner Word, the divine sound or holy Name of God, which he transmitted to his disciples. To confine our understanding of Torah solely to a written scripture, or even to an oral tradition expressed in human language, is to ignore the basic fact that Moses brought a spiritual teaching, which by its nature is beyond expression in language. The transition from inner mystic teaching to written scripture is a phenomenon common to most religions. As Maharaj Charan Singh writes:

Owing to the partial loss and misunderstanding of the mystic tradition, followers of most religions use the term *Bani*, Word, for their various sacred books. The books themselves, however sacred and to whichever religion they may belong, are only verbal descriptions of the real Bani within. Huzur Maharaj Ji [Maharaj Sawan Singh] used to emphasize this point: our scriptures and sacred books extol that Bani or Shabd which is within; the Bani itself is not in the books but is within ourselves, and it can be heard or contacted within ourselves by perfect discipleship and the grace of the Master.<sup>13</sup>

This Word, the creative divine essence, is a transcendent reality which can only be perceived by the soul. Sound and light are both aspects of the disciple's inner experience of the Word or Name, and therefore mystics speak of seeing and



hearing the Word. Ultimately, the sound and light become one ineffable experience. The Word is not an outer, literal word or voice, but a spiritual reality which is beyond earthly seeing and hearing.

The biblical story of the revelation on Mount Sinai describes the light and sound of the voice of God:

And the Lord spoke unto you out of the midst of the fire; ye heard the voice of words, but ye saw no form; only a voice.

DEUTERONOMY 4:12

The first-century Jewish mystic Philo Judaeus explains that this divine revelation was a mystic experience in which the divine Word was also perceived as spiritual light:

When we read in the Scriptures ... that God spoke to man, we are not to believe that the atmosphere was shattered by a material voice but that the human soul had been illumined by the purest light. Only in this manner can the divine word address itself to man. Again, when the Law was promulgated on Mount Sinai, the text does not say that a voice was *heard*, but that a voice was *seen* by all the people assembled. "You have seen," says Jehovah, "that I spoke to you from heaven above" (*Exodus 20:19*). Since a miracle is expounded, this cannot refer to rational knowledge or to a mere contemplation of ideas, but to a revelation mystically understood.<sup>14</sup>

The author of the *Zohar* described the revelation of the Torah as an emanation from the inner voice, that great voice which is the source of everything and is the essence of the holy divine Name:



The Torah emerged from that inner Voice called Great Voice, of which we read: 'These words the Lord spake, ... with a great voice, and it went on no more' (*Deut. 5:19*). Observe that that Great Voice is the root of all things, and is the essence of the Holy Divine Name.<sup>15</sup>

In some contexts, the Torah is called the Law, because as the inner Word or Name it is the cosmic law that sustains the universe. It is the divine law that is eternally sustaining and relevant. C. H. Dodd, in *The Bible and the Greeks*, relates how the Torah, which "in its widest sense means divine teaching or revelation," came to mean law in a legislative sense because of the pitfalls inherent in the process of translation, "thus giving a misleading legalistic tone to much of the Old Testament."<sup>16</sup>

Because of this misunderstanding, for centuries many people have believed that Moses gave the law—in a legalistic sense—but that Jesus brought mercy and love. They have seen Moses as a representative of justice, in contradistinction to Jesus as the source of compassion and love. They base this belief on their understanding of a passage in the New Testament, "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (*John 1:17*), interpreting law in its narrow sense as the opposite of grace and truth. However, as Dodd has explained, law means revelation, divine teaching.

Maharaj Charan Singh also has commented that in this context *law* means the cosmic law, the eternal mystic teaching or revelation:

Christ said that the law has been given to you by Moses. Moses gave you the same law, and yet you condemn me. And he doesn't say Moses never gave you the law, this cosmic law; he gave you the same law, but we have forgotten that law.<sup>17</sup>

This cosmic law is the divine power, which created and now sustains the universe. It is this creative will or principle—the Word—which is the mystic essence of the Torah that the Lord revealed to Moses and into which Moses initiated his disciples, the children of Israel. The following hymn from the daily Jewish prayers eloquently attests to the Torah as a mystical entity, revealed via the divine light emanating from the “face” of the Lord:

O our Father, do Thou cause the divine light of thy face to shine upon every one of us, for by the divine light of thy face, O Lord our God, hast Thou revealed to us the Torah which sustains life, which teaches the love of kindness, righteousness, blessing, mercy, life, and peace.<sup>18</sup>

It is our contact with the inner holy Name and not a written scripture that sustains life and infuses us with the finer qualities of kindness, mercy, and inner peace. When one experiences the mystic Word, the cosmic law, command, or order, there is no need for a written code of laws and commandments, as experience makes everything clear. Once we are in tune with the power of the living God, we know right from wrong, we are aware which actions will take us closer to the Lord and which will take us away from him. We become attuned to the cosmic law through meditation on the Word, the holy divine Name. As Maharaj Sawan Singh used to say, “Where there is love, there is no need for law.”

## Sound and Light of the Name

We have shown earlier that the kabbalists described the creation as a process through which the Lord, the Ain-Sof, the holy Name, projects himself from a spiritual dimension to the



material. This projection or emanation is often described in terms of gradations or *sefirot* (emanations, levels) of sound and light. Just as the creation took place through the projection of the light and sound of the Name, so the divine reality is experienced within oneself in meditation as light and sound.

As witnesses to this truth, the prophets of the Bible described their own experiences of the Word or Name of God in terms of light and sound. For example, the book of Kings tells the story of Elijah's divine encounter:

And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains ... and the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, and the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, and the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a *still small voice*.

*I KINGS 19:11-12*

Thus the prophet Elijah described his experience of God. He says that the Lord manifested to him first as a great and strong wind, but the essence of the Lord was not in that wind. After the wind, came the sound of an earthquake, but the Lord could not be found in the earthquake. Then came the vision of fire, yet the Lord was not to be found in the fire or flame. Although these sounds and light were manifestations of the Lord, they were external to him and were not him. But then came "a still small voice." This is the sublime experience of God's essence.

Elijah's experience directly corresponds with the description given by all true mystics of the Name experienced as inner sound and light. The disciple experiences the inner holy Name or Word as the sound of the wind, conch, thunder, earthquake—many metaphors are used. But gradually the spiritual sound becomes finer and finer. The mystics say that ultimately



it cannot be described. Some compare it to the sound of the Indian *vina*, an ancient stringed instrument, but even that comparison is gross and clumsy when compared with the divine sound's ineffable beauty. Here the prophet Elijah has called that delicate sound the still small voice.

In the Psalms, a different aspect of the divine Word is described:

The voice of the Lord is upon the waters:  
The God of glory thunders:  
The Lord is upon many waters.  
The voice of the Lord is powerful;  
The voice of the Lord is full of majesty.

*PSALMS 29:3,4*

The psalmist is describing his experience of the inner Name or voice of the Lord as the sound of thunder upon the waters—powerful and majestic. During his spiritual journey within, the mystic passes through several regions where different sounds are heard, as Elijah had described in Kings. These are all emanations of the Divine.

By day the Lord will command His loving-kindness,  
And in the night His song shall be with me.

*PSALMS 42:9*

God's love manifests itself in the Name, described here by the psalmist as God's song. The psalmist's inner being is accompanied night and day by the divine music.

The biblical mystics often refer to both light and sound as one essence in their experience of the Name. In the book of Numbers, the Bible describes the glory of the Lord appearing to Moses and Aaron (20:6). The glory refers to the awesome-

ness, wonder, brilliance, bliss, and utterly transcendent quality of the Name. Although the glory is intangible, it is so overwhelming that the mystics of the Bible seem to experience it visually—it “appears” to them. Similarly, the prophet Ezekiel recounts his awesome and brilliant inner vision:

This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spoke.

And He said unto me: “Son of man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak with thee.” And spirit entered into me when He spoke unto me, and set me upon my feet; and I heard Him that spoke unto me.

*EZEKIEL 1:28,2:1,2*

Ezekiel sees the glory of the Lord, while hearing his voice:

Afterward he brought me to the gate, even the gate that looketh toward the east; and, behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east; and His voice was like the sound of many waters; and the earth did shine with His glory.

*EZEKIEL 43:1,2*

The Name, though formless, manifests within as spiritual light and sound. Since there are no words to describe this spiritual experience, the mystics use the language of sensory seeing and hearing.

## Fountain of Living Waters

The fountain of living waters is another expression used in the Bible for the Name, the Word, the divine source. The fountain,

this audible life stream, does not water a physical land but the parched desert of a heart void of devotion. It is a vivid description of God's restorative love and grace entering our being.

And it shall come to pass in that day,  
That the mountains shall drop down sweet wine,  
And the hills shall flow with milk,  
And all the brooks of Judah shall flow with waters;  
And a fountain shall come forth  
of the house of the Lord,  
And shall water the valley of Shittim.

JOEL 4:18

Obadyah Maimonides, the Egyptian Jewish mystic of the thirteenth century, also interpreted this passage from the prophet Joel as a reference to the revelation of spiritual knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

The water of divine knowledge—the Shabd, as the Indian mystics call it—is always flowing within us, but at the time of redemption, when a master initiates us, we will have conscious contact with it. We will experience this water of the Name or Word flowing through us, giving life from its never-ending source. It is an infinite fountain flowing eternally at the third eye, the entrance to the house of the Lord. In fact, the Hebrew word for fountain, *ma'ayan* or *'ayin*, is the same as the word for eye, revealing how profound is the identification of the eye (the third eye) as the source of the divine waters of life.

As Obadyah Maimonides exhorted in his *Treatise of the Pool*:

Ever strive toward the bountiful and salutary waters which quench man's thirst and withhold thyself from all others which only increase man's thirst, lest "the disciples who come after you drink thereof and die, and the Heavenly Name be profaned" (*Pirke Avot 1:11*), or lest it be said of



thee, "they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (*Jeremiah 2:13*). Reflect upon this.<sup>20</sup>

In the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (Book of Brilliance) of the twelfth century, there are a series of passages in which this fountain is described as "the spring flowing with living water" which nourishes the tree planted by the king in his garden—a thinly veiled reference to the Lord and his creation. The image of the fountain of divine waters is a commonly used mystic metaphor of the ancient Middle East for the sustaining, nourishing current or stream of the Word which flows through all creation.

Said Rabbi Rehumai: From what you say, may one infer that what was needed for this world, the Holy One, praised be He, created before the heavens? He said to him: Yes. To what may this be likened? To a king who wanted to plant a tree in his garden. He examined the entire garden to know if there was in it a spring with flowing water to sustain it, and he could not find one. He said: I will dig for water, and bring forth a spring so that the tree might be sustained. He dug and brought forth a spring flowing with living water, and then he planted the tree which bore fruit. It succeeded because the roots always watered it from the spring.<sup>21</sup>

And what is this tree that you speak of? He said to him: It refers to the potencies of God (the *sefirot*) in graded order, and they are like a tree. As a tree, by being watered, bears fruit, so the Holy One, by means of water, increases the powers of the tree. And what is the water of the Holy One, praised be He? It is wisdom.\* And this also refers to the souls

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\*Wisdom is used here in its mystical sense, as Word, Name, or logos.

of the righteous that are carried from the spring to the great channel and ascend and are attached to the tree.<sup>22</sup>

The spiritual dew is a related term for the refreshing and nurturing quality of the Name. The prophet Isaiah says that the dew of the spiritual light will bring to life those who are spiritually dead:

Your dead shall live; my corpse shall arise,  
Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust,  
For your dew is the dew of light...

*ISAIAH 26:19*

Isaiah is not predicting that those physically dead will be given new physical life, but that those spiritually dead will awaken to their true spiritual essence, nurtured by the dew of God's holy Name.

## Wisdom

We can know God only by his expression, or emanation, in the creation. Often the prophets of the Bible referred to this divine emanation as Wisdom:

The Lord by Wisdom founded the earth;  
By understanding He established the heavens.

*PROVERBS 3:19*

Wisdom often speaks in the first person:

The Lord made me [Wisdom]  
as the beginning of His way,  
The first of His works of old.  
I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning,

Or ever the earth was.  
When there were no depths,  
I was brought forth;  
When there were no fountains  
abounding with water....  
When He established the heavens, I was there;  
When He set a circle on the face of the deep,  
Happy is the man that hearkeneth to me,  
Watching daily at my gates ...  
For whoso findeth me findeth life,  
And obtaineth favor of the Lord.  
But he that misseth me wrongeth his own soul;  
All they that hate me love death.

*PROVERBS 8:22-36*

The term Wisdom, like the terms Word, Name, or Shabd, refers to the eternal divine essence or power. Wisdom also means the understanding that comes from merging with God's creative power. The mystic thus comes to understand all things and be possessed of all wisdom, both human and divine. He sees all things by direct perception. Even a simple, uneducated man becomes the wisest of the wise when his soul comes in conscious contact with Wisdom.

In the passage above, Wisdom says: I pre-exist the creation. The person who finds me, who puts his attention in me, will be happy. He who finds Wisdom within will find life—eternal life; he will not have to suffer death and rebirth again and again, because he will have become one with the eternal One, the Lord. Thus he will please the Lord. But he who misses this opportunity hurts his own soul, as he deprives it of the opportunity to merge into its source. He chooses death, that is, the impermanence of the material creation, over the eternal life of the spirit.



*The Wisdom of Solomon*, an apocryphal book of the Bible,\* states that God "made all things by his Word (*logos*), and through his Wisdom (*sophia*) framed man" (9:1–2). Wisdom is described as being the radiance of God's glory, God's agent in the creation, the bride of the bridegroom, through which one can return to the Lord.

Similarly, the mystics of the Kabbalah recognized Wisdom as a mystical essence, identical with the Word. As contemporary scholar Gershom Scholem wrote:

Wisdom is seen as an intermediary force by means of which God creates the world.... In many circles this Wisdom soon became the Torah itself, the "word of God," the form of expression of the Divine Power.<sup>23</sup>

## Salvation and God-Realization

The holy divine Name, which is essential in attaining freedom from the lower self and union with the Lord, is to be found within the body. If we do not search for it within ourselves, we can never obtain salvation. The Bible says: "And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered" (*Joel 3:5*).

In the Bible there are many places where the Lord promises salvation and redemption through the Word and Name. If we read the Bible literally, the prophets' visions and promises of divine redemption seem to refer to salvation on a political or national level. However, if we look at the literal

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\* The Apocrypha consists of fourteen books originally included in the Septuagint (the first Greek translation of the Bible). They are not included in the Judaic or Protestant canons, but eleven are accepted by Roman Catholics in their canon.

Bible as an allegory of the soul's relation to the Lord, the story of the redemption takes on a deeper and more significant meaning.

The first-century mystic Philo believed much of the Bible to be an allegory of the soul's ascent to God, and the goal of his great biblical commentary was to "uncover the hidden meaning of the ... text, using the 'method dear to men with their eyes opened'."<sup>24</sup> So, also, the medieval kabbalists engaged in biblical exegesis in order to uncover the kernel of the mystic teaching they believed had been intentionally hidden in the literal events of the Bible.

God is interested in the welfare of our soul. To assume that he is interested in the national or political welfare of one people over another assumes that he is prejudiced in favor of one people at the expense of the other. There is one God for all humanity, so how could he be concerned about the welfare of only some of his children and create hardships for his other children? To bring God's will into human politics is to make him subject to the duality of human existence on this earth plane. The historical events narrated in the Bible take on greater universal significance as allegories of the soul's struggles within and its attempts to find victory in those struggles. Victory is union with God. As Philo said, "Humanity's goal and ultimate bliss lies in the knowledge or vision of God":

The limit of happiness is the presence of God, which completely fills the whole soul with his whole incorporeal and eternal light. And the limit of misery is his passing on the way ... for the soul to be separated from the contemplation of the Existent One is the most complete of evils.<sup>25</sup>

From this perspective, it is clear that the worst exile is the exile of the soul from the inner realms where it is one with

God. The soul is exiled to the world of mind and senses. This has been its predicament since Adam was banished from the Garden of Eden to the physical plane. So, also, the historical event of Israel's banishment from the land of Israel can be understood symbolically as the banishment of the soul from the presence of God. As Philo says, this is "the most complete of evils." Ultimate salvation, therefore, implies the return of the soul to its divine source.

Salvation for the soul also implies victory over the enemies hidden within us, over the worldly tendencies that keep us bound to this world through our actions and their consequences. Action results in reaction and keeps us tied to the wheel of birth and rebirth. When we overcome our worldly tendencies by attaching ourselves to the current of the Name within us, our soul will become free to merge into the Lord, thus achieving salvation and God-realization. Many of the biblical psalms praise the Name of God as our source of strength when we are besieged by enemies. The psalms can be understood as testimony to the divine help we receive in our struggle to overcome our worldly tendencies.

The Lord also will be  
a high tower for the oppressed,  
A high tower in times of trouble;  
And they that know Thy name  
will put their trust in Thee;  
For Thou, Lord, hast not forsaken them  
that seek Thee.

*PSALMS 9:10,11*

For Thou art my rock and my fortress;  
Therefore, for the sake of your name,  
lead me and guide me.



Bring me out of the net that they have hidden for me;  
For Thou art my stronghold.

*PSALMS 31:4,5\**

The Name makes the disciple fearless; he can conquer his worst enemies—his own evil tendencies and desires. In the Bible, the Name of the Lord gave the prophets strength to defeat the enemies of Israel many, many times. The greatest enemies our soul can have are the enemies from within—the five perversions of lust, anger, greed, attachment and ego.

Thou art my King, O God;  
Command the salvation of Jacob.  
Through Thee do we push down our adversaries;  
Through Thy name do we tread them under  
that rise up against us....  
In God have we gloried all the day,  
And we will give thanks unto Thy name for ever.

*PSALMS 44:5-9*

In the Bible, the young David says to the giant Goliath: "Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a javelin, but I come to thee with the name of the Lord of hosts" (*I Samuel 17:45*).<sup>26</sup> The giant Goliath can be seen as a symbol of the awesome inner weaknesses which David had to defeat before he could become king—before he was pure enough to ascend to the divine throne in the inner regions. David relied on the divine Name as his source of power and salvation.

Later in the Bible, the prophet Jeremiah accuses false prophets of pulling the people away from God's Name to worship of

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\* Author's translation.

the idol Baal. He bemoans the fact that the people are forgetting the worship of the divine Name. Jeremiah eloquently speaks of the power of the Word to save the soul, while the dream (the false practice) keeps the soul ensnared in illusion. The Word separates illusion from reality, the straw from the wheat.

The [false] prophet that hath a dream,  
Let him tell a dream;  
And he that hath My word,  
Let him speak My word faithfully.  
What hath the straw to do with the wheat?  
Saith the Lord.  
Is not My word like as fire?  
Saith the Lord;  
And like a hammer  
that breaketh the rock in pieces?

*JEREMIAH 23:28,29*

Jeremiah emphasizes the difference between the dream and the Word. The Word is like fire in its ability to burn away the straw—illusion—and leave the wheat—the essence. It is like a hammer—strong in destroying the obstacles of the soul. In a similar vein, the psalmist sings:

The voice of the Lord heweth out flames of fire;  
The voice of the Lord shaketh the wilderness.

*PSALMS 29:7,8*

Using almost the same image, the Indian mystic Kabir explains that we are imprisoned in bodies because of our karmas, our sins, which can be destroyed by the practice of the Name, just as a high heap of hay is reduced to ashes by a single spark

of fire.<sup>27</sup> And Guru Ramdas, fourth in the line of Guru Nanak, wrote:

One may bring wood from far and near  
 And stack it in a heap,  
 But a little fire reduces it to ashes.  
 Even so, one's great store of sins  
 Is soon consumed  
 When saints apply to the sinner  
 A spark of Nam, the Name of the Lord.<sup>28</sup>

In the Bible, repentance is equated with listening to the voice of the Lord and attending to his Word. Repentance clears away the sins a person has accrued through his prior actions; in other words, it burns away his karmas. By not attending to the Word, his sins remain with him:

Because he hath despised the word of the Lord, and hath broken His commandment; that soul shall utterly be cut off, his iniquity shall be upon him.

*NUMBERS 15:31*

In thy distress, when all these things are come upon thee, in the end of days, thou wilt return to the Lord thy God, and hearken unto His voice....

*DEUTERONOMY 4:30*

This potent Name, or Word, is within us all. It is not outside of us; it is within our own body. When we learn to come in touch with this Name or Shabd, this divine speech or music, the glory of God, we will experience its presence everywhere—as the force of love, the spiritual light and sound which give life, energy, and order to every being and activity; and as the



music of the spheres that keeps the universe working harmoniously, the planets revolving around the sun, the earth rotating on its axis.

Each one of us can put our consciousness in touch with that Name, or voice of God, within. Under the guidance of a living master, we can learn to merge into this divine music. Then we will realize our spiritual nature, that we are indeed created in the image of God, that he has placed a drop of himself within us. We will realize our soul is the holy Name, his essence, a spark of his divine light.



## Meditation

How can we know God? Is there a practical method by which we can unite our souls with him? Mystics teach that since the Lord is pure spirit, which emanates from the highest spiritual region, he can be known only by our soul, which is of the same divine essence.

The mind and intellect cannot know or understand God because the origin of mind is in the causal plane, which is lower than the pure spiritual realms. Mind can know only what lies within its own realm and below. As Maharaj Charan Singh has explained:

God gave us intellect to carry on the works of this world of phenomena. Beyond that our wisdom cannot reach. It is the Lord's will that we should rise above cold reason and fly towards him on the wings of love and faith. One who relies on reason alone cannot attain true knowledge (knowledge of the Lord). Reasoning is the function of our physical brain. It can properly value and understand only those things that are ascertainable through our physical senses.

God and things spiritual can be realized only by the direct perception of the soul, through contact with Shabd. The soul can perceive clearly without going through the process of reasoning. Our mind is too feeble and limited to comprehend the unlimited and incomprehensible One....

Hairsplitting gets us nowhere. One must obtain direct perception of those things and there is a way to do it. Open your inner eye, which is the eye of the soul....

The intellect, limited as it is, cannot even understand everything in this world of phenomena, to say nothing of the worlds beyond the senses. Our worldly science, intellect and reasoning power is a bundle of guesses that sometimes come out right—but more often wrong. This is all the more so when we attempt to use these inferior means for unraveling the mysteries of the Hidden Hand that works in this world and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

The soul has its own power of knowing, beyond the intellectual faculties of the mind. When it sheds its coverings of mind and body, it is free to know God instantly, by direct perception. But it is only through meditation that the soul can attain this level of direct perception and obtain spiritual knowledge. Meditation is the technique given by the mystics to liberate the soul from mind and matter, so that it can freely know and merge into God. Freed of the weight of karma, it rises to its source without hindrance, naturally. Thus it experiences union with God.

Recent research has demonstrated that many of the mystic experiences of the prophets that are recounted in the Bible came about through meditation. Contemporary scholar and mystic Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan maintained that if one reads the original Hebrew Bible accurately, one will find many references to meditation. Terms like *hagah* (literally, utter) and



*siyah* (converse), for example, describe specific repetition practices.

*Hitbodedut* is another important term for meditation. Literally meaning seclusion or self-isolation, it has been used to describe the meditation practice of Jewish mystics from the time of the Bible through modern history. However, Kaplan comments, terms like *hitbodedut*, *hagah*, *siyah*, and others have generally been mistranslated and applied to outer practices of prayer. Thus their true meaning has been lost, and few people today are aware of the long tradition of meditation in Judaism, beginning with the prophets.<sup>2</sup> As Kaplan has remarked:

Many people consider the prophets of the Bible to be nothing more than spokesmen and agitators, who spoke out against the wrongs of their people and governments. What is not generally known is the fact that these prophets were among the greatest mystics of all times, actively engaged in the loftiest meditative techniques.<sup>3</sup>

Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azzulai (1724–1806), an important kabbalist, considered *hitbodedut* to be a basic biblical concept. He remarked:

The root of everything is meditation (*hitbodedut*). It is a very great and lofty concept, making a person worthy of all holiness.... When a person meditates he is clothed with holiness.... When one meditates, he is also attached to God, even with regard to his mundane bodily needs.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the rabbis and sages believed that direct experience of God is possible, resulting in a higher type of knowledge than may be gained by intellectual means.<sup>5</sup> Aside from the visions of the prophets recorded in the Bible, the rabbis based

their belief in meditation on a mystical interpretation of the passage in Psalms, "O, Taste and see that the Lord is good: Happy is the man that taketh refuge in him" (*Psalms 34:9*). The word *taste* is graphic, tangible, and non-intellectual. It suggests knowledge through direct experience of the divine reality, rather than by thinking or reasoning. Similarly, many Indian and Muslim mystics have described their experience of the Divine in meditation as tasting the inner ambrosia, the spiritual food, and as drinking the inner nectar.

In a play on words, the rabbis of the Talmud interpreted God's command to Abraham in the Bible, "*lekh lekha*"—"go to yourself" (*Genesis 12:1*), as meaning "go within yourself."\* They felt that the passage was more than a simple command for Abraham to leave the home of his fathers and "go up" to the physical land God would show him; rather, it was a command for Abraham to leave the lower land or level he normally inhabited, and go up to the spiritual levels by meditation—by going into himself. Clearly, the rabbis believed that as far back in history as Abraham, knowledge of God was obtainable through mystic experience rather than through the intellect.

Moses Maimonides, the great twelfth-century Jewish philosopher of Egypt, wrote explicitly of the limitations of intellect and of the potential for superior spiritual knowledge through mystic experience, which he called prophecy—"the vital energizing condition that established the channel linking man with God." Maimonides wrote:

I maintain that human knowledge is limited, and as long as the soul is in the body it cannot know what is beyond nature. It cannot see beyond, because it is confined within

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\* *Lekh lekha* can be read as an emphatic command meaning simply, "Go!" But it can also mean, "Go to you," or "Go to yourself."



nature. Thus when our intelligence should seek to probe the beyond it will be unable to do so, for this subject is outside its reach. It is only what is within nature that it can know and contemplate.... But know that there is a level of knowledge beyond that of the knowledge of the philosophers, and this is prophecy. Prophecy is another world, and proof and argumentation do not apply here.<sup>6</sup>

Maimonides saw a link between the level of prophecy achieved by the prophets of the Bible and the spiritual state that can be achieved by people of all times through meditation:

Prophecy ceased to be a singular phenomenon of God's revelation vouchsafed to chosen individuals, and became instead an episode in a larger category of man's encounter of the Divine; it became a phase of mystical experience.<sup>7</sup>

Many of the Jewish Sufis and kabbalists practiced various forms of meditation in order to obtain knowledge of God. For example, according to the thirteenth-century Spanish Jewish mystic Isaac ibn Latif, even the highest type of intellectual understanding reaches only the "back" of the Divine, but a picture of the "face" of the Lord can be gained through supra-intellectual ecstasy, which is an experience even higher than prophecy. Ibn Latif calls this type of direct perception "the beatitude of supreme communion."<sup>8</sup>

As the Indian philosopher and scholar Professor L. R. Puri writes in his book, *Mysticism, The Spiritual Path*:

Mystic knowledge is neither sense perception nor intellectual thinking and reasoning. It is an inner illumination of the soul when ... it comes in direct contact with Reality....



The capacity of mystic insight is present in all of us. It is in a latent or dormant state, but can be awakened by proper mystic training.<sup>9</sup>

Meditation is “the proper mystic training” that brings the soul in direct contact with the divine reality and “the beatitude of supreme communion.” In meditation, one learns to detach the soul from the mind and body and merge it in the Lord, its source. Once it experiences God-realization, the soul will never take birth in this world again.

To learn to meditate properly so that we can achieve God-realization, we need to find a perfect mystic teacher—perfect in the sense that he has perfected his spiritual practice; he has already made the journey to the highest spiritual realm and merged with God. Under such a master’s guidance, one avoids the dangers and pitfalls experienced by those who have tried to attain spiritual powers and divine knowledge by meditating on their own, without the protection of someone who already has attained the highest level.

The meditation practice taught by a perfect master is based on direct contact with the inner sound or divine power reverberating within. It is a universal and timeless teaching, for the same divine essence is common to us all. This practice has been taught by mystics throughout the ages to people of all cultures and traditions. It is not limited by place, time, culture, language, race, or religion. Research into the scriptures and holy books of the past reveals that the great mystics such as Moses, Buddha, Lao-Tse, Jesus Christ, Prophet Muhammad, Guru Nanak, Sarmad, and Kabir all taught devotion to the inner Name or Word. After they died, however, the mystic aspect of their teachings became lost and only the outer trappings remained.

The meditation practice taught by such true masters has three aspects—repetition, contemplation, and listening to the inner sound. Repetition, or *simran*, as it is called by the Indian mystics, involves inward, silent repetition of certain words or names given by the master, in order to calm the mind and concentrate it at the third eye—the point of concentration behind and between the eyes. To help in concentration, the mystics teach contemplation, or *dhyān*, which occupies the visual faculty of the mind. Once the mind is calm and concentrated at the third eye, it comes in contact with the inner sound, the divine Name, the spiritual essence reverberating constantly within. The Indian saints call this inner sound practice *bhajan*, which literally means worship.

The soul becomes entranced and enthralled by the beauty of the inner sound, which pulls it further inward and upward. Ultimately, the current of inner sound takes the soul through the regions of mind and spirit to the highest spiritual region, where it merges into the Supreme Lord.

## The Third Eye

The process of meditation is often described as a spiritual journey because it involves a change in the location of our attention or consciousness. Normally our attention is confined to the world of the senses and ideas. In meditation it is withdrawn to a single focus at the third eye, where the inner spiritual regions begin. Mystics often say that the spiritual journey begins at the soles of our feet and ends at the top of the head. This journey is not a pilgrimage to a city or temple; it is made within the microcosm of our own body.

The third eye, or eye center, is the place in the body hidden between and slightly above the two physical eyes, where the soul and mind naturally reside, knotted together. It is not a



physical place but a point of spiritual and mental focus. Normally, when we try to recollect something, our hand automatically comes to the center of our forehead. This subconscious movement is a witness to the fact that the attention of the mind naturally resides at this point.

Normally, as we live our daily lives, our attention descends from this point and spreads out into the world through the nine apertures of the body—the two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, mouth, and the two lower apertures. Through these apertures, the mind experiences sensory stimuli and creates images and ideas. Its tendency is to constantly wander out into the world and it cannot remain still even for an instant. The first and immediate goal in spiritual practice is to bring the attention back from the world and the senses to the eye center.

All religions speak of the third eye as the beginning of the spiritual journey. Muslims call it *nukta-i-savaida*, the black spot. Ancient Hindu sages called it *Shiv-netra*, the eye of Shiva, and *divya-netra*, the divine eye. Guru Nanak called it *til* and *tisra til*, meaning the sesame seed, a reference to the extremely small size of this opening to the spiritual realms. (It is not small physically, but to enter it one must be meek and humble, thus symbolically small, ridding oneself of ego and attachments.) In the *Adi Granth* it is also called the door to the house and the tenth door.

The Jewish practice of *tefillin* (phylacteries, prayer cases) can be understood on a mystic level as a symbol of concentration and meditation at the third eye. During the morning prayers, the *tefillin*, small leather boxes filled with biblical passages enjoining remembrance of God and his Word, are placed at the center of the forehead and on the arm closest to the heart, in order to fulfill God's commandment to bind his words "as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes" (*Deuteronomy 11:18*). The practice of



tefillin takes on a mystic significance when one understands it as an external reminder or symbol of God's commandment to remember him and his Word constantly, between the eyes and in the heart.

In his commentary on the book of Genesis in the Bible, Abraham ibn Ezra, a rabbi of twelfth-century Spain, refers to the third eye:

I will now explain to you the mystery of the venerated and awful [awesome] Name, and the mystery of the angels; and I will make a simile for you, from the light of the soul which comes forth from the eye.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, the single eye is the term used in the New Testament to describe this point of focus:

The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.

MATTHEW 6:22

Judaism and Christianity both refer to the third eye as the eye of the needle and the gate to heaven. Rabbi Chaim Vital (1543–1620) wrote in his book *Gates of Holiness*:

With great difficulty, I will open the gates of holiness, making an opening like the eye of a needle, and let him who is worthy pass through it to enter the innermost chamber. God is good and He will not withhold this benefit from those who walk in righteousness.<sup>11</sup>

Vital is referring to the great difficulty of bringing our attention back from the world to the third eye, the eye of the needle. He uses a beautiful image—of creating in the gates of

holiness an opening so small it is like the eye of a needle, yet it is large enough for the disciple's soul and mind to pass through. When the mind is freed of ego, when we drop all our worldly illusions about ourself—our attachments and preoccupations—and become truly humble, we become small enough to fit through this opening. With the grace of God, the mystic opens these gates to the spiritual realms and passes through them to reach the inmost chamber. As Abraham he-Hasid of Cairo wrote in the thirteenth century:

If the Gates be opened, he will be enabled to perceive all that lies within. A vision will take place and he will behold wondrous secrets and comely forms.<sup>12</sup>

## Repetition

We cannot easily bring our attention to the third eye, where the spiritual journey begins, because our minds are preoccupied with worldly affairs; we are constantly reflecting, ruminating, and desiring. This is a natural tendency of the mind. Some people think about their jobs; others about their children, their husbands, their wives. Some are worrying, some anticipating, and some grieving. The Indian mystics call this habit of repetition *simran*, from the word in Hindi which means to remember.\* They tell us that rather than thinking about the transient objects, people, and events of this world, which actually binds us to them, we should remember the eternal, the true. Then we will become attached to and attain the eternal and true, and not be subject to the swings of change and destiny.

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\* *Simran* is from the Hindi root *smarna*, which may be related to the Hebrew *shamor*, keep, guard. Muslim mystics often use the Persian/Arabic term *zikr*, also spelled *dhikr*, which is related to the Hebrew *zakhor*, remember.

Instead of doing simran or repetition of the world, we should do simran of the Lord. The mystics instruct their disciples to mentally repeat a series of names or words in order to calm and concentrate the mind. The spiritual simran is an exercise or method for concentrating and stilling the mind by repeating outer names, in order to be able to hear the true holy Name of God, the inner Word or sound.

The biblical "remembrance" of God's Name or Word can also be understood as a form of simran. According to Aryeh Kaplan:

There appear to be references to mantra meditation even in the Bible. On the basis of philological analysis, it seems that the Hebrew verb *hagah* denotes a kind of meditation in which a word or sound is repeated over and over.<sup>13</sup>

The prophet Isaiah eloquently sings to the Lord about the joy of remembering him:

To Thy name and to Thy remembrance  
is the desire of our soul.\*  
With my soul have I desired Thee in the night;  
Yea, with my spirit within me  
have I sought Thee earnestly.

ISAIAH 26:8-9

The Jewish Sufi mystics of the thirteenth century also referred to the practice of inward remembrance of God. In his commentary on the *Song of Songs* of the Bible, Abraham he-Hasid wrote:

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\* Author's translation.



One can attain to the spiritual world through the practice of outward and inward holiness, excessive love of God and the delight in his recollection (*dikr*) and Holy names.<sup>14</sup>

Scholars of that period mention that the “continuous ‘remembrance of God’ is a common theme in the earlier Spanish-Hebrew poetry and may be associated with the notion of ‘*dikr [ziker]* of the heart’.”<sup>15</sup>

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, an eighteenth-century Jewish mystic of Italy, wrote about the importance of repeating the Name:

Through this Name, His handiwork can speak of Him and call Him. By uttering this Name, individuals can also bring themselves close to Him.<sup>16</sup>

Even in relatively modern times, some Jewish mystics practiced continuous repetition of certain phrases or names in order to achieve concentration. Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772–1811) taught his disciples to repeat the phrase *Ribbono shel Olam*, “Master of the Universe.” He wrote:

God also decreed and ordained that when an individual utters his Name, divine Illumination and Influence are bestowed upon him. This is what God meant when He said, “In every place where I cause [allow] My Name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you” (*Exodus 20:21*).<sup>17</sup>

Much of the world’s mystic literature reveals that spiritual masters of a high order teach a system of meditation in which, initially, their disciples withdraw their attention from the world to the third eye and engage their mind in a practice of silent repetition. It is a simple task—one does not need to be educated

to do it; one can be of any age or in any state of health. And since the mind is in the habit of repetition, it should be an easy matter to switch from the repetition of the world and its objects to a repetition that connects one with the Lord. However, although the task may appear to be simple, it is not that easy to do, as the mind will not readily sit still at the third eye. It has the habit of running out, and the disciple must constantly struggle to bring it back.

The *Sefer Yetzirah* has an interesting passage that describes this process:

Ten Sefirot of Nothingness:  
Bridle your mouth from speaking  
And your heart from thinking  
And if your heart runs,  
Return to the place....<sup>18</sup>

This is almost an exact description of the disciple's struggle in meditation and the master's advice: Speak not of trivial, worldly things, and loosen your mind's attachment from whatever it desires. If the mind goes out, bring it back. Once it sits still at the third eye and concentrates on the simran of the words or names given by the master, it will be able to catch hold of the sound current—the true inner Name.

The Christian mystic Saint Francis de Sales also described this universal struggle with the mind:

If the heart wanders or is distracted, bring it back to the point quite gently and replace it tenderly in its Master's presence. And even if you did nothing during the whole of your hour but bring your heart back and place it again in our Lord's presence, though it went away every time you brought it back, your hour would be very well employed. <sup>19</sup>



## Contemplation

Along with our constant mental repetition of worldly thoughts, our minds habitually visualize and contemplate on the faces and forms of our worldly attachments—places, possessions, family members, friends, and even enemies. The Indian mystics call this habit of visualization *dhyān*, or contemplation.

The more we visualize the forms of our loved ones, the more our attachment for them grows. We begin to see them even in our dreams. At the time of our death, their faces will stand vividly before our eyes. If, at this last moment, we are thinking of all the people and places we are attached to, we will be reborn to be with them once again. In fact, it is our love and attachment for the faces and things of this world that brings us back here again and again.

This is why the mystics advise us to substitute our contemplation of worldly forms and faces with spiritual contemplation. During meditation, especially, while we are trying to engage the thinking faculty of our mind in *simran*, we need to give it some form to contemplate on, in order to occupy its natural faculty of visualization. Because we already have this habit of contemplation, mystics suggest we make use of it for our spiritual uplift.

While trying to concentrate the mind at the eye center by means of *simran*, we need to engage in *dhyān* to hold the mind still and keep it from slipping down. We have to choose the object of our contemplation very carefully because of the mind's tendency to attach itself to whatever it visualizes. So, therefore, who or what is worthy of our contemplation?

In Jewish tradition, human beings are considered the crown of creation. The Bible says that man is created in God's image, while the Kabbalah teaches that he contains within him all ten *sefirot*, the divine emanations or qualities through which the



creation took place. He is the complete microcosm that contains the macrocosm.

Similarly, Indian mystics teach that the entire universe is made of five vital components: earth, water, air, fire, and ether. All living beings are made of a combination of these elements. Only in man is ether, the faculty of discrimination, active.

If we were to contemplate or worship lower life forms in which the other four elements predominate, we would therefore regress spiritually. We would even reincarnate at their level after we die. On the other hand, if we were to worship another human being equal to ourselves, we would be unable to progress beyond our human condition and would have to take birth once again in human form. So, if we want to advance spiritually, to experience God and merge into him, we will have to contemplate on him alone.

This line of reasoning, though logical, presents a dilemma. How is it possible to contemplate on God? God, in his highest reality, is formless and abstract. Saints teach that he is transcendent and indescribable. How then can we worship and contemplate on him?

If we want to merge into God, we need to contemplate on a being who has merged his consciousness into God, someone who has risen beyond the confines of the body and the limitations of his own humanity and has realized that indeed he is made "in the Lord's image." God sends the perfect masters to us for this very purpose. Although the master has a physical body like us, he is not trapped in it. Because he has become one with God, he radiates God's divine essence, like Moses who saw God "face to face" and whose face radiated beams of divine light.

The perfect spiritual master has his body on earth, but his soul flies free in the eternal regions. He is constantly in com-

munion with the Lord. The hasidic Jews referred to their *rebbe*s (masters) as channels or ladders linking God with man. By contemplating on the spiritual master and loving him, one can become connected with his spiritual power and ultimately become part of the same Lord.

To use an example from observation of the principles of electricity: If an appliance like a computer or TV set is not connected to a power supply, it cannot be turned on. However, if we attach an electric cord to the appliance and plug it into the wall outlet, electricity will give the appliance the power it needs to function. The Lord, the divine power or Word, is the power supply. We are the appliances that are disconnected from our source, and the master establishes the connection. Once we are connected with the divine power through the assistance of the master, we can receive the current of that power and become spiritually charged.

God, in his mercy and compassion, sends the perfect masters to reveal his true divinity and teach us how to reach the highest spiritual realm within, our true home. By contemplating on the true master, we gain a glimpse of God's brilliance and radiance. The master is God's means of showing himself to us in a form that we can understand while we are confined to the body, where we can only perceive and experience through our mind and senses.

As we read earlier in the work of Moses Maimonides, "As long as the soul is in the body, it cannot know what is beyond nature." When confined in our body, our soul cannot know God, because God is beyond nature. The true master, whose body is within nature but whose soul has merged in God, is God's means of reaching us at our level. That is why we need to contemplate on the master's form.



## Listening to the Sound

Once our attention has been withdrawn to the third eye by means of repetition and stabilized with the help of contemplation, we discover a sweet melody or sound reverberating within. This sound is the divine Name, the Word, the fountain of living waters, the inner nectar, pouring forth from the eternal source. The process of listening to the inner sound is called in Hindi *bhajan*, literally, worship or devotion.

This divine music or sound is the heritage of all mankind, whether rich or poor, young or old, man or woman, black or brown or white. Everyone has equal rights to it; the Lord, in his kindness, has placed within each one of us the means to find it.

Hearing the inner sound, the voice of the Lord that is within us, is both the means and the goal of meditation. Mystics of all religions have written about this divine sound; the beauty of its music transports the soul to a level where it no longer desires or is conscious of anything else. The soul becomes attached to this divine music. Now that the soul has found a greater attachment, it can let go of its attachments to the mind and senses. In hearing the beauty of the sound, the mind and soul become purified and automatically become detached from their lower tendencies. The thirteenth-century Jewish mystic, Rabbi Abraham Abulafia of Italy, described this process of detachment from the world of nature, or matter, and attachment to the spiritual as the "loosening or untying of knots."<sup>20</sup>

Ultimately, the disciple rides the current of sound to the highest spiritual realms within. There the soul exists in its naked purity and meets the Supreme Lord, only to realize that the soul, the Lord, the sound, and the master—all are one.

The Talmud says that "the Shekhinah, the divine presence, used to beat before Samson like a bell,"<sup>22</sup> the bell sound being



the sound heard within oneself at the first region on the spiritual journey. This sound is the still, small voice that Elijah heard, the voice of the Lord that appeared to the children of Israel when Moses ascended Mount Sinai. "The descent of the divine voice" was the term commonly used by medieval rabbis to describe the experience of the sound by the prophets of the Bible.

In the biblical *Song of Songs*, the disciple who is longing for union with the Lord cries out to him:

Thou that dwellest in the gardens,  
The companions hearken for thy voice;  
Cause me to hear it.

*SONG OF SONGS 8:13*

In this verse, the lover begs of his beloved, the Lord: You who dwell in the gardens—the inner regions—your lover is longing to hear your Word, your Voice. Cause me to hear it!

And the psalmist described his own practice of meditation on the Word:

I rose early at dawn, and cried;  
I hoped in Thy word.  
My eyes forestalled the night watches,  
That I might meditate on Thy word.

*PSALMS 119:147-148*

Like mystics everywhere, the psalmist meditates in the early hours of the morning—the time of elixir, as it is called by Indian saints. He patiently sits and waits to hear the Word, the sound; he stays awake at night in order to meditate on it.

The Greek mystics also mentioned the divine sound or Word in their writings. They wrote about the logos and the music of the spheres; both terms are references to the Word.

Socrates spoke of hearing a sound within himself that transported him to transcendent, divine realms. Pythagoras also experienced the inner sound.<sup>21</sup>

Muslim and Jewish mystics often described hearing the Word as drinking the elixir, the nectar, the wine divine. The uninitiated readers did not realize that when the mystics sang of drinking wine or tasting nectar, they were describing the mystic practice of listening to the Word and not the sensual enjoyment of drinking an alcoholic beverage.

Sarmad, the seventeenth-century Jewish mystic of India, composed beautiful *rubaiyats* (poems) describing his experiences of the inner sound:

A cup of wine and flowers in the garden,  
That is our home, the dwelling of a happy mind.  
Sayest thou those who drink are drunkards?  
Then thou art right;  
but it's intoxication of another kind.  
Thou callest me a madman? Thou art right.  
But I object to being called a devotee,  
For I love wine, and that is all.<sup>23</sup>

In this ecstatic poem, Sarmad says that a cup of the divine wine (the sound) and his inner visions are all he needs to keep his mind happy—they are his home. If you object and say he is just drunk, Sarmad agrees with you; but, he says, it's a different kind of intoxication. Do you think he's crazy? He agrees also. Sarmad says he objects to being called a devotee—a religious man in the ordinary sense; all he is interested in is the real nectar and not traditional religious observance.

Elsewhere Sarmad says: "Strange phenomenon is this, he who drinks wine becomes the wine himself."<sup>24</sup> He who hears the divine sound becomes that sound—he merges into it and

achieves God-realization. "The hunter (death) is ever roaming in the sky to trap thee; so therefore drink the wine, quick and fast."<sup>25</sup> Sarmad is warning us to make use of the opportunity of human birth and practice meditation on the Word while we still can drink the wine.

Muslim mystic Omar Khayyam describes the mystic experience in the similar terms:

I bid thee drink no other wine  
But this, the everlasting fount:  
A fortune of delight to count,  
In this brief hour of the world is thine.<sup>26</sup>

In this well-known verse, the poet-mystic is referring to the pleasure of listening to the inner Word—drinking the spiritual nectar, the wine divine. That is the everlasting fountain or stream. Once the disciple hears the inner Word or Shabd, everything becomes his—he is totally satisfied.

The thirteenth-century Sufi mystic Rumi, author of the *Masnavi*, also sang of the inner wine:

The mortal body is a proof of the immortal spirit:  
The wandering of the drunken reveller proves  
the existence of the Cup-bearer....  
When first the Giver of the grape  
my lonely heart befriended,  
Wine fired my bosom and my veins filled up;  
But when his image all my eye possessed,  
a voice descended;  
Well done, O sovereign wine and peerless cup!<sup>27</sup>

Mystics in different cultures may have used different terms to describe the practice of listening to the sound, but that vibrant



power itself is one and the same. It is this inner sound, the holy Name of God, that is the true reality and essence of spirituality—the core of all religions.

### “The Path of the Names”

Many Jewish mystics from the time of antiquity through the period of the Kabbalah practiced complex systems of meditation involving the repetition of outer names of God. These methods were sometimes called “the path of the names.” The mystics believed that divine power was invested in the names, or in the letters of which the names were comprised, and that by combining or repeating them in specific ways, they would gain control over that spiritual power.

For example, the third-century *Sefer Yetzirah* explains the nature of God and the process of creation through the relationship of numbers, letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and “divine names.” It is believed that this early work was also a manual of meditation techniques using repetition of the names and their letters in order to manipulate divine forces. Some legends even ascribe the miraculous creation of living creatures to the rabbis who engaged in these practices.

Techniques involving repetition of names are also found in the *Hekhalot* literature of the talmudic period. These names were thought to be passwords to the inner regions and a means of control over the heavenly beings and forces. Despite warnings in the Talmud against the “misuse” of the names, the practices continued and became even more widespread during the period of the Kabbalah.

Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, kabbalist of the thirteenth century, taught his disciples a complex method of meditation based on breathing exercises, body movements, and the writing, visualizing, repeating, combining, singing, and permuting of

the "thirty-six-letter name" and the "seventy-two-letter name" of God. He taught the use of the names to bring about "the descent of the divine influx." According to Abulafia's teaching, through knowledge of the correct names and repetition practices, one could "draw down" the divine power. The purpose of these practices was ultimately to bring about ecstatic experiences of mystic union.

Some of the later kabbalists related their name repetition practices to the symbolism of the *sefirot*—the successive emanations of the divine power. Rabbi Isaac Luria taught that at the time of the creation, a great catastrophe had taken place when the primal divine light had become scattered into the lower creation and imprisoned in matter; this was mirrored in the upper spheres by the unbalanced and disharmonious relationship of the *sefirot*. Luria taught techniques of *tikkun* (repair) that would bring these forces back into harmony, including *yihudim* (unifications)—concentration exercises involving the contemplation and combining of "sacred" names—as well as *kavvanot* (intentions)—words, names, and prayers, repeated with great concentration and focus, and rituals and ceremonies performed with focused intention. It was also believed that these exercises were the source of spiritual, even magical powers.

Apparently, by using these various name practices, many of the mystics achieved a certain degree of inner progress, probably due to their intense concentration and the long periods they spent in meditation. This is attested to by the accounts of Abulafia, Rabbi Isaac Eizik of Komorno, and others who describe experiences of inner light and sound. Others wrote of achieving certain supernatural or miraculous powers, such as physical healing and foretelling the future.

However, from the evidence presented in the Bible and some of the commentaries, it seems probable that the inner



worship engaged in by prophets of the highest order, such as the patriarch Abraham and prophet Moses, involved an inner repetition practice and hearing the Word or voice of God within, without any attempts at manipulation and without creating elaborate practices of word combination and permutation. Those practices seemed to have developed later, during the post-biblical rabbinic and medieval periods. In fact, Obadyah Maimonides may have been alluding to this development when he wrote that the true mystic teaching was practiced by the prophets of Israel but was then lost to the Jews, reappearing with the Sufis of Islam. He did not seem to consider name permutation and combination as part of the true mystic practice.

The repetition practice of outer names that leads to the highest level of spiritual realization is designed simply to control and concentrate the mind so that one can become receptive to the inner holy Name. One does not try to unite with the outer names; rather one uses them as a vehicle to connect to the inner spiritual power. The words or letters of the outer names themselves have no power. They cannot influence divine forces or beings through their vibrations. They cannot provoke the descent of the divine *shefa* (influx) by being pronounced correctly. The true, inner, unspoken, ineffable Name or voice of God is a divine power; it is not made up of the letters of the alphabet—not four letters, not thirty-six letters, not seventy-two letters. It is beyond writing, speaking, and reading. No amount of manipulation or combination of letters can produce this name. As Maharaj Charan Singh explains:

The correct combination of key letters that enables the lock of the cage, or prison house of the body, to be opened is the raising of the body consciousness so that it hears and unites



with the "voice of God." This is the Ancient Wisdom, and it is this Wisdom that the messengers of God come to teach in this world. This law is eternal, and knows no variation or change. It is the same for yesterday, today and forever. This act constitutes the real worship of the Lord. It is all-embracing and comprehensive.<sup>28</sup>

It would be appropriate here to recall the words of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook that we read earlier, that the outer or attributive names of God should not be the focus of our religious worship:

All the divine names, whether in Hebrew or in any other language, give us only a tiny and dull spark of the hidden light to which the soul aspires when it utters the word "God." Every definition of God brings about heresy; every definition is spiritual idolatry; even attributing to his intellect and will, even the term *divine*, the term *God*, suffers from the limitations of definition....

The tendency of unrefined people to see the divine *essence* as embodied in the words and in the letters alone is a source of embarrassment to humanity.<sup>29</sup>

When the true, or perfect spiritual master gives his disciples a repetition practice of outer names—the practice of *simran* described earlier in this chapter—its purpose is to subdue and focus the mind. But the power to control the mind is not in the names themselves; it is in the master who has bestowed them. The names serve as a link between master and disciple. When the disciple repeats the names, he is not only concentrating on the names themselves, he is invoking the power and protection of his master.

Maharaj Charan Singh would often give the example of a gun and bullets. The outer names are like bullets. They have little power if we throw them. But they gain amazing force when shot from a gun. The master is like the gun. When we repeat the names he gives us, they have *his* power behind them.

There is an Indian legend that illustrates this point. A king went to a holy man and asked for initiation into the spiritual path. The holy man gave him the names "Ram Nam," but the king said to himself: "There is nothing new about these names—everyone knows them. They are common names for God!" So he didn't bother doing the repetition practice as the holy man had instructed.

A while later, the holy man went to the king's court. He approached one of the guards and, pointing to the king, declared: "Arrest that man!" The guard, thinking he was crazy, ignored him. The holy man then approached the king and again shouted, "Arrest that man!" while pointing directly at the king. The king, annoyed, commanded his courtier: "Arrest that man!" The holy man was immediately put in chains.

Before he could be led away, however, the holy man turned to the king and said: "Now you see how the same words, when uttered by the one with power, can produce results! The names I gave you were nothing, but they carried my spiritual power." Naturally the king freed the holy man and submitted to him in humility.

The book of Kings in the Bible tells a story with a similar message. Naaman, a captain in the army of the king of Aram, was stricken with leprosy. In his quest for a cure, he went to the Jewish prophet Elisha:

And Naaman came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha. And Elisha sent

a messenger to him, saying, Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall come back to you, and you shall be clean.

But Naaman was angry, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place, and cure the leper.

Are not Amana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? May I not wash in them, and be clean? And he turned and went away in a rage.

And his servants came near, and spoke to him, and said, My father, if the prophet had bid you do some *great* thing, would you not have done it? How much rather then, when he said to you, Wash, and be clean?

So he went down, and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

2 KINGS 5:9-14

It wasn't the water of the river that cured Naaman; it was power of the prophet Elisha. Similarly, there is no power in the outer names themselves, unless the master invests them with *his* power.

## Dying While Living

The practice of listening to the holy divine Name is often called dying while living because when we withdraw our consciousness to the third eye and listen to the inner music reverberating there, the mind and the soul leave the tomb of the body and finally come to life. They ascend to the Supreme



Lord in the company of the inner sound current. Maharaj Charan Singh explains the process of dying while living:

By the grace of the master, we cut asunder our attachments with the world and forget its troubles and miseries. Daily, through the practice of meditation, we die. We die to live, to enjoy the eternal bliss and peace of our True Home, and live forever.<sup>30</sup>

The Bible also describes this type of death:

Precious in the sight of the Lord  
Is the death of His saints.

*PSALMS 116:15*

Here the psalmist is saying that the Lord is pleased when his devotees die to the world and ascend to the realms within, for only then do they come alive to the reality that is God. The Lord is our beloved; he misses us and wants us to rise to his level, even more than we long for union with him.

Hasidic rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy, disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov, wrote: "He who wishes to live, finds death; he who is willing to die, finds life."<sup>31</sup> He who truly wishes to live life to its fullest must die to the world; he who is willing to die to the world finds eternal life in God.

Contemporary rabbi and scholar Aryeh Kaplan, whose studies of Jewish meditation reveal a long tradition of inner spirituality, says that *hitbodedut* was the main term used by Jewish mystics to describe this meditation process. Literally, *hitbodedut* means seclusion or self-isolation, and is generally understood as a "kind of internal isolation, where the individual mentally isolates his essence from his thoughts."<sup>32</sup> This

is essentially a description of what happens to the devotee in the process of dying while living. Rabbi Chaim Vital of Safed wrote:

“One must seclude himself (*hitboded*) in his thoughts to the ultimate degree ... the more one separates himself from the physical, the greater will be his perception.”<sup>33</sup>

In other words, through meditation, the more one secludes oneself mentally from the physical world, the greater will be one's spiritual perception.

Moses Maimonides also wrote about this process of mentally cutting oneself off from the world in order to develop inner love for the Lord:

It is well known that the love of the Holy One, praised be He, cannot become fixed in a person's heart unless he meditates on it constantly—and he must withdraw from everything else in the world.<sup>34</sup>

Rabbi Emanuel Frances (1610–1710) stated that many of the biblical prophets would experience such deep meditation that they would attain a state of ecstasy in which their bodies would lose all sensation.<sup>35</sup> Thus, they would be dead to the world and its pleasures and pains. It is said that the great prophet Moses attained the level where his physical senses were not agitated at all, and he perceived all things with perfect serenity.<sup>36</sup> Rabbi Simon ben Tzemach Duran (1361–1444) wrote:

With his keen mind [Moses] was able to understand what was required to attain enlightenment, realizing that the path was through meditation (*hitbodedut*).

He therefore chose to separate himself from all who would disturb him and to reject all physical desires, choosing to be a shepherd in the desert, where no people are to be found. While he was there he unquestionably attained a great attachment to the conceptual, divesting himself of all bodily desires, until he was able to remain for forty days and nights without eating or drinking.<sup>37</sup>

According to Kaplan, the rabbis recognized that all the visions of the biblical prophets, as well as their experiences of God, came about through the deep meditation associated with *hitbodedut*:

The spiritual power and enlightenment that is the most important element of the prophetic experience is not found in the whirlwind or earthquake, but in the "still small voice" of utter tranquility. This is a state that is attained through deep meditation.<sup>38</sup>

This still, small voice is God's holy Name, the source of peace, bliss, and tranquillity which, even today, the masters teach their disciples to hear and merge into as the goal of meditation.

## Sound and Light Within

Mystics tell us that when we begin the inner journey we will experience the various lights and sounds that mark the way. These lights and sounds are not physical. They exist in the inner regions and are manifestations of the light and music that issue from our own soul. Since the soul is of the same essence as the Lord, whose expression is at once the primal divine light and the holy Name or Word, the soul also expresses itself as light and sound on the inner planes. While our attention is



trapped by the mind and senses, we cannot perceive this sound and light; but once we begin the inner journey, we shed the limitations of body and mind and experience the soul in its true state.

Earlier we discussed the inner experiences of light and sound of several of the biblical prophets, such as Ezekiel. In this section, we will look at the experiences of other biblical prophets as well as some of the later Jewish mystics.

Rabbi Abraham Abulafia describes experiences of inner light and sound during his own practice of meditation. He says that light seemed to be issuing from a source within himself, and that after seeing the inner light he heard "the divine speech."<sup>39</sup>

The source of the soul's own light is the Ain-Sof or the Word, from which the creation emanated. It is the primeval divine light. As Obadyah Maimonides, grandson of Moses Maimonides, wrote:

When thou remainest alone with thy soul after having subdued thy passions, a Gate will open before thee through which thou wilt contemplate wonders. When thy five external senses come to rest, thine internal senses will awaken and thou wilt behold a resplendent light emanating from the splendour of Reason. Thou wilt perceive mighty and awesome voices which leave a man bewildered.<sup>40</sup>

The lights and sounds we experience within help us on our spiritual journey. Like a magnet, the Word, or Shabd, pulls our soul upward toward the Lord. The sound emanating from the Word helps us find the direction to our true home; its light helps us stay on course and complete the journey. The soul's power of seeing is called *nirat* by the Indian mystics, and its power of hearing is called *surat*. Nirat sees the radiance of the

Shabd and surat hears its sound. God has put the sound and light within us to help us find his inner holy of holies, as the Bible calls the highest region.

If we go out for a walk at night after dark and get lost, how can we find our way home? We can stand still for a while and listen for sounds coming from our house—the television or stereo, for example. From the direction of the sound we can determine where our house is, but we need a light to illuminate the path so that we don't get scratched by thorns, fall into ditches, or experience other difficulties. Similarly, the light of the Word, the Name, illuminates the path within. As the psalmist sings:

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet,  
And a light unto my path.

*PSALMS 119:105*

The people that walked in darkness  
Have seen a great light;  
They that dwelt in the land of the shadow of death,  
Upon them hath the light shined.

*ISAIAH 9:1*

Once the disciple connects his consciousness with the inner light, he need no longer dwell in darkness. The state of darkness is where the layers of karma covering our soul obscure its light; it is the level where death is an ever-lurking fear. The inner light shines upon the realized souls, illuminating the path to God-realization and to freedom from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

For Thou dost light my lamp;  
The Lord my God doth lighten my darkness.

*PSALMS 18:29*

The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord,  
Searching all the inward parts.

*PROVERBS 20:27*

What is this inner lamp or candle? It is our soul, our consciousness, our conscience. The journey is within; it requires us to cleanse ourselves from within. The light shows the way and lets us see the dirt that is keeping us from realizing the pure Lord within. The psalmist sings:

For with Thee is the fountain of life;  
In Thy light do we see light.

*PSALMS 36:10*

Now we are blind, because if we look within ourselves we see nothing but darkness. But the experience of the inner light and sound purify the disciple. If we concentrate our attention at the third eye and attach it to the holy Name, we will penetrate the darkness and see the inner flame, the eternal light within. Within the light we will discover a sweet and captivating music. On seeing this light and hearing the celestial music, we will automatically lose our taste for the world and, instead, develop intense love for the Lord. Guru Nanak taught:

Within us is the light,  
And from within the light  
Emanates the sound;  
We are attuned to the true Lord  
Through Shabd, the Word.<sup>41</sup>

## The Experiences of Moses

In the Bible, the story of Moses and the burning bush is a powerful description of the disciple experiencing the inner



light. God revealed himself to Moses by taking his soul to the inner regions. Thus Moses was transformed from an ordinary shepherd into the spiritual guide or master of the children of Israel (*Exodus 3:1-8*).

According to the biblical account, one day, while Moses was looking after his father-in-law's sheep, he suddenly saw a burning or blazing bush; but though the bush seemed to be aflame, it was not consumed. This is a beautiful story—very clear on a mystical level. The burning bush that Moses saw was not a physical flame but the divine light within himself. That is why it was not consumed.

The burning bush experience of Moses marked his calling to spiritual mastership.\* The Bible explains that Moses heard a voice from within the fire—in other words, he experienced both sound and light as one essence—and he became filled with God's will, his command to liberate the children of Israel from the Egyptians.†

The story of Moses' ascent up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments and his experience of seeing God face to face is also well known to readers of the Bible. Generally, the story is understood literally. However, if we realize that the real spiritual revelation comes from an experience of God within oneself, that God does not live on any particular mountain of this world, then we will realize that Moses must have gone up the "mountain" of his own body. He penetrated beyond the

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\* According to esoteric traditions, Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, was his spiritual master. Thus it is possible Moses already had inner experiences prior to seeing the burning bush, but it was only then that he received God's calling to perform His mission.

† The Egypt of the Bible is generally interpreted by Jewish mystics as an allegorical reference to the state of mental and spiritual slavery to the lower desires, as well as to physical enslavement in an actual country. In Hebrew, the word for Egypt, *Mitzraim*, means constricted.

clouds of illusion—attachments and desires of the world, which keep a person tied to the body—and saw God's light and sound within. The Bible says:

And Moses went up into the mount, and the cloud covered the mount. And the glory [*kavod*]\* of the Lord abode upon mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days; and the seventh day he called unto Moses out of the midst of the cloud. And the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel. And Moses entered into the midst of the cloud, and went up into the mount; and Moses was in the mount forty days and forty nights.

EXODUS 24:15-18

And it came to pass, when Moses came down from mount Sinai with the two tablets of the testimony in Moses' hand, when he came down from the mount, that Moses knew not that the skin of his face sent forth beams while He talked with him.<sup>†</sup> And when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face sent forth beams; and they were afraid to come nigh him. And Moses called unto them; and Aaron and all the rulers of the congregation returned unto him; and Moses spoke to them. And afterward all the children of Israel came nigh, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him in mount

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\* Literally, *kavod* means glory; mystically, it refers to the awesome, transcendent, and visual manifestation of the Word or divine presence.

† The Bible says that Moses' face shone with beams of light. "Beams" was later mistranslated as horns, as the two words are the same in Hebrew, and meaning depends on context. This is the reason for Michelangelo's famous sculpture of Moses with horns.

Sinai.... And the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face sent forth beams....

EXODUS 34:29-32,35\*

In discussing Moses' ascent and his experiences of light and sound, Maharaj Charan Singh once remarked:

In the Bible they try to explain that Moses saw fire, a red light, in the mountain (*Exodus 3:2*). That light was not in the mountain, because if [it were] so, that light should be there even now. It was within. He went to the mountain to meditate, but he saw that red light and heard the thundering of the clouds within (*Exodus 19:16,18*).

And Christ also refers somewhere in the Bible to the lightning and thundering of the clouds. He says that hearing it, people fell flat. They could not bear that sound and light within, so they became unconscious (*Matthew 17:5-6*). It is nothing physical, nothing outside. It is all within, but those who do not know anything about inner experience interpret all these things as outside events.<sup>42</sup>

Abulafia and other Jewish mystics also believed that the biblical story of Moses' ascent up Mount Sinai refers to his spiritual ascent to the level of prophecy.<sup>43</sup> Moses rose up within and experienced the inner light, which was so strong that even his physical face beamed from its intensity. This is the light of the *kavod*, the glory of God, the inner flame.

At God's command, Moses revealed the inner light and sound of the Name to the children of Israel. The *Zohar* says, "They were irradiated with a supernal light, and perceived things beyond the ken of all succeeding generations."<sup>44</sup> In

\* See also Exodus 40:34-38, Deuteronomy 4:11-15, Numbers 9:15-23.



bringing them the revelation and in joining their souls to their divine source, Moses was freeing the people from the slavery of the senses and mind. This is the ultimate exodus from slavery into freedom.

The contemporary mystic also experiences sound and light during his meditation. It is the same spiritual sound and light that Moses and the other prophets saw within themselves. The inner flame is burning within us at all times, although we cannot see it because our attention is below the eye center, scattered in the world through our desires. But since the inner sound and light have their origin in our soul, the closer we get to our true spiritual essence and the more we rid ourselves of our material attachments, the more light and sound we will experience.

## The Inner Journey

Our real spiritual journey begins once we have withdrawn our attention to the third eye and feel the pull of the inner sound. Under the guidance of our spiritual master, we travel through five inner regions, or planes of consciousness. When we take our attention within, we will see lights like those of the stars, sun, and moon. Then we will pass through the astral region, where we will experience the vision of the thousand-petalled lotus and hear its celestial music. We will see the *jjyoti*, the inner flame, and meet the Radiant Form of our master, which guides us on the rest of the journey home.

We then rise to the causal plane, which the Indian mystics call *Trikuti*; it is the origin of the mind. There, our individual mind merges into universal mind; and our soul, unfettered, rises to the spiritual realms, which the mind cannot enter. Accompanied by the Radiant Form of the master, the soul crosses these predominantly spiritual regions until ultimately it enters the realm of pure spirit—*Sach Khand*, the true abode.

Essentially, the journey of the soul returning to the Father is the reverse of the original journey of our soul when it separated from the Supreme Being at the time of creation. The soul's return to the Father is the drop merging in the ocean, the spark merging in the divine flame. As the soul traverses each region, it experiences the increasingly sublime beauty and intensity of the spiritual light and sound.

In describing their own meditation experiences, the mystics of the Bible and of later periods also referred to the inner spiritual journey. The biblical prophet Isaiah urges his followers to take the spiritual journey with him:

“Come ye, and let us go up  
to the mountain of the Lord,  
To the house of the God of Jacob;  
And He will teach us of His ways,  
And we will walk in His paths.”  
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,  
And the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

*ISAIAH 2:3; CF. MICAH 4:2*

Here, Isaiah likens the process of meditation to climbing the mountain of the body—pulling the attention from the body up to the third eye and entering the house of God. Zion and Jerusalem are metaphors for the inner regions. From there flows the Word of the Lord, which is the cosmic law or divine creative principle.

And a highway shall be there, and a way,  
And it shall be called the way of holiness.

*ISAIAH 35:8*

The meditation practice takes us on a spiritual journey or path. It is called the way of holiness because it leads to union with God.

Solomon ibn Gebirol (Avicebron), in his poem "Kether Malkuth" (Crown of Royalty), wrote that all creatures yearn to come closer to God on the royal route, but they have strayed and fallen. He says that the true disciple, "marching on the correct road, turns neither to the right nor to the left, until he enters the court of the palace of the King."<sup>45</sup> He then describes God as the one who supports all the creation by his divinity, and sustains all existence by his unity. There is no distinction between the Lord's divinity, unity, eternity, and existence because it is all one mystery. All life flows from God. Ibn Gebirol describes the destination of the inner journey:

Thine is the hidden Name, from the habitations of Wisdom... Thou art the Living One, and he who reaches to Thy mystery finds eternal delight; he eats and lives forever.<sup>46</sup>

Ibn Gebirol is saying here that the Lord's hidden Name—the inner unpronounceable Name—comes from the source of Wisdom. The mystical meaning of "Wisdom" in Jewish mysticism is the same as the divine Name, will, or creative power. Its source is the highest spiritual realm. He who reaches to the mystery—who traverses the inner regions and merges into the Lord—will find eternal delight. Ibn Gebirol is using a universal mystic language, shared with the Sufi and Indian mystics. He is saying that when the disciple eats the inner food—what the Indian mystics called *amrit*, ambrosia—and drinks the inner nectar—the Name or Shabd—he will live forever. Death will have no hold over him, as once he merges in the Name he need not be reborn into this world again. He has died to live forever.



In the Jewish prayers, many hymns are sung which are normally understood literally. However, as some of them were written by Jewish mystics, they have another level of meaning and refer to the inner spiritual journey. The morning service begins with this prayer:

How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel. O God, in the abundance of Thy mercy do I come into Thy House, to bow down in Thy holy Temple in awe of Thee. O Lord, how I love to linger in Thy House, the place where Thy glory dwells. Here I will bow down and humbly speak praises unto the Lord, my Maker. Attune my heart unto Thee in this hour of my meditation, and in Thine abundant kindness do Thou answer me with Thine unfailing help.<sup>47</sup>

This well-known prayer can be understood on a mystical level as a plea for the Lord's help in the disciple's attempts at meditation. The tents and dwelling places, the house of God, are the inner regions, the mansions of the Lord within. By the Lord's grace, the disciple enters the inner regions and bows down at the holy temple—the highest spiritual realm. The disciple likes to stay within; he likes to prolong his time in meditation, to linger in the Lord's house, for here His glory dwells. The disciple bows down—he submits himself to his Lord. He asks God to attune his heart to Him during the period of his meditation.

The eleventh-century hymn "Akdamut" is another poetic account of the joy and wonder of the spiritual journey and ultimate reunion with the Lord:

The righteous will possess the reward for their service. They will dwell before their Creator, arrayed on golden thrones,

with seven steps ascending, resplendent as the azure of the sky and the brightness of the stars.... They will sit at tables of precious stones, rivers of balsam flowing before them; and they will drink the precious wine stored for them from the first of days.<sup>48</sup>

The golden thrones and the seven steps are clear references to the inner regions traversed in meditation; these are the steps of the ladder. The images of the blue sky, the brightness of the stars, the precious stones, and rivers of balsam correspond closely with the sights on the inner journey as described by all mystics. The precious wine is the Name, the Shabd, the divine nectar, the wine divine.

From the second century B.C.E., many Jewish mystics used the metaphor of the chariot, the *merkavah*, to describe their meditation practices and experiences on the inner journey. These practices were based on interpretations of the spiritual journeys of the biblical prophets Elijah and Ezekiel, whom the Bible describes as having ascended to the spiritual realms in a chariot of fire, accompanied by the noise of thunder and lightning, propelled by the spirit.\*

These accounts of Elijah and Ezekiel are a way of rendering into human terms their indescribable, fantastic spiritual experiences, where sound and light became the vehicle that transported them through the inner regions. The sound current, the Word or holy Name, is the mystic chariot in which the soul makes its ascent to the higher regions.

The merkavah mystics, as they were called, used various concentration and contemplation techniques in their meditation. They described traveling through *hekhalot* (palaces, mansions), until they were able to behold the Lord seated on the divine throne.<sup>49</sup>

\* See II Kings 2:8–12, Ezekiel 1:4–28.

Jewish mystics have also used the image of the tree of life to describe the various stations on the inner journey. Sometimes the tree of life was pictured as a map of the successive sefirot or levels within the realm of the body, bearing a relationship to the series of body chakras or energy centers of some Indian yogic meditation practices, like hatha yoga. Fundamentally the tree of life is a symbol for the Name or Word of God, as it is the source of the divine nourishment that sustains life. The Name is also the means through which the soul returns to God, and therefore the tree of life was used as a general symbol of the inner journey back to union with him. According to the Bible, once Adam and Eve ate of the tree of knowledge they could no longer eat of the tree of life.

As discussed earlier, this story has great significance on a mystical level. Once Adam and Eve became trapped in the illusion of duality, they could no longer make the inner journey back to God—they could no longer experience his unity, his Word. Throughout history, therefore, the Jewish mystics have attempted to climb the tree of life—to get in touch with the Name or Word of God—and return to the blissful state of the Garden of Eden. They have followed various meditation practices in order to achieve God-realization.

In order for any of us to reach the highest spiritual regions, we must climb the tree of life by pursuing a course of meditation. However, without the guidance of a perfect living master who has traveled this path successfully, we will get lost in the intricacies of the inner mansions and never go beyond the limitations of the regions of mind. To journey back to the source of all life, light, and bliss, we must find a master who will travel with us in the chariot and guide us on the right way.





## The Living Master

### The Master and the Lord

Mystics often refer to God as the infinite ocean of divine love, and the spiritual master as a wave of that ocean. The master comes into the world, joins our consciousness with the Name, and then takes us with him when he merges back into his source. Maharaj Charan Singh explains:

Just as the waves rise in the sea for a moment and then merge back into it again, even so the lovers of the Lord are waves of the ocean of divinity, and after finishing their mission of mercy they merge back into the ocean.<sup>1</sup>

The wave is made of the same essence as the ocean—water. So the master is made of the same essence as the Lord—the Name, or Shabd. As the wave surges forth and takes on individual shape, so the Name clothes itself in the individual human form—the perfect master.

Some people misunderstand the concept of a perfect master, believing that it limits God, who is perfect, to claim that he appears in the imperfect and transient human form. However, although it may appear paradoxical that the infinite Lord could manifest in a finite human body, it is actually more paradoxical and more limiting of God's greatness to assert that he cannot. We all know that God is everywhere and in everything. If he wills to do so, he can manifest in the form of a master. The perfect master is perfect in the sense that he has merged his soul into the perfection of God and has no other existence.

God is beyond duality. He transcends matter, although his essence pervades and energizes the entire material creation. Transcendent and immanent, he is intangible, beyond comprehension, formless, and limitless. Yet, because he is the Word and his essence is divine love, out of his mercy he takes on the transient human form so that people can perceive him and come close to him.

The perfect master is not a pretender to divinity. Love for the master is not *avoda zara*, idolatrous worship of a being other than God. Since a true spiritual master has merged in the divine Name, he embodies that Name. He is the one place on earth, open to humanity, where the divine reality or power can be perceived and experienced. He is the intersection of the divine with the physical realms. The divine energy has become concentrated and crystallized in this one point so that we can know it. The perfect living master is the doorway through which we can experience the Divine.

As we have read earlier in Moses Maimonides, as long as our soul is confined in the body, it can only know what is within nature. That is because our soul is limited by our mind and senses. The spiritual master, whose body is within nature but whose soul has merged with God, is the way God has chosen to bridge this gap, for the finite to experience the infinite.

God is inseparable from his holy Name, the ineffable divine essence. The true or perfect master has realized this essence within himself and has merged into it. Thus, for all intents and purposes, he is inseparable from God. Though his body is finite and of the material plane, his spiritual radiance is so great that he appears as a divine being walking among men—like the prophet Moses whose face shone with beams of light.

When the perfect master meets us, he ignites the spark of our soul with his divine fire, his light, so that we too can experience our true spiritual nature; this then puts us on the path to what mystics refer to as self-realization and God-realization.

Just as the ocean is not limited by the formation of the wave, so the infinite Lord is not made finite by manifesting in the form of the master. The Lord is One; he is formless and infinite. Yet he is also the Shabd, the Ain-Sof, the audible life stream, the sap coursing through the tree of life. Thus he is present in all the creation, while he is beyond the creation. In the perfect master, the Lord takes on the human form like an overcoat; the body does not define or limit God's formless and abstract quality.

Sarmad explores the seemingly paradoxical relationship between the Lord and the perfect master and then offers the practical response of the mystic: Experience this wonder for yourself, then you will understand!

Can an ocean be contained in a small jar?  
Can the master be God? Can man be the Lord?  
They say it is imagination? Let them say so!<sup>2</sup>

He is the river, I a tiny vessel.  
How can the river be contained in a vessel?  
You say it cannot be? Come and see it for yourself!<sup>3</sup>



Sarmad agrees that ultimately it is impossible to understand with our limited intellect how God can manifest in a human being. The only way we can understand this paradox is to go within, to the inner regions, and see for ourselves how the Lord can be contained in the perfect master, and how the microcosm (the human body) can contain the macrocosm (the Lord and his creation). Spiritual seekers must experience this truth for themselves; otherwise, it does indeed seem like a fantasy, a play of the imagination. But, Sarmad says in another verse, whoever does not realize the greatness of the true master is a fool: "O fool! Thou art ignorant of the existence of the master!"<sup>4</sup>

Earlier we saw that Jewish mystics used the metaphor of the tree of life for the spiritual path. They often visualized it as an upside-down tree on which the devotee climbs from the branches to the higher, inner roots. The teachings of Rabbi Isaac Luria of sixteenth-century Safed were transmitted by his disciple, Rabbi Chaim Vital, who compares the master's relationship with the Lord to the upside-down tree whose roots remain in heaven attached to their source—the Lord, the Ain-Sof—although its branches, who are the spiritual masters or prophets, touch the earth.

Actually, Vital uses this metaphor for all human beings and their souls' relationship to the divine source, but it is only the prophets, the spiritually realized souls, through whom the flow of the divine light or spirit is transmitted without hindrance. For those people who are subject to the lower tendencies of the mind, which he calls the evil urge, or whose minds are otherwise preoccupied with physical concerns, he says their roots are cut off or blemished. Vital explains the concept of the realized soul of the prophet and its roots in God:

These souls descend to the physical world, clothing themselves in physical bodies. Their roots, however, remain attached to

their source, from which they were hewn, and only the branches of these roots descend.... The case resembles the branches of a tree. The branches are attached to the trunk of a tree, but when they are bent over they can touch the ground, even though they are still attached to the tree....

This explains the concept of prophecy. The individual must be in a pure state, not tainted by the evil urge, and beyond the grasp of everything pertaining to the physical. He must be completely free of any sin that would blemish any of the roots of his soul. Only then, if he prepares himself properly, can he attach himself to the highest root....

It has already been discussed how man's soul has countless roots. The higher the source of these roots, the greater will be their power to transmit the influx of prophecy ... the soul is like a very long branch, with its root attached to the tree, and reaching to man's physical body. When man yearns to ascend to this root, the soul becomes like a transmission line, bringing information from the root.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly in Hasidism, the mystical movement of eighteenth-century Poland that was influenced by Luria's teachings, the rebbe or *zaddik* (master) was considered as the link between God and man. As Ben Zion Bokser wrote, "At the center of the hasidic community was the living master, the rebbe, who served as a link between the people and the higher divine realms."<sup>6</sup>

## Need for a Living Master

Both the master and the disciple have physical bodies, which are equally perishable. But the real form of the master is the holy Name, which is eternal. Similarly, the real form of the

disciple is the soul, a drop of that same eternal divine essence. Under the guidance of a master, the disciple learns to merge his soul into the Name and become eternal as well.

On our own, we cannot perceive the holy Name of God, because it is too pure. In his mercy, the Lord sends a master to teach us how to free our soul from the bondage of mind and matter and let it shine in its pristine beauty and wholeness. The master is the link between man and God. Maharaj Jagat Singh of Beas described the soul as a drop of water, the Lord as the ocean, and the master as the stream that brings the drop to the ocean.

Hayyim Luzzatto (1707–1747), in *Derekh ha-Shem* (The Way of the Name), describes the master as a lens that collects and focuses the divine inner light and allows us to see God:

The prophetic experience must come about through intermediaries. A human being cannot directly attach himself to God's glory, perceiving it as one sees a man standing in front of him. The perception of God involved in true prophecy [spiritual experience] must therefore come about through God's servants, whose task it is to provide such a vision.

These intermediaries then act as lenses through which the individual sees the Glory.<sup>7</sup>

Given the nature of our democratic traditions, some contemporary seekers may be uncomfortable with the idea of a spiritual master. They may feel it implies loss of individuality, subservience to another person seemingly no different from ourselves. However, if we look at our true situation in life, we will quickly realize that to learn anything important we always need to find a teacher or guide who is adept in that field. We



need to think of ourselves as apprentices learning from someone who has mastered the skills we wish to obtain. What we can gain from books is limited at best. We can get facts and information from books; they may even spark our imagination. But books do not have the ability to transform us to the very core as does personal contact with a gifted teacher—and the true spiritual master is the uniquely gifted teacher of a unique spiritual science. The spiritual journey can be hazardous if attempted alone; we need a qualified guide.

The other important aspect of our true condition is that we actually have no freedom, no independence, as we have no real control over our mind. Our mind is not ours. The master teaches us to control the mind by attaching it to the Word. He enlightens and purifies our mind so we can get in touch with our true self, the Divine within us.

Dr. Julian Johnson explains this point by giving the example of a patient who needs the skilled hands of the surgeon to heal him. If he does not submit to the operation and trust the competency of the surgeon, he will die. "A person trusts his higher interests in the hands of an expert.... Complete surrender to the master is the only avenue or path to complete liberation."<sup>8</sup>

Here is a divine paradox—by surrendering all to the guru, you gain your liberty. By giving everything to him, you gain everything. Only that man is free who walks behind the guru. Only that man is free who always does the will of the master. For the will of the guru is the will of the Supreme Father.<sup>9</sup>

*Guru* literally means one who brings light into darkness. Only a guru, a spiritual master, can dispel the darkness of ignorance about the basic and ultimate questions of existence.

The master opens our inner eye and removes our doubts about life and death. He shows us the spiritual light, the Word within, and thus irrevocably convinces us that we are indeed our divine essence. By ourselves we cannot achieve this goal because we are trapped within the limitations of our own intellect. We need the help of someone who has gone beyond the intellect and has achieved union with the divine, and who then serves as its channel. Maharaj Sawan Singh wrote:

In reality, the guru is not the name of a man. He is a power which is manifested in this body temporarily. He is our true ideal in the light of which true spiritual progress is made. He is full of radiant light, like an electric bulb. While he shines, the thought of the structure of the bulb does not enter the mind. The seekers after spirituality sacrifice themselves like moths over this divine light.<sup>10</sup>

Obadyah Maimonides, the thirteenth-century Jewish Sufi mystic, wrote about the need for a spiritual guide, whom he called an intercessor:\*

It is clear that he who hath not gained an intercessor to mediate between himself and his Beloved is considered as dead. Once thou hast realized this principle, then thou wilt be ashamed to call on the Lord without having achieved this.

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\* Fenton maintains that Obadyah was alluding to reason as his intercessor. However, the passage makes perfect sense as it reads, and there is no reason to think Obadyah would not insist on the importance of a spiritual guide, as it is a universal tenet of true mysticism. Additionally, Fenton cites the renowned scholar, Dr. Georges Vajda, who understood Obadyah's intercessor as a "*sayh* or spiritual mentor." (Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool*, p. 128, fn. 162.)

Indeed, "Who is he and where is he who could bear to stand before the Lord" (*Esther 7:5*) without having recourse to a mediator, for this is sheer impertinence! Thus it is incumbent upon us to seek diligently after an intercessor and to find one without delay, for he is our guardian in the nether world and our guide to the world everlasting, and think not otherwise.<sup>11</sup>

Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, in *Derekh ha-Shem*, also wrote of the need for a living master:

All of this, however, requires the guidance of a master prophet. He must have an adequate knowledge of the prophetic methods, and be able to teach his disciples what each one must do to attain the desired result, according to each one's particular level of readiness.

When the neophyte prophets begin to experience revelations, the master prophet continues to guide them. On the basis of what is revealed to them, he instructs them and informs them what is still lacking in their quest. Until they attain full prophecy, they will require a master for all of this. Even though some influence and revelation may have started to come to them, this in itself is not enough to immediately bring them to the ultimate goal. Before they can reach this, they need much guidance and training, each one according to his degree of readiness.<sup>12</sup>

Later, in a discussion of false prophecy, Luzzatto writes:

It is therefore crucial for those who strive for true prophecy to do so under the guidance of a master prophet. Only such guidance can prevent errors such as these.<sup>13</sup>



The Hasidim, also, were emphatic about the importance of having a *living* master. The Ba'al Shem Tov, first of the hasidic rebbes or zaddiks, taught that the zaddik was a channel by which the divine essence, the divine light or presence, reaches into man: "The zaddikim are the channels through which the sparks of the Shekhinah [the divine presence] pass, that they might scatter to the world."<sup>14</sup>

The Hasidim spoke of a divine spiritual essence, which they called *shefa* (abundance, flow of grace). The zaddik or master is the vehicle by which the shefa is transmitted to humanity. In his book *The Zaddik*, which concerns the teachings of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy, Samuel Dresner writes:

This outpouring from heaven to man is called, in kabbalistic terminology, *shefa*, and may be likened to the rays which emanate from the sun, ceaselessly reaching out to brighten the darkness of the world. To receive the spiritual outpouring which endlessly and lovingly flows from heaven and to transmit it to his people is the task of the zaddik. In this sense the zaddik is spoken of as a "channel."<sup>15</sup>

Dresner then quotes Rabbi Yaakov Yosef:

The zaddik is called the heart of the body, for he is a channel which draws the bounty of life [*shefa*] from the Life of all Life to all the other limbs, which are the people of his generation.<sup>16</sup>

The Hasidim would say that the zaddik lives on a higher rung of the spiritual ladder and descends to the lower rung of our world in order to help us. Yaakov Yosef, who was the foremost disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov, describes the process by which the master moves from the higher rung, where his atten-

tion is completely within—in the spiritual planes of oneness with the holy Name—to the lower rungs which are closer to the earth. He then brings his attention into the physical plane and uses his body and mind to communicate with his disciples:

And this is what was revealed to our father Jacob [in his dream in the Bible], a ladder fixed in the earth whose head reached the heavens, which means—even when the zaddik is fixed in the earth, with the lowly, common people of the earth, among scoffers and gossips and the like, nevertheless his head, his thoughts, reach the heavens, joining his thoughts to his Creator. For the Divine Name is before him. In this manner, the angels of the Lord—those who come into this world to do the bidding of the Lord [i.e., the zaddikim]—are called messengers of the Lord ... and ascend the ladder [of the world].\*<sup>17</sup>

We cannot perceive the Lord or make this journey successfully without a true spiritual master. We, who are trapped within the mind and senses, do not have the power to go above and beyond the mind. We function in this world through the senses and the intellect and are limited by them. We cannot transcend our own individuality, our separateness, our ego. We need the help of someone who emanates from the regions of pure spirit, whose home is in the highest region, and who can show us that the realm of spirit is what is true and real.

We are like flowers in a garden, surrounded and choked by weeds. Of our own volition, we cannot water the flower bed or pull up the weeds that are choking us; nor can we cut down the tall grasses hiding the sunlight. The master is like

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\* Yaakov Yosef is engaging in a play on words based on the fact that the Hebrew word *malach* means both angel and messenger.

the gardener; he waters the earth, pulls up the weeds, and cuts the grass, so we can flourish and grow toward the sun without obstruction.

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772–1810), another important hasidic rebbe and mystic, taught of man's need to realize his higher self and enjoy fellowship with God, though he may be caught in the negativity and triviality of everyday life. The main channel which God has given man to find him is the rebbe, the master, who has powers beyond those of ordinary human beings:

People find it difficult to understand why one must travel to the master in order to hear the teaching from his lips, because, as they see it, one can study moralistic works. But this is of great value, for there is a great difference between hearing the truth from the master directly, and hearing it quoted by others in his name, and certainly if the one quoting it only heard from another, for it descends to lower levels the more remote it is from the master; and there is especially a great difference between hearing it from the master and reading it in a book.<sup>18</sup>

Holy books and scriptures recount the stories of the saints and masters and their experience of union with the divine Name or Word, but these books themselves do not contain the Word. We need to be taught by a living spiritual master, not by reading stories of past masters. Just as we need a living doctor to diagnose our diseases, a living lawyer to defend us in court, so we need a living perfect master to instruct us in the method of meditation on Nam. We cannot perceive the Lord himself, and so he reveals his essence, his radiance, to us through a form we can perceive. In *Philosophy of the Masters*, Maharaj Sawan Singh wrote:



The guru, in fact, is a glowing lamp whose light rekindles the lights that have blown out. A burnt-out lamp cannot do this. Many people say that we can light the lamp of knowledge by merely reading religious books.... But persons who depend upon books alone have yet to understand the difference between insentient and sentient beings.... We can obtain this spiritual life only from some spiritually realized soul. Only a burning lamp can light another lamp. It is impossible to get life from inert matter. Similarly, spiritual knowledge cannot be attained by the mere reading of religious books, were it even for millions of years.

Spiritual knowledge cannot be taught. It is a 'touch' which can be had only from a man of realized experience. "Spirituality cannot be taught but caught." The experience of saints cannot be had except by revelation. It is not simply a matter of knowing it; one has to realize it as an experience.<sup>19</sup>

The Master "injects," as it were, his consciousness and light into the soul of the disciple at the time of initiation. This injection of his own consciousness and light permeates the disciple like leaven, and produces a new spiritual consciousness and light as the practice of Nam is continued. The spiritual light of the Master gives a new life to the soul of the disciple and begins to free it. Consequently, the disciple begins to have a feeling of fulfillment. This gift of the Master cannot be taken away.<sup>20</sup>

"Two Turkeys" is a hasidic folktale attributed to Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav which beautifully explains why we need a living master—the zaddik who instructs, guides, and loves his disciples with a divine love:

The king's son once became insane and imagined himself to be a turkey. He removed his clothes and sat under the table naked, and renounced food, eating only grains and pieces of bones. The king tried all the physicians but no one could help him.

At last one wise man came to the king and said to him: I undertake to cure your son.

This wise man also removed his clothes, placed himself under the table next to the king's son, and gathered grains and pieces of bones and ate them.

The king's son asked him: Who are you and what are you doing here? The wise man replied: And who are you and what are you doing here? The king's son answered him: I am a turkey. The wise man replied similarly: I am also a turkey.

The two turkeys sat together until they became acquainted. The man then gave a signal to bring him a shirt, and after he put on the shirt he said to the king's son: Do you think that a turkey is not allowed to wear a shirt? He is allowed, and he does not thereby cease being a turkey. The king's son understood this and he also consented to wear a shirt.

After some time, the wise man signaled to bring him trousers; he put them on and said to the king's son: Do you think a turkey is not allowed to wear trousers? Even if he wears trousers he can still remain a real turkey. The king's son agreed and he, too, put on trousers, and then, following the wise man's example, he put on the rest of the clothes.

Then the wise man asked for regular food and he ate it, saying to the king's son: Do you think that a turkey is not allowed to eat good food? One can eat the best and remain a turkey as ever. The king's son followed him also in this, and he began to eat regular food.

Reflecting on the progress made so far, the wise man then said to the king's son: And do you really think that a turkey must remain confined under the table? Not at all. A turkey may also go where he chooses, and no one has a right to interfere with him. The king's son understood this and accepted the wise man's advice. And since he now stood up and walked like a person he began to behave like a person.

Similarly, the *zaddik* robes himself in worldly garments and behaves like ordinary people in order to draw them to God's service.<sup>21</sup>

In explaining the need for a living master, Maharaj Charan Singh tells a similar tale in which a king sends his only son to a poor village, far from the royal palace, so that afterwards he might appreciate his royal birth all the more. However, because of his foolishness, the prince mingles with the common villagers and forgets he is a prince. He thinks he is a villager too. So the king sends one of his noblemen to bring his son back to the palace. At first the noble tries talking with the prince but to no avail. Ultimately, the noble succeeds in winning his confidence by dressing and acting like a villager. He gains the trust of the prince, slowly weans him from the common village ways, and brings him back to his father's throne.

We are all children of the King, living in exile in the filth of the world. The master has to come to our level in order to wean us from worldly attachments and bring us back to the court of the Lord.

For ages, the Jewish people have yearned for the coming of the Messiah who will lift them out of oppression and exile and establish a time of peace and harmony on earth. On a mystic level, we can understand the concept of a messiah as a true spiritual master who comes in every generation to rescue suffering humanity from its exile in the world.



Moses was the messiah of his time for the disciples who followed him. Similarly, Buddha was the messiah of his time for his disciples. Jesus was the master or messiah of his time for the souls who followed him. But Moses cannot help the Jews of today. Buddha cannot help the Buddhists of today, and Jesus cannot help the Christians of today. We must find a *living* master in our own time to set us on the path back to God.

Although we are attached to the past masters, we are not really following their teachings. By the time our religions become institutionalized, we have lost touch with the true inner teachings and have become involved with rituals, ceremonies, and dogmas. Our religions have even become commercialized, corrupted, and politically oriented. That is why a new mystic has to come to reveal to us the true inner teachings in the language of our time. There is nothing wrong with the teachings of the past mystics; it is just that we have forgotten their essence and have lost touch with their inner truth. This is what happens in all religions. That is why the Lord keeps sending the true living masters to bring us back to him.

Because we are so attached to these past masters, the living masters of later ages refer to them and quote from their teachings. Initially, we cannot have faith in the living mystic of our own time unless he shows us that his teachings conform to those of the past mystics whom we have grown to love right from our childhood. Thus the contemporary spiritual masters of Beas, India, in speaking to foreign audiences with a Christian background, have quoted extensively from the New Testament in conveying their teachings. When speaking to an Indian audience, they have cited passages from Guru Nanak, Kabir Sahib, Sant Paltu, Soami Ji of Agra, and other Indian mystics of the past, whether Sikh, Hindu, or Muslim, as well as from the Persian mystics. Similarly, in the past, the prophet Muhammad

referred to Moses, Abraham, and Jesus, as his followers included both Christians and Jews. And the Jewish mystics of all periods have quoted from the Bible and earlier mystics of the Judaic tradition.

The teachings of all these mystics is the same: Find the perfect living master of your own time and learn the mystic practice from him. Do not get confused by rituals and outward ceremonies. Do not give blind allegiance and belief to unsubstantiated dogmas. Sit in meditation, follow the inner path for yourself, and experience what it really means to merge your soul in God.

## Moses and the Prophets

Moses, the great prophet and spiritual guide of the Israelites described in the Bible, was probably a master of the highest order. Since the Bible gives many accounts of the events of Moses' life, we tend to think of him in terms of the literal meaning of these stories—his encounter with the burning bush, his leading the early Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to freedom, his guiding them to Mount Sinai where they received the Ten Commandments and the Torah. However, if we look beyond the literal stories and try to understand their spiritual implications, we will see that Moses was a true mystic who, above all, gave spiritual guidance to his disciples.

Moses and many of the other biblical prophets brought the same universal teachings as mystics and saints of all traditions. They taught their disciples to unite their souls with the divine essence that manifests within as sound and light and thus achieve God-realization. Mystically, the true Torah revealed at Sinai is not the written scroll or book; it is the Word of God, the Name, the Shabd—the cosmic law of the soul's return to the Father.



Obadyah Maimonides, in his *Treatise of the Pool*, referred to the patriarchs and prophets of the Bible as mystics who withdrew to the desert and brought their attention within themselves in order to meditate on God:

The individuals who attained this state were very scarce, as it is said, "I have seen the sons of Heaven, but they are few" (*Sukkah 45b*), like a drop in the sea.... For thou wilt find in each era but a single individual, such as Noah in the generation of the Flood, his predecessor Methuselah, Enoch, Lemech, Shem, Eber, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. After the Patriarchs the bond (*wusla*) was severed and there was no intercessor (*safi*) until the birth of the most glorious of beings and the noblest of creatures, our master Moses, peace be upon him, who restored it, through the Divine Will.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, Maharaj Charan Singh has said that the saints around whose teachings the great religions of the world were formed were most certainly masters. He has spoken specifically of Moses as a master who brought the true inner teaching of God's holy Name. According to the Bible, Moses said to the Israelites:

The Lord spoke with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire—I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to declare unto you the word of the Lord ...

DEUTERONOMY 5:4,5

Moses acted as an intermediary between God and the people, a channel through which the Word or voice of the Lord could reach them. God would not have used Moses as an intermediary if the Israelites had been able to receive God's purity and divinity directly. That is why the masters come at all times—



because everyone, even potential and future masters, need to receive the illumination from another illuminated soul. No one is able to receive God's pure spirituality directly.

God told the children of Israel that Moses "is trusted in all my house; with him do I speak mouth to mouth, even manifestly, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the Lord doth he behold" (*Numbers 12:7-8*). This means that Moses had access to God's house—the pure realms of spirit. When the Bible says that God spoke to him "mouth to mouth," it is conveying a closeness that is beyond words; it means that he spoke directly with him, in the manner of an inner spiritual experience. Sometimes the Indian mystics say that the Lord is closer to us than our own breath, or closer than hands and feet—both these expressions convey a closeness that is beyond verbal description because it is closer than any relationship possible on the physical plane; it is where two virtually become one.

Even in public—"even manifestly" and not in hidden conversation—it could be seen that Moses was attuned to the Lord, united with the Lord. He saw the divinity within himself—"the similitude of the Lord doth he behold."

The Ba'al Shem Tov saw Moses as the source of the Israelites' spiritual knowledge and vision, and taught that each generation has a living master to mediate between God and humanity, as Moses did for the people of his time. The Ba'al Shem Tov said that the spiritual leadership of each generation derives its light from Moses himself—in other words, he understood Moses as the first in a long line of spiritual masters. Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy, the Ba'al Shem Tov's disciple, wrote:

Through the mediation of Moses, the spirit of wisdom and prophecy rested upon them [the children of Israel]. So it is

with every generation and its leaders, the spirit of the Lord goes from him [the leader] to the people....<sup>23</sup>

Just as Moses was the head of all of his generation ... so it is with every generation. The leaders have sparks [within the flame of their souls] from our teacher Moses.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, if a living spiritual master were not necessary, why would God have taken such pains to appoint Joshua as successor to Moses? If the teachings could be gleaned from a book and we did not need a living master to teach us, why wouldn't God have instructed the people simply to turn to the teachings that Moses had left? On the contrary, however, he provided Joshua as a successor to Moses, to teach the people and to guide them. As we read in the Bible:

And Moses spoke unto the Lord, saying: "Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation, who may go out before them, and who may come in before them, and who may lead them out, and who may bring them in; that the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep which have no shepherd." And the Lord said unto Moses: "Take thee Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is spirit, and lay thy hand upon him."

*NUMBERS 27:15-18; CF. DEUT. 34:7-11*

This passage confirms the importance of the living master, the shepherd, so that "the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep which have no shepherd." Sheep are so helpless that if one goes astray, the shepherd will have to find it and physically carry it in his arms back to his flock. People without a master are completely unprotected as they go through life and—perhaps even more crucial—when they meet their death. Like



sheep without a shepherd, they will go astray and be slaughtered by the first hunter or predatory animal that finds them. Without a master to guide them on the inner journey, they will fall prey to temptations or lose their way. At their death, those who have a master are protected by him. He cares for them until they are safe from the karmic entanglement of mind and illusion, until they are freed from birth and death, and delivered safe and sound into the lap of the Supreme Being.

The Lord will never leave his people shepherdless. Moses, the good shepherd, wanted to be sure that his sheep would always be protected. The Lord told Moses to lay his hand on Joshua—a symbolic way of demonstrating to the people that Joshua had been chosen to succeed him. Joshua was called a man “in whom is spirit”—who had realized the spirit, the Shekhinah, the Word, the holy Name, within himself. Later, after Joshua was already installed as master, God told him:

There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee; I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.

*JOSHUA 1:5*

Thus God confirmed to Joshua that he was indeed the successor to Moses and that he was equal in stature to Moses. God’s spirit—the Name or Word—would be with Joshua, just as it had been with Moses.

It is clear that for the early Israelites, as for later generations of Jews seeking spiritual realization, having a living spiritual guide was very important. There are several other places in the Bible where God reassures the people of Israel that he will send a master, a messenger, a teaching priest, to guide them and prepare them to receive the Lord within themselves.



Behold, I send My messenger,  
And he shall clear the way before Me;  
And the Lord, whom ye seek,  
Will suddenly come to His temple;  
And the messenger of the covenant,  
Whom ye delight in,  
Behold, he cometh,  
Saith the Lord of hosts.

*MALACHI 3:1*

In this beautiful passage, the Lord expresses his love and concern for humanity. It is a promise that he will send his messenger to prepare the people for his appearance to them. Nowhere does he say that he will send just one messenger, one messiah, during one period of history. The Lord who loves us so dearly would not be so unfair as to send a master to save the souls of only one generation and leave those incarnated before or afterwards without a means of salvation. The days of the coming of the messiah are at all times, for each of us has the opportunity to answer the pull of the Lord and seek a living master of our time.

In another passage, the Lord confirms his concern for the people's spiritual welfare:

Now for long seasons Israel was without the true God, and without a teaching priest, and without law; but when in their distress they turned unto the Lord, the God of Israel, and sought Him, He was found of them.

*II CHRONICLES 15:3*

The teaching priest was the master, who would teach the people the law in its highest sense, the method of taking the soul back to the Lord. When the people longed for a master to

reveal the way back to God, they turned from their evil ways and prayed to God, and "He was found of [by] them."

By taking a closer look at the Bible, we have seen that Moses was a spiritual master who revealed the Torah—the inner Word or Name—to his disciples, the children of Israel. Similarly, it is possible to understand events in the life of the biblical patriarch Abraham, and from the lives of the other patriarchs and prophets as well, as mystical allegories in the lives of true masters. For instance, Noah and Enoch are described as men who walked with God. Elijah and Elisha rode the chariot and walked with God. We have already seen that the chariot of Elijah, Ezekiel, and other prophets was a metaphor for the divine Name or sound current, the vehicle by which the soul travels through the spiritual regions and merges in the Lord.

In summary, although it may not be possible to determine which of the many biblical figures were masters of the highest order, it appears that Moses definitely was, some others almost certainly were, while many others were spiritually evolved souls who had master-disciple relationships with their followers and imparted spiritual knowledge and benefit to them.

## The Master and the Disciple

### *MARKED SOULS*

True or perfect masters are very rare but they are always present in this world. They are sent by the Lord in every age to reveal the path to humanity. They come for their marked souls, for those assigned by the Lord to their care.

Seekers will automatically be attracted to the master. Those who are marked for a particular mystic will automatically flock around him and seek his protection and guidance. They will know within themselves if he is their master.

The prophet Isaiah of the Bible refers to the marked souls as the redeemed, the ransomed of the Lord.

But the redeemed shall walk there;  
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return.

*ISAIAH 35:9-10*

The disciples are called the "ransomed," because when the master initiates someone, he ensures that the debt or ransom of that disciple's karmas is paid to the lord of judgment, the power that controls the realms of mind and matter.

The Hasidim also believed that each zaddik had certain marked souls for whom he was responsible. Dresner says:

While later [hasidic] writers emphasized the teaching that each man has a particular zaddik and none other, the beginnings of this doctrine are to be found in the writings of Yaakov Yosef. "When a zaddik leaves the world, one must cry out bitterly at the loss." One should not say: "Are there not other zaddikim ... ?" For perhaps this zaddik was the portion of life of this particular man.<sup>25</sup>

Cleaving to a zaddik is not a casual act, to be placed on the same level as ordinary events. It is an action of ultimate significance, a joining and meeting of the spirit. There may be a zaddik somewhere who has the key that will unlock the hidden caverns of pain and doubt which destroy a man. That zaddik is the spirit to his body.<sup>26</sup>

The perfect masters do not come for the whole world. They come for their marked, or allotted souls. By joining our spirit with theirs, they unlock the prison of karmic justice and liberate us from the caverns of pain and doubt which destroy us.



### COMPANY OF THE MASTER

The company of the perfect master has the extraordinary ability to transform the disciple inwardly, from his very core. As novice disciples with limited understanding, we cannot hope to fully comprehend the profound effect that the master's presence makes on our mind and soul. However, in *Philosophy of the Masters*, Maharaj Sawan Singh describes this process:

Powerful currents of life-energy emanate from a saint and surcharge the surrounding atmosphere.... The mere presence of a saint awakens souls and redeems them....

Rays of purity constantly radiate from him. He is full of wonderful light and kindness. He has an indescribable influence on others. He has magnetic attraction. By his words, which are full of mystical meaning, he pulls the soul upwards. He produces an experience of bliss which defies description....

There is peace and evenness within a perfect master. As a result of being in his company, a current of bliss runs through us. We feel happy on meeting him. All our doubts are removed and we feel certain that our ultimate destination will be attained....<sup>27</sup>

The spiritual power and influence of the hasidic master—the rebbe or zaddik—has been described in similar terms:

God has, therefore, provided a medium to function within Jewish life as a fountain of divine grace, to direct the people toward the light, and this is the zaddik, the living master, the rebbe. His is a superior soul, a soul saturated with holiness; by establishing contact with him, the individual is given the helping hand he needs in his efforts to ascend toward God.

The Hasid, the individual disciple, must seek to be continually in touch with the rebbe. He spends certain holy days in his court, within the radius of his direct influence.... The rebbe knows how to descend to the level of life where the people are, in order to raise them ever higher. The radiance of the rebbe's influence is elicited especially by being within the range of his vision and the touch of his hands.... The rebbe is in sense a redeemer—a redeemer of the holy sparks imprisoned in the world. He helps effect the reunion between God and his creation.<sup>28</sup>

The master's ability to affect the disciple to his very core is demonstrated in the moving story of the "conversion," or initiation, of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy by the Ba'al Shem Tov, as recounted by Samuel Dresner in *The Zaddik*. Dresner calls it a conversion, as it involved not a new course of study or acceptance of new dogma or belief, but a complete change in the personality and way of life of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef, who until then was

... a harsh, officious man, rigorous in his personal observance, devoted to study, aloof from the people and their problems, given to outbursts of anger and assertions of authority... The change which the Besht [the Ba'al Shem Tov] wrought in his soul was the turning point of his life. It reached down to the core of his being, opened his eyes to what he had been and revealed what he must become.<sup>29</sup>

There are several traditions and legends that describe this conversion. The Ba'al Shem Tov entered the town of Sharogrod where Yaakov Yosef was rabbi and, with his gift of storytelling, soon attracted an audience. Yaakov Yosef heard about the Ba'al Shem's stories and asked him to come and share one



with him. The Ba'al Shem told first one story, then another, then another. After three stories, Yaakov Yosef "entered into conversation with him and immediately 'was joined' to him."<sup>30</sup>

According to another legend, the Ba'al Shem told Yaakov Yosef the story of a rabbi who had cruelly beaten a water carrier, and who then suffered for years because he could not find the man to apologize to him. Yaakov Yosef recognized himself in the description of the haughty and cruel rabbi, and was deeply moved by the Ba'al Shem's knowledge of his most secret guilt. We can read in Rabbi Yaakov Yosef's own words what happened after one of his early meetings with the Ba'al Shem Tov:

Later, while praying, I wept a great weeping, the like of which I had never wept in all my life. I understood that this weeping was not from myself.... The Besht used to say that it was necessary to "elevate" me, so I dwelt with him for a period of weeks, and inquired when his honor would elevate me.<sup>31</sup>

Those who have been initiated by a spiritual master can easily understand what Yaakov Yosef meant by being "joined" to the Ba'al Shem Tov. They also have experienced their master joining their soul to him. When we are joined to the master and, with his guidance, bring our attention to the eye center, he elevates our soul to the inner spiritual regions. In that way he purifies the soul of the disciple. It appears that the Ba'al Shem Tov initiated Rabbi Yaakov Yosef and took his soul up to some higher regions within. Though we do not know to what stage or level the Ba'al Shem Tov or Yaakov Yosef reached, their experiences demonstrate the transforming and elevating power of the spiritual relationship of the master and his devoted disciple.



The Ba'al Shem Tov taught that the process of joining the master to the disciple is the essence of the master-disciple relationship. It implies a relationship much closer than speaking or studying; it implies a spiritual initiation, where the disciple is attached to the master on a spiritual level and thus always has his guidance and protection. The disciple now has the stamp or mark of that master upon him eternally.

When the soul of the disciple is joined to the master, there is a flow of the Word or divine energy between the two. This relationship is one of *devekut*, as the Hasidim called it—"attachment or cleaving to God, in which a double process is set into motion: man's life and work ... flows back to its own divine source, and man in turn becomes the recipient of a fresh influx of divine energy from the divine realm."<sup>32</sup> Maharaj Sawan Singh describes how the master acts as a conduit for this exchange of the divine energy:

The currents of love emanating from the heart of the master draw power from it, and return to the heart of the disciple with a double force. In this manner the spiritual powers of the master enter the heart of the disciple—and it appears to him that the master has become one with him, and he himself feels one with the master. Once the disciple is in communion with the guru, all the gates of bliss and happiness are open to him.<sup>33</sup>

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav describes how the disciple learns from the master just by looking at him and being in his presence:

Man must refine himself. Each one can see himself by looking at the master's face, as if it were a mirror. Even if the master does not reprove him or preach to him, a person will

feel immediate remorse for his deeds by merely looking at him. By merely looking at his face, he will see himself, as in a mirror, and note how he is sunk in darkness.<sup>34</sup>

The Muslim Sufi mystics also wrote of the power of the master's glance as well as the benefits the disciple receives by having his master's *darshan*—gazing at the master with great love, concentration, and submission:

It is like the elixir of life.  
The master by his sight  
Turneth a stone into a ruby,  
'Tis an established fact.  
Such is the divine effect of his look.<sup>35</sup>

The perfect master is a window to God's radiance. The eyes of the master reveal his divine power, light, and love. When we look into the master's eyes, we get a glimpse of the extraordinary source from which he draws his divine qualities.

It is not just what the master says that instructs, but by being in the presence of the true master we become transformed. Having the master's *darshan* makes an irresistible appeal to our inner being, even when we receive no verbal instructions. Rabbi Nahman said, "The person who listens to a discourse by a zaddik receives an imprint of his image, his mind, and his soul, and the physiognomy of the zaddik becomes fixed in his mind."<sup>36</sup>

Gershom Scholem tells the story of a Jewish mystic who said: "I did not go to the Maggid of Mezhericz to learn Torah from him but to watch him tie his boot-laces." Scholem comments that for the Hasidim, "It is no longer his [the zaddik's] knowledge but his life which lends a religious value" to contact with him.<sup>37</sup>

The true master has the ability to show us our weaknesses in a way that allows us to rise above them. Maharaj Sawan Singh explains:

A perfect master can, with a single glance, find out one's inner condition. He then instructs us according to our condition. When anyone visits him, he can see the visitor's inner condition as if that person were encased in transparent glass, but he keeps it a secret. Bees rush to flowers for their fragrance and honey; similarly, the seekers go to the perfect master to partake of his wealth of spirituality and righteousness. No one returns empty-handed from the bountiful master.<sup>38</sup>

To follow a master requires a special kind of devotion, of true discipleship. In discussing the master-disciple relationship during the rabbinic period, Jacob Neusner writes:

Disciples were not students who came to a master only to learn facts or holy traditions. They came to study the master as well as what the master said....

The disciple, indeed, acquired more than a master. He gained a new father.... The master was truly and really the second father of the disciple, who would shape him for eternity as the father had for this world. The father had given the physical features. The master would sculpt the soul.

Entry into the rabbinical circle, like initiation into a mystery cult, marked the end of an old existence, the beginning of a new life, a new being. The disciple did not simply learn things; he was converted from one way of living to another.<sup>39</sup>



Neusner is describing the kind of master-disciple relationship all spiritual masters have with their disciples. Once the master initiates a disciple into the spiritual practice, the disciple is reborn and he begins a new life with a new goal—God-realization. For the ideal disciple, this is the only priority and the standard against which to measure all actions and decisions.

### *THE MASTER'S POWER AND PROTECTION*

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav gives a vivid description of the mission and power of the zaddik:

Even those who are remote from the zaddik receive vitality and illumination from the zaddik. He shelters them, like a tree, which has branches, bark and foliage, and all draw their sustenance from the tree. Even plants distant from the tree which do not appear to draw sustenance from the tree, do in fact draw from it. Similarly, the zaddik has the equivalent of branches, bark and foliage.... And even those who are distant receive vitality from him by [his] sheltering them like a tree.<sup>40</sup>

The sheltering tree is an appropriate metaphor for the protection we receive from the master. In a similar vein, the Indian saint, Paltu, compared the master's power to soothe the cares of the world to the coolness of the sandalwood tree and the serenity of the moon:

Cool as sandalwood, serene as the moon, are saints;  
Serene as the moon,  
the feverish heat of the world do they cool.  
Anyone who comes to them on fire  
is soothed by the sweetness of their words.

Infinite is their patience,  
boundless their love and compassion.  
Kind, tender, and merciful,  
their sweet and loving words melt even stones.  
Their way of life and their smile  
lend fragrance to their wisdom.  
The maladies—physical, mental and spiritual—  
All three vanish when the eye beholds a saint.  
Even the fire of hunger, O Paltu,  
is quenched in no time.  
Cool as sandalwood, serene as the moon, are saints.<sup>41</sup>

As we have seen earlier in both Judaism and Christianity, the master was also likened to a shepherd, because of the nurturing and protective care he gives his disciples:

“When one believes in a shepherd of Israel, it is as if he believes in the Lord himself” [*Talmud*], for the one is the means to the other.... By a shepherd is meant one who shepherds and watches over the flock so that they are well fed ... acting for the sake of heaven, for the welfare of Israel. It is good to believe in such a man.<sup>42</sup>

The spiritual journey is beset with temptations, subtle distractions, and other obstacles. The perfect master, who has already completed the spiritual journey and is familiar with the inner path, guides and protects the disciple, ensuring that he reaches his final destination. Often, if the disciple has not yet made sufficient progress within, he does not realize the extent to which the master is guiding and protecting him. However, those who are able to go inside see his protective hand every minute. Whether we are aware of it or not, the master is always helping and protecting us.



It is universally recognized that the protection of a spiritual guide or master is necessary for the disciple to traverse the inner regions safely. Gershom Scholem writes:

The yogis, the Sufis, and the kabbalists, no less than the manuals of Catholic mysticism, stress the need for such a spiritual guide, without whom the mystic runs the risk of losing himself in the wilderness of mystical adventure. The guide should be capable of preserving the proper balance in the mystic's mind.<sup>43</sup>

Some Jewish mystics have recounted the spiritual and mental anguish they suffered when attempting mystic enlightenment on their own. In the early nineteenth century, Rabbi Isaac Eizik of Komarno wrote of his intensive life of Torah study and divine worship through which he attained "many lofty stages of the divine spirit." However, he says, "I did not appreciate at the time that it was not the result of my own efforts, since I was still remote from true worship.... Many harsh and demonic forces rose against me.... Worse than all was the state of melancholy into which I was hurled."<sup>44</sup>

After finally overcoming these inner obstacles, Rabbi Isaac describes a wonderful light which he attributes to the Shekhinah—the holy divine Name, the *kavod* or glory—which came upon him. He recounts that after this period of spiritual delight, he fell once again, and finally realized, "I must journey to the saints who would draw down His light ... upon me since I already had a refined vessel wherewith to receive the light."<sup>45</sup> Rabbi Isaac realized that all his divine worship and Torah study—even his seeing of the divine light of the Shekhinah—were just preparation, cleaning the vessel of the body, to ready him for the real spiritual experience which he could attain only by seeking the company of a saint.



Elsewhere Rabbi Isaac tells of a vision that he dreamed one night in which he was overcome by a great longing to see the face of the divine Ba'al Shem Tov:

I ran to his abode and stood in the outer room. They told me that he was reciting his prayers in the inner sanctum but he opened the door and I had the merit of seeing the radiant form of our master, the Ba'al Shem Tov.... I was in such a state of joy and dread that I could not move, but he came up to me, greeting me with a smile of his face. I delighted greatly in this and his form is engraved on my mind so that I can recall it.<sup>46</sup>

When Rabbi Isaac writes of the divine Ba'al Shem Tov, he is recognizing that the master is more than an ordinary human being, that he has truly attained divine qualities and power through union with the Divine.

The inner experience of all who travel the spiritual path is the same. The outer form of the master will vary with the body that the master takes on in each age and country, but, ultimately, the real form of the true master is God's holy Name, the Shabd. As the Shabd is one, so the path within is one; and our goal, the Supreme Lord, is one.

Relations and friends may abandon us during our lifetime. And even if they do stay with us, we will surely be separated from them at the time of our death. They are powerless to cross the great divide between life and death. But the perfect master in his inner Radiant Form never abandons us. He is the beloved who accompanies us when we die and keeps us safe from the clutches of Kal, the negative power, the lord of judgment, who normally greets souls when they leave the physical body at death and metes out their punishments and rewards according to their actions.

It is impossible to describe the pain the soul can experience at the time of death. Some of the saints have likened it to being gnashed in the jaws of Kal. The true master, in his mercy, joins us in our lifetime to the inner holy Name of God and protects us from Kal's "justice" at our death.

### *THE MASTER IS OUR TRUE FRIEND*

The perfect masters are one with the Lord. The Lord sends them to the world from the highest spiritual region, their true home, where they exist in the bliss of total union with him. It is for our benefit that they come to this coarse, material plane.

The perfect masters are karmaless, meaning that they have no karmas of their own which bring them into this world. They do not come to reap rewards or punishments for previous actions as they live beyond the sphere of karma. The perfect masters have incarnated here solely to fulfill their mission of bringing souls back to the Lord. Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy used a similar vocabulary in discussing the hasidic masters. He said that the zaddik has no independent role in this life—he has no life of his own.<sup>47</sup>

Whatever the perfect masters say or do is for our good. They are here to save us from the miseries of duality. They have taken on this human body, which is subject to heat and cold, suffering and disease. Like all of us, they bear the pain and sorrow of this earth plane. Living in this world is much less pleasant for them than remaining in a state of total union with God. But since the masters are absolute and perfect in their obedience to the Lord, they come into this world at his behest, to render service to us. Their hearts are moved with pity at seeing how the negative power is torturing us.

The masters' death is a time of ineffable joy for them, as they are finally liberated from the need to function in a physi-

cal body, and can return to the state of total and permanent union with the Lord, the beloved. As Rabbi Yaakov Yosef commented:

The actual death of the zaddik is called a *hilulla*, a time of joyous festivity, because he goes from this vale of sorrows to the tranquility of the next world. "But weep for him that goeth away" ... that is, for the zaddik who does not actually die, but who descends from his rung, going down to join himself to the common people in order to raise them.<sup>48</sup>

### There Have Always Been Perfect Masters

Perfect masters are universal; they have come at all times, in different nations, cultures, religions, and social classes. Their teachings apply to everyone and do not depend on race, country, creed, time, caste, or religion. But when they die, we arrest their teachings into narrow compartments and forget their universal essence. Maharaj Charan Singh explains:

When a mystic leaves this world, we forget the reality and give ourself to rituals, dogmas and ceremonies, lose the reality and hold to the empty shell. Another mystic comes from the Father in some other part of the creation, again revives the same teaching, and when he departs, again we forget his teaching and just try to hold to the shell and to the organization.<sup>49</sup>

The world is never without a perfect master, and there may be even more than one on earth at the same time in history. For instance, Guru Nanak and Kabir Sahib both appeared in different parts of India in the fifteenth century, as did the Buddha in India, Lao-Tse in China, and the prophet Ezekiel in



Judea in the sixth century B.C.E. Maharaj Charan Singh has said that there have been saints in the West as well as in the East, but that generally in the West spirituality has not been valued highly, so these saints were not known outside their small circles of devotees. Normally we hear of only those saints or holy men who came in conflict with or who influenced political figures of their time.<sup>50</sup>

The Lord, in his mercy, always manifests himself to suffering humanity. He is eternally sending his messengers, the perfect living masters, to teach the way back home to those souls yearning for oneness with him.

The perfect master is the crystallization on the physical plane of the Lord's love and mercy. Actually, if the master were not present on earth, constantly generating love with his very being, the whole world would dissolve in chaos. He emanates the energy of love that allows all the disparate elements that make up the world to coexist and work together harmoniously. Dresner introduces a number of passages giving Rabbi Yaakov Yosef's teachings on this subject:

"The zaddik is called the cornerstone upon which the world is built." He is the "foundation of the world," and it is on this foundation that all else either stands or falls.<sup>51</sup>

Through the zaddik, the austere loftiness of heaven and the abject lowliness of earth, the transcendence of God and the humanity of man, meet. What seems set apart and unalterably opposed find in him a mediating principle which brings them together. "It is only possible to join together two opposites through a third force."<sup>52</sup> "The zaddik is the foundation of the universe, which is peace, for he joins together two opposites as when one makes peace between a man and his neighbor."<sup>53</sup>

Dresner comments:

The idea of the zaddik as the foundation (*yesod*) is closely allied to his action as the mediator between the two extremes. Since he is the foundation of the world, he is able to reach those forces which have drawn apart and join them in place.<sup>54</sup>

For Rabbi Yaakov Yosef, Dresner says, "The righteous man was the object of all creation ... he occupies a superior place in the world of creation—superior even to the Temple or the Torah."<sup>55</sup> He further said that "every zaddik is the soul of his generation."<sup>56</sup> Just as our soul gives life to our body, so the zaddik gives life to the world, to the generation of people in this world during his lifetime.

## What Is a Genuine Master?

The hallmark of the perfect living master is that he teaches the method of uniting the soul with the Lord by meditation on the holy Name of God—the inner sound or Shabd. The perfect master shows the ordinary individual how to travel through the five inner regions to the highest realm of pure spirituality.

But there are many mystics and spiritual teachers in the world who have reached only as far as one of the intermediate regions. At best, they are only able to take their disciples to the region of their own highest ascent. In our quest for a spiritual guide, therefore, we should try to find a master of the highest order, who can take us back to the highest spiritual regions, the source of the Lord. If we become the disciple of a lesser master, we will be limited by his limitations, and later on we will need to make the search once again.



The perfect master teaches us how to unite our consciousness with the Shabd, the essence of the Lord. He teaches us how to hear the holy Name, see its inner light, and ultimately merge our soul into it. Soami Ji of Agra, first master in the Radha Soami line, said:

He who gives the message of Shabd is the true Guru,  
for Shabd is the real truth.  
He who practices Shabd is the perfect Guru—  
Be thou as dust beneath his feet!  
Look not for any other marks;  
care not for any other qualities.  
Seek instruction into the secret of Shabd from such a Master,  
And practice it with wholehearted devotion.<sup>57</sup>

The true master teaches the path of the formless inner Name or Word, not the manipulation of letters, words, or formulae whose purpose is to influence or manipulate divine powers or forces. For, although he gives his disciples a repetition practice of outer names or words, it is simply a step toward the inner Name practice. Its goal is to help concentrate and still the mind in order to experience the inner and true holy Name of God—the ineffable sound of God's power vibrating through the creation.

A perfect master never teaches magical or occult powers or knowledge, nor does he get involved with the performance of miracles—neither by himself nor his disciples. The masters teach that miracles become obstacles on the spiritual path; they attract curiosity seekers and inflate the ego. True masters prefer to conform to the laws of nature and not perform supernatural acts of no consequence. They teach their disciples to reserve the expenditure of their spiritual energy for further inner progress, not for display in the world.



The importance of finding a master of the highest order, who teaches the path to the highest spiritual region, is demonstrated by the story of Baba Jaimal Singh, the second master in the Radha Soami line, who as a youth had read in the *Adi Granth* about the five inner sounds, corresponding to the five inner regions. He started on what was to be a journey lasting for many years to find a master who would teach him the secret of the five sounds. At one point during his search, Baba Ji found a master who knew two sounds, but he was not satisfied; the future saint persevered until, after many years of intensive inquiry—walking from one end of India to another, talking to holy men and devotees of many different religious and ascetic practices—he finally encountered Soami Ji of Agra.

Soami Ji taught the simple, natural path of the five sounds about which Baba Ji had read in the *Adi Granth*. The two great souls met and their mutual recognition was instant. Soami Ji initiated Baba Ji, and after a short time Baba Ji proved to be the most devoted of disciples, imbibing the full spiritual wealth of his master.

A perfect master is always initiated by another master, conforming to the spiritual principle ordained for all humanity. Mystic literature tells of two types of saints—those who are born fully evolved spiritually and who only need initiation to set their flame ablaze, and those who may spend years as humble, unassuming disciples, attending to their spiritual practice in total obedience to their master before ultimately achieving the highest level of mystic union and God-realization. (If even the born saints need to be initiated by a master before they can take the spiritual journey, how much greater is the necessity of initiation for ordinary human beings like ourselves!)

As a man, the perfect master is a perfect human being. He embodies all the moral and ethical virtues taught by religion

and civilization. As Julian Johnson wrote, "In all respects, the master is the highest type of man, when judged as *man*....

If I were looking for a master, I would first of all make the most critical inspection of the man's life to determine if he had any of the ordinary imperfections of character usually manifested by the average man. If I found him to be a *perfect man*, when studied as a man, I would then begin my study of him as a guru. But if he failed to pass inspection as a man, I would at once give up the search in him for guru, or master.<sup>58</sup>

True or perfect masters are never a burden on society. They earn their own living and take no payment, gifts, or other remuneration in exchange for their services. They would never beg or accept charity from others. Quite the contrary, they are the benefactors of mankind. They are givers, not takers. In fact, if a supposed saint or master accepts gifts or begs from others, one can be sure he is not a true master. True masters also emphasize to their disciples the importance of earning one's own living, as living off others severely hampers a person's spiritual progress.

History shows us the saints of the past lived on their own earnings. Many were simple farmers, craftsmen, and tradesmen. Moses was a shepherd, Rabbi Akiba and other rabbis of the talmudic period were members of the legal academy, and many of the hasidic rabbis earned their living by chopping wood, as tailors or traders, and in other occupations. Among the Indian saints, Kabir was a weaver, Guru Nanak a farmer, Ravidas a cobbler, Paltu a grocer. Others were from wealthy backgrounds. For example, Tulsi Sahib, the guru of Soami Ji of Agra, abdicated the throne of Satara and devoted himself

to the spiritual life. Mira Bai was princess of Marwar, and Bulleh Shah was a *sayyid*, a Muslim nobleman of the Punjab, of the lineage of the prophet Muhammad. Maharaj Charan Singh says:

If a saint begs from his disciples, he is not a true master; he should be avoided, he does not deserve respect or esteem. But the saint who earns his own living, gives free service to the *sangat* [community of disciples], and who knows the Way is the kind of master that one must find.<sup>59</sup>

The perfect masters set an example for us of how to live in this world and discharge all our worldly obligations, while at the same time attending to our spiritual life. They do not tell us to renounce the world; in fact, they encourage us to live a normal family life and keep away from ascetic practices. They teach us to live in the world without being attached to it. They show us how we can function in the world through the mind and body while keeping our attention, our consciousness, merged with the Lord—the Word or Shabd. This is similar to the paradox of the zaddik, the hasidic master, according to Dresner:

Thus, even when going out to the people, the zaddik somehow remains bound up with God; and this is the paradox of the zaddik, a paradox of solitude and communion, of being among the people and yet all the while standing in the presence of God, of going “into the midst of the city” and yet, at the very same time, cleaving to the Lord and fulfilling literally the verse, “I have set the Lord before me at *all* times.”<sup>60</sup>



The true master is marked by humility. He does not seek to be a master and would never declare himself a master. He would never boast of his mastership nor of his spiritual powers or attainments. He assumes the duties of mastership only out of obedience to his master, who has named him his successor.

The true master does not enjoy position or power; he is the patient teacher and guide of his marked souls. In submission to the Lord's will, he has taken the human form and lives in this imperfect world of matter and mind. Were it not for these responsibilities, he would be basking in the bliss of union with the Lord.

In the Bible, also, humility is emphasized as the hallmark of the spiritual master's greatness:

Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men that were on the face of the earth.

*NUMBERS 12:3*

As Rabbi Yaakov Yosef wrote:

Through humility and meekness, one is worthy of coming closer to God.... The truest sign that man cleaves to the Lord, who is the life of all life, is humility.<sup>61</sup>

If we come upon a spiritual teacher, we should study him carefully to assure ourselves that he is indeed a perfect master who can teach us the method of merging our souls in the Lord. We don't want to be misled by false prophets, or those teachers who can guide us for only part of the journey, for then we would have to begin our search again, later in this life or in another life. To make the journey all the way home, we have to find a perfect master living in our own time.



## Rituals and Prayer

For reasons seemingly beyond our control, we are born into different religions and nationalities. Each religion believes that its practices and creeds are correct and that they provide the best or only way back to God, to spiritual realization and salvation. But as intelligent, thinking people, we would have to agree that if an individual were born into  $x$  religion rather than  $y$  religion, he would believe that  $x$  religion's rituals and beliefs are true and that  $y$ 's and all others are false or deficient. We can therefore see that an individual's beliefs and perspectives are conditioned by his birth and education, and that if he were born into a different family and were educated differently, his beliefs would differ accordingly. As true seekers of spirituality, therefore, we are naturally compelled to ask if there exists any absolute truth, any universal practice and belief, which applies equally to all individuals independent of their circumstances of birth.

Mystics teach that there is indeed an underlying truth around which most prayers and rituals revolve, and which is the subject of scriptures and holy books. It is the practice of uniting

the individual soul with the universal spiritual essence, the one God made known through his loving power, the holy Name. This is the true, universal prayer.

If we stay confined to the realm of external ritual and prayer, we will perceive distinctions between people; if we go beyond and behind the rituals to their essence and core, we will find universal oneness in all individuals. Only in unity will we find peace within and experience God's truth.

## Rituals

The Jewish emphasis on fulfillment of the *mitzvot*, or commandments—the rituals and practices derived from the Bible—stems from an accurate understanding of human nature. The early rabbis were aware that people need to be reminded constantly of their spiritual core, for otherwise their minds become totally immersed in the mundane preoccupations of life. The mitzvot circumscribe daily life and lift us beyond it; they remind us of God and our relationship with him. Unfortunately, however, human nature being what it is, our mind often tends to concentrate on these external rituals, forgetting the internal reality of which the rituals were designed to remind us.

In the Bible, the prophets consistently pointed out that God requires only the inner practice, the inner contrition, and not outer symbols and rituals. The prophets repeatedly reminded the people that the real worship that pleases God is kindness, humility, and sacrifice of ego—not the animal sacrifices that were customary at that time:

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit:  
A broken and a contrite heart, O God,  
Thou wilt not despise.

PSALMS 51:19



I desired mercy and not sacrifice;  
And the knowledge of God  
More than burnt-offerings.

*HOSEA 6:6*

The real sacrifice of ego comes in leading a life devoted to service and inner meditation on God's essence—in submitting oneself to the will of God and not to the pleasures of the world. As Maharaj Charan Singh wrote to a disciple:

If God could be pleased by the killing of animals, nothing would have been easier, for then anyone could please him by killing a few animals in his name. It is not the sacrifice of animals but of our own animal nature, our mind, our "self," our "ego," that we have to subdue or sacrifice and sublimate.<sup>1</sup>

The Bible describes the real sacrifice as follows:

And I will offer in His tabernacle  
sacrifices with trumpet-sound.

*PSALMS 27:6*

Here the psalmist declares that, in place of animal sacrifice, he will offer sacrifices with trumpet-sound. Although generally interpreted as a reference to the external practice of sounding the *shofar* (ram's horn) on holy days, it is possible that on a mystical level this passage refers to a meditation practice in which the devotee sacrifices his interest in the world—he removes his attention from the realm of sense pleasures and mental activity—and, instead, merges into the internal sound, which at certain stages may be described as trumpet-like. That spiritual sound

is God's holy Name that reverberates within his tabernacle or temple—the human body. It is this sacrifice which will purify the devotee, not the killing of animals.

During the biblical period, a repentant sinner would often tear his garments as a means of publicly acknowledging his guilt and sincere repentance. The prophet Joel reminded the people that this external exhibition of guilt and repentance is useless:

And rend your heart, and not your garments,  
And turn unto the Lord your God.

*JOEL 2:13*

Indeed, even today, many Jews follow the practice of tearing their clothing during periods of mourning and on special fast days and holy days devoted to repentance. But just as the tearing of garments cannot turn us to the Lord, outward prayers cannot give us God-realization; nor can other external observances or austerities. Only inner devotion can free us from the bondage of desire and ego.

The true mystics teach that austerities such as fasting only increase our ego and make us focus our attention on whatever we are denying to ourselves—food, drink, activity, family relations, and so forth. They aptly ask why we punish the body, when it is the mind that has sinned in running to the senses. What has the body done to us that we should punish it? Why chastise the cage and ignore the monkey? A life of sacrifice means abstaining from those actions that displease the Lord and trying to follow the path that pleases him. Sacrifice doesn't mean running away from family and work responsibilities. It means living among other people and discharging our responsibilities without being obsessed or possessed by them.

Austerities are designed to take the mind away from sense pleasures by discipline, but the mind can give up its attachments to the senses and lower pleasures only by becoming attached to something higher—a greater pleasure—and that is the holy Name of God, the beautiful divine sound reverberating within all of us. By listening to the sound in meditation, we will automatically become purified. The finer qualities of contentment, forgiveness, continence, detachment, and humility will manifest in us automatically, just as cream rises on milk.

Some Jewish mystics also recognized that austerities like fasting were not desirable practices. The Ba'al Shem Tov wrote in a letter to his disciple Rabbi Yaakov Yosef:

Behold, I have received the letter composed by your unsullied hand and saw from its first two lines that his eminence believes fasting necessary. This shocked me to my innermost soul. By the counsel of God and his Shekhinah I order you not to bring yourself into this danger, for this way is dark and bitter and leads to depression and melancholy. The glory of God does not dwell where there is depression but where the joy in performing his *mitzvah* [command] prevails, as is known to his eminence—words which I have taught many times. Let them be upon your heart.<sup>2</sup>

Every form of worship does not lead to God-realization, to union with the immortal and escape from the cycle of birth and rebirth. On the contrary, religious practices such as austerities and acts of penitence, recitals of holy books and scriptures, and donations of alms and charity—which we perform for the purpose of gaining salvation—may actually increase our attachment to this world. We will have to reap their reward in a future life, and thus they will tie us to the cycle of birth and death, while our goal is to get free of the wheel of transmigration.



However, if we meditate on the holy Name of God, we will get the spiritual benefit of all such practices by coming in touch with the true power of soul liberation.

Rituals and ceremonies will have the most meaning if we remember the real spirituality that is at their base; otherwise, they are just expressions of the customs and traditions of our community. There is no harm in them, but we shouldn't confuse them with spiritual practice. They will not help us on our road to God-realization.

The practice of the Name is the inner teaching brought by the true mystics of all times. But when the mystics die, we forget their instructions to go within, and instead we adopt a great variety of outer practices and modes of behavior. Before we realize it, these traditions and customs have taken the place of our true religious practice, which is meditation. Rules for how we should wear our hair and clothing, how we should perform marriages and funerals, and how we should welcome a new baby into our midst have all become identified with our religion, and the real inner practice has been lost.

Many Jewish religious holidays have their origin in the annual agricultural cycle or in historical events. They reflect social and cultural traditions that have come down through time, despite the fact that religious reasons have been given to justify their being included under religious law. If we recognize them as cultural traditions and customs and realize that they have little to do with God or the soul, then we will be free to enjoy them, accepting them for what they are, while we undertake the inner spiritual quest for the benefit of our soul.

The kabbalists, in fact, invested the common understanding and practice of the holidays and Sabbath with additional spiritual meaning. They created a mystical symbolism based on the interplay of the sefirot (the divine emanations) and wove it into the prayers and ceremonies of the holy days, as a

reminder of the mystical dimension that underlies the external practices.

The divine nectar is waiting for us within. Once we have tasted it, we will find any other kind of worship meaningless and depressing. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the twentieth-century Jewish mystic who was chief rabbi of Palestine, wrote of awakening to the depths of the inner worship, which he called the holiness of silence—the experience of the inner silence which allows one to commune with the Lord:

If a person who has risen to the holiness of silence should lower himself to a particularized form of divine service, in prayer, [or] Torah study, to the limited problems of morality, he will suffer and feel oppressed. He will feel as though his soul, which embraces all existence, is being pressed as though with prongs, to surrender her to the lowland where everything exists within a prescribed measure, to the narrowness of a particular path, when all paths are open to him, all abounding in light, all abounding in life's treasures.<sup>3</sup>

Once we have united our soul with the Lord and experienced the still, small voice within—once we have experienced the intensity of the inner light and have felt the peace and love that flow from the ultimate Supreme Being—all other worship, ritual, penitence, and ceremony become stifling and confining. As Sarmad boldly sang:

Sarmad! they scorned thee, treading alone  
The lane of love, amidst the towns of Judah's creed;  
And of the faithful followers of Islam,  
Then also of the votaries of Ram,  
Lovers of their small selves alone thou found mostly;  
And very few of the one Self.<sup>4</sup>

Here Sarmad declares that he follows the path of divine love, which embraces everything within the one Self (the Lord, the source of all souls). But, he says, he was scorned for this by Jews, Muslims, and Hindus equally, as they were in love with their own small selves—the lower self—rather than with the Lord.

When we concentrate on the Lord, we will see one reality, the one Self. When we look at our individual selves, we will see diversity, many selves. Religion should not separate us from other people through the inevitable differences in outer practice and behavior. Our religion should stand on spirituality, not on external rituals and ceremonies. We should mold our worship of the Lord around his universal oneness—the audible life stream that gives life and energy to the entire creation.

We therefore should not waste this opportunity of human birth; we should seek a master who can teach us the secret of the Name. As Maharaj Charan Singh has said, “God remains a mirage to all who seek him by external means.”<sup>5</sup>

## Symbols of Light and Sound

During the ceremonies and rituals of most religions—in temples, synagogues, and churches around the world—candles and lamps are lit, conches and bells are sounded. In Jewish and Buddhist temples, as in Catholic churches, an “eternal” light or flame is kept burning at all times. This eternal light is an external symbol of our eternal soul, the essence of God, which is perceived within as spiritual light. We see the soul’s inner flame when we take our attention within and begin the spiritual journey.

Pious Jews light candles to mark the beginning of every Sabbath, holy day, and festival. These candles, too, symbolize the inner light of the soul, which we are able to see when we



ascend to the inner spiritual regions in meditation. In fact, the *menorah*, a seven-branched candelabra, is the most important symbol of Judaism.

Using kabbalistic terminology, in the fourteenth century Rabbi Joseph Albas of northwestern Africa wrote of the menorah as a symbol of the seven lower *sefirot* (divine emanations) by which the good oil, a symbol for the creative power or Word, is bestowed on the creation. The passage begins with his invocation to God to grant him the qualities of the higher sefirot of Wisdom, Understanding, Lovingkindness, and Might. Albas writes:

And from your Wisdom, O supreme God, emanate upon me, and from your Understanding, give me Understanding. With your Lovingkindness enlarge upon me; with your Might frustrate my enemies. And your good oil pour on the seven branches of the menorah to spread your good influence to all your creation. Open your hand and satisfy all life with your Will.<sup>6</sup>

The festival of Chanukah (renewal) is based on the miracle that took place during the Maccabean wars, when oil sufficient for only one day lasted for eight. This story symbolizes the grace and light the Lord gives us on our journey to spiritual renewal. It is a miracle of faith at a time when the spiritual path is beset by enemies and detractors. By the Lord's grace, the soul's light, the inner flame, burns brightly and continuously despite all the obstacles we face. This holiday, similar in spirit to the Indian holiday of Diwali, is celebrated by lighting candles for eight successive days.

An interesting aspect of the Chanukah candle-lighting ceremony is the importance of the *shamas* (literally, the servant

candle) in lighting the other candles. One is not permitted to directly light the candles representing each of the eight nights; first one must light the shamas, and then one uses the shamas to light the other candles. The shamas might be understood as a symbol of the spiritual master, whom God uses to light our individual inner flames.

The Indian saint Paltu spoke of the inner flame as a lamp which burns without wick or oil:

In the inverted well of the inner sky  
Burns a lamp,  
Burns a lamp without wick, without oil ... <sup>7</sup>

So, also, the Indian mystic Kabir said, "The flame of the inaccessible region burns without wick or oil."<sup>8</sup> And similarly, the bush that Moses saw on the mountain—the bush that was not consumed—is a symbol of the eternal inner flame or light of the Word, the Shabd, the soul.

The *yizkor* (remembrance) candles lit in memory of departed relatives have a symbolic meaning similar to that of the eternal light found in the synagogue. As if unconsciously aware of the deeper truth, human beings use a flame to remember a departed person. But there is no need to light a physical candle. The light of the soul never goes out. Even though a person may die, the soul does not die. After death, the soul is either assigned to some inner region or reborn in a different body. Sometimes the departed parent or husband has already been reborn as a new grandchild in the same family. The family lights a candle and cries over the memory of the dead, yet he is right there all the time, cooing and giggling in their laps.

Hindus and Jews both blow conches and rams' horns during their ceremonies. Buddhists use gongs and bells, as do Christians.

During the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement, the most holy days of the Jewish year, the *shofar* or ram's horn is blown in an atmosphere of great awe. It is a call to repent before one's actions are judged. The sound of the shofar is a powerful symbol of the inner sound that is heard with the inner hearing and attention of the soul. One of the sounds of the first inner region above the eye center is described by the masters as the sound of the conch or ram's horn.

Why do so many religions have the same symbols of sound and light? The masters teach that the human body is the only true temple or tabernacle, and that within the temple of our body burns the eternal divine flame. There echoes the inner spiritual melody—music that has been described as sounding at first like a bell, deepening to become like a conch. As the soul rises within, the music becomes finer and more beautiful. It has been likened to many different musical instruments, although these physical instruments can in no way approximate the sublime spiritual beauty of the inner sound. The sound one hears within purifies all who hear it, as their souls travel upward toward the highest spiritual realms.

After the true or perfect masters leave this world, humanity tends to misinterpret their teachings. Instead of engaging in the struggle to turn inward and see light and hear sound, people take to rituals, ceremonies, and symbols. These are of no help. Only by going inside can the soul gain dominance over the mind and avoid being caught in its grip. Maharaj Charan Singh says:

We do not know how to practice the real or true worship, which is devotion to Nam.... Instead, we perform traditional rituals. That is to say, we love the shells of nuts and throw away the kernel.<sup>9</sup>



## The Sabbath as Meditation

Normally the Sabbath is celebrated as a day of rest, in commemoration of the seventh day of creation when, we are told, God rested. Those who celebrate the Sabbath see in it a time to rise above the concerns of the world and live in a spiritual atmosphere.

Traditionally, the Sabbath is one day in the week when we are to “die to the world.” We seek out external ways to cut ourselves off from worldly activity and devote ourselves to God. But the most effective way of purifying our minds is not by withdrawing ourselves from the world for one day a week. We need to devote ourselves to God every day, to find a method of invoking his presence every day.

It is through meditation that we can become detached from the desires of mind and body. By doing meditation the soul loses its attachment to the world and its preoccupations. Mystics ask us to give a regular time period each day to our meditation, a time when we withdraw from the world, remember the Lord, and give ourselves an opportunity to be with him alone. Giving time every day to our practice enables us to feel God’s presence all the time.

Many pious Jews feel that on the Sabbath a special spirit—the Shekhinah, the divine indwelling presence—comes to rest within the devotee. In this respect, the Sabbath can be seen as a metaphor for the process of meditation: by concentrating our attention at the third eye and hearing the internal sound, we become filled with the bliss of union with the divine spirit, the Shekhinah. Through meditation, the spirit that is the essence of the Sabbath is present in us every day, throughout the day. While working in the world, we keep our mind in the Lord. We do not need to dedicate a separate day to the Lord; every day becomes the Lord’s.

In the Kabbalah, the Shekhinah is portrayed as the feminine aspect of God and as his bride. In the system of the sefirot, she is equated with the tenth and lowest sefirah of *Malkut* (Kingship), which transmits God's presence into the world. Malkut is the bride of the fifth sefirah of *Tiferet* (Splendor), which is equivalent to YHWH. The Shekhinah also symbolizes the soul, with God (YHWH) as her bridegroom.

The hymn "Lekha Dodi" (Come, O Beloved), sung every Friday evening at the start of the Sabbath, tells of the union of the bride with the bridegroom. The kabbalists wrote it as an allegory of the union of the Shekhinah with YHWH, of Malkut with Tiferet, and of the soul with the Lord. They are all symbols of the same thing, but on different levels. The poem describes how the union takes place through the remembrance of God's Name:

Come, O beloved, the bride to meet,  
 Come, O beloved, the face of the Sabbath to greet.  
 "Keep" and "Remember" in one utterance,  
 Which the unique Lord caused us to hear.  
 The Lord God is One and One is His Name,  
 For name, for beauty, for praise.

In Hebrew, keep and remember are *shamor* and *zakhor*, which are derived from the same roots as the Hindi *simran* and the Persian *zikh*. "Keep and remember in one utterance" refers to the biblical command to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. The poet is saying that this command was issued in the one divine utterance—the Word or holy Name. Thus, keeping the Sabbath, remembering the Sabbath, becomes a symbol of remembering the inner holy Name of God. Then the divine presence, the Shekhinah, will come to reside within the devotee all the time, not just one day a week.

Aristobulus, a second-century B.C.E. Jewish mystic, wrote:

The pre-existent Wisdom of Logos, which is identical with the primordial light ... gives the true Sabbath rest to those who follow her.... God created the world and ... he gave us for rest the seventh day, which in reality could also be called the primal source of light, through which all things are comprehended. The latter could also metaphorically be transferred to Wisdom, for all light comes from her.... Wisdom existed before heaven and earth.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, according to Aristobulus, the seventh day is actually a pure spiritual essence, not a particular time. It is the primal divine light, which emanates from the Word, the holy Name. By meditation one rests in that light.

## The Holy Land

Many Jews believe that by making a visit or pilgrimage to Jerusalem they will come nearer to God. Jerusalem is the site of the holy temple which was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 C.E. Nowadays, pious Jews visit the one remaining wall of the temple in Jerusalem, the western wall, sometimes called the wailing wall. They see visiting Jerusalem and the wailing wall as fulfillment of a religious duty. On a mystical level, however, the outer Jerusalem is a symbol of the inner Jerusalem. The real holy temple is the sanctuary above the eye center, where the eternal light shines within us; its holy of holies are the pure spiritual realms within.\*

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\* Holy of holies is the term used in Judaism to designate the innermost chamber of the temple, where the most sacred ceremonies were performed. It is interesting that Sikhs use the same term for the holiest area in their *gurdwaras* (temples).



The physical destruction of the temple in Jerusalem was certainly a great tragedy, but the ongoing tragedy which permeates all our lives is the destruction of our inner spiritual temple. Our body is the temple of the living God, and we have polluted it with animal food, alcoholic drinks, and immoral living. We have corrupted our minds with evil thoughts toward others and with lust and greed. We are out of touch with the inner creative power and have allowed our spiritual life to atrophy.

By our own neglect and indulgence, we are exiled from the inner regions where we can experience oneness with God. Our soul is in exile, led around as it is by the mind and the senses. It is imprisoned in the desires which the mind and senses rush to fulfill. The wailing wall in Jerusalem is a poignant reminder of the total helplessness of the disciple who needs to beg for the Lord's forgiveness and mercy within. Sitting quietly and concentrating his attention at his inner wailing wall, the third eye, the disciple begs and pleads for spiritual union. Dresner explains:

We live our lives in a broken universe. And this is the deepest meaning of exile, not only an exile of the body, a physical exile, but an exile of the soul, a spiritual exile.<sup>11</sup>

"Next year in Jerusalem" is the refrain often repeated by those who believe that God created this one particular land as their holy retreat, which God promised to them as their heritage—"that thou mayest go in and possess the good land which the Lord swore unto thy fathers" (*Deuteronomy 6:18*). But no physical country or land is holy; once again, this is a metaphor for the holy land that is within us all, at the eye center. As the Bible says, "Go in and possess the good land." Philo of Alexandria wrote:

The city of God is called by the Hebrews Jerusalem and its name when translated is "vision of peace." Therefore do not seek the city of the Existent in earthly latitudes for it is not constructed of wood or stone, but in a soul without war, whose sight is keen, which has set before it as its goal the contemplative and peaceful life.<sup>12</sup>

To understand God's covenant with Abraham as simply a promise of physical land is to limit God's love and mercy. God's legacy is far more glorious than this mundane earth. Through the covenant, he has promised to take his "children," his marked souls, to the higher spiritual regions. How unfortunate that God's children enter into conflict with one another over worldly land, when their heritage, their destiny, is the same—God himself. The "promised land" is within every human being, and is not limited by borders, boundaries, or acreage. There is enough room in the Lord's lap for everyone.

It is obvious that we all will die one day, however pleasant our worldly surroundings may be. God's mercy and love are beyond space and time. Where the soul goes after death is of more permanent importance than its temporary physical circumstances.

By going on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, we might experience uplift and satisfaction from knowing that we have obeyed the dictates of religious custom and tradition, but spiritual self-realization is something else. To go within to the holy of holies—the highest spiritual regions—only that will bring soul liberation. That is the purpose of life.

The object of our spiritual search is to merge our consciousness with the immanent Sound or Divine Power that resounds within all human beings. This power is the heritage of all mankind; it is within each and every human body.<sup>13</sup>

The covenant of the holy land is a symbol of God's mercy and love. He has implanted within us the desire to return to him, which is symbolized by our yearning for Jerusalem. The way to realize our divine purpose, to tap into the source of the divine power, is in the hands of the mystics and prophets whom the Lord has sent in every generation as guides and teachers. We must seek out a true spiritual master who can lead us within, to that holy land within our own body.

## Study of Scripture

True mystics show us how to remove the coverings that obscure our soul and prevent us from realizing its brilliance; they teach us how to join our soul currents to the music of the divine Name. The prophets of the Bible urged and exhorted their disciples to praise and practice the inner Name. However, although the Bible tells us of the necessity and benefits of devotion to the Name, it does not embody the Name, nor does it actually teach us what that Name practice is. We cannot merge into the Lord or Name by reading or studying the Bible. The experience of the holy Name of God becomes a reality only through the practice taught by the living mystic, prophet, or master. Study of Torah—the Bible—so highly regarded in Judaism, teaches us of the existence of the divine reality and instills in us the longing and devotion to discover it within ourselves, but it cannot fill us with the bliss and purity that come from actually experiencing the holy Name—tasting the Nectar, hearing the voice of God.

Theoretical knowledge of a subject can never take the place of actual experience. A sick person cannot be cured by reading a medical book. However, someone who takes medicine prescribed by a doctor and prepared by a pharmacist can be cured. A cookbook gives recipes for delicious dishes.



However, just by reading a cookbook a hungry person cannot be satisfied.

By the same token, a railway timetable gives the schedule for train transportation to various cities. It lists the number of stops, the fare, and other details. However, the traveler cannot reach his destination by reading the timetable. He has to actually purchase a ticket, board the train, ride the train for the required number of hours, and eventually reach his destination.

Reading scriptures cannot give us God-realization. The scriptures tell us that we can indeed realize God while we are living in this human body, but they counsel us to seek out a true master and learn the method of God-realization from him.

The Indian saint Kabir says: "Learning makes you in all truth a heartless stone; love of God is not born of books." The Buddhist text *Dhammapada* says: "What does a spoon know about the taste of the delicious food it conveys?"<sup>14</sup> In *Ecclesiastes*, the king Koheleth describes the futility of study and book knowledge:

And besides that Koheleth was wise, he also taught the people knowledge; yea, he pondered, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs. Koheleth sought to find out words of delight, and that which was written uprightly, even words of truth.

The words of the wise are as goods, and as nails well fastened are those that are composed in collections; they are given from one shepherd. And furthermore, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

The end of the matter, all having been heard: fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole man.

*ECCLESIASTES 12:9-13*

Koheleth says that, ultimately, study is to no avail. The only thing to do is to fear God and obey him; in other words, follow his true teachings, which lead to self- and God-realization, and thus become whole—the whole man. Mere study of the texts of the Torah, Talmud, and Kabbalah, therefore, without devotion and Name practice, whether done during day or night, winter or summer, weekday or Sabbath, is futile as it does not lead to personal experience of God.

Many passages in the Bible enjoin remembrance of God's Word and praise for his Name, and this is often interpreted as a reference to study and repetition of the written Torah. However, if we interpret the word *Torah* at its highest level—the teaching or path of God, the universal principle or law—then we will understand that the highest and deepest remembrance is the remembrance of the inner Name of God through inner meditation. Study and repetition of written scriptures alone will be of no practical help to the true seeker of spiritual union.

The Bible is a record of the experiences of the prophets, mystics, masters, seers, and sages; it recounts their struggles and their quest for God-realization. Often they explain their teachings in parables, as there are no words to describe the actual experiences. But if we only read these records and do not try to take the same journey, then we are not really heeding the words of our great prophets and patriarchs, nor are we fulfilling the purpose of human life.

## Prayer

One of the main motives for prayer is to petition God to forgive our sins. And sin, according to the mystics, is what separates us from the Lord. Our sins are those actions that we have performed that are contrary to the law of love. If we recognize

the fact that we have reincarnated on this earth numerous times, we will realize that we have not only sinned in this life, but in all our previous lives as well. We cannot possibly remember all these sins, yet we are carrying their burden on our soul. How can we obtain God's forgiveness when we don't even know, specifically, what to ask forgiveness for?

We feel moved to pray to God, to beg him for compassion. He is our merciful Father, *Av ha-rahamim*, as he is called in the Jewish prayers—*Avinu Malkenu*, our father, our King. What kind of prayer will allow us to repent for all these actions, these sins that separate us from our Father? What will invoke his mercy and grace?

Mystics teach that meditation is the most effective prayer for forgiveness. In meditation, we don't need to know intellectually about the sins we have committed that separate us from the Lord. Meditation is a direct means of communicating with God; it opens our hearts to receive his love and grace. Meditation removes pride and anger and fills us with humility. Thus meditation is a very effective way of praying to our divine Father to forgive us for those sins which bind us to the creation and keep us from merging in him.

External prayer and ritual, which in all contemporary religions is the primary means of petitioning God's forgiveness and worshipping him, is far less effective than inner meditation. Outward, set prayers are of little help in our quest for God-realization. Maharaj Charan Singh explains:

There's no set prayer which you can repeat four times a day or five times a day. No language is required, no words are required in prayer. Prayer is a language of love from the heart to the Father, and nobody exists then between you and the Father. You're not conscious of the world when you



pray to him. He exists and you exist. That is real prayer, and that is only possible at the time of meditation when we try to forget all that we are and where we are.<sup>15</sup>

The Lord does not need us to call loudly. He can hear even the subtlest thought. Nor is there any need to go to a temple or synagogue to pray. All that is necessary is an inner urge. Any place is holy where the Lord is remembered; thus all places are fit for prayer. The body is the temple where the Lord resides. The masters advise us to find a quiet place where we can concentrate undisturbed within ourselves, as concentration is essential for effective meditation.

Sarmad never shrank from reminding the people of the futility of formal worship in a physical building designated as a house of the Lord. He said that the Ka'aba, the mosque, and the Hindu temple all have one thing in common—darkness. Sarmad invited his followers to accompany him to the garden of the inner regions, where the eternal light shines for everyone and where all opposites are united.

Only darkness reigns  
In Ka'aba, mosque, and temple, equally.  
Come thou into my garden; then wilt thou see  
The white blaze of the light of Unity.  
Look well: Beloved, lover, rose, and thorn are one!<sup>16</sup>

The inclination toward prayer is a natural feeling, an answer to a universal need. When we are faced with troubles in life, we automatically turn to a being higher than ourselves and seek strength from him. When we attune ourselves to God, then our soul—which is of his essence—draws strength from him. The Lord does not change the destiny that is ahead of us, but by praying to him, our attitude is changed.

Inward heartfelt prayer that springs from spontaneous yearning and devotion, although it is not of the same level as meditation, can also benefit us. We gain strong willpower by focusing our attention and praying sincerely, for in this way we clear our minds and understand what we really desire. Thus we also acquire strength and courage to face our destiny.

By recognizing that we are subordinate to the Lord and dependent on him as the source of our strength, we become humble. Humility makes us receptive to his grace, and we feel uplifted and freed of the troubles that beset us.

The saints urge their disciples to pray for the courage to accept whatever comes to them and see it as the Lord's will, and not to petition God for a change in destiny or for specific favors. They explain that from our perspective we cannot see the whole picture. We do not know the beginning and end of things the way the Lord does. Our desires affect the whole world, yet we cannot see beyond ourselves and our immediate needs. What we think would be good for us might harm another, and the same God is Lord of all of us. The saints advise us to make the effort to improve our situation if we can, and pray to the Lord for the courage to meet the events of life. Then we will face life from a different perspective.

In Judaism, the true attitude to prayer can be summed up in the biblical passage, "Love the Lord your God, and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul" (*Deuteronomy 11:13*). The Jewish mystics understood meditation to be the service of the heart enjoined by God in this passage.<sup>17</sup>

The Jewish practice of *tefillin* can be understood as an outward expression of this inner service of the heart. As discussed earlier, the tefillin, or phylacteries, are two small leather boxes containing biblical scrolls.\* During the morning prayers,

\* Exodus 13:1–10; Exodus 13:11–16; Deuteronomy 6:4–9; Deuteronomy 11:13–21.

one of the boxes is strapped on the head and hung on the middle of the forehead; the other is strapped on the inside of the left arm, so that it is held close to the heart during prayer. Pious Jews put on the tefillin during prayer in order to fulfill the biblical commandment:

Therefore shall ye lay up these My words in your heart and in your soul; and ye shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes. And ye shall teach them to your children, talking of them, when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt write them upon the door-posts of thy house, and upon thy gates.

*DEUTERONOMY 11:18-20*

To a traveler on the mystic journey, this passage has a deep inner meaning. God commands his loyal followers to ever remember his words, to keep them in their heart and soul. He is not telling them to remember some outer words, but the inner, unpronounceable Word or Name and the mystic practice of uniting with it through remembrance and repetition. Quite beautifully, the author of the Bible tells us that all our actions should be guided by this teaching. He says: "Ye shall bind them for a sign upon your hand." Then he says: "They shall be for frontlets between your eyes." This means that we should always be conscious of this inner Word or divine reality. Between our eyes is the third eye, the point of mystic focus where the inner Word is always resounding and giving us life. We should always be conscious of its presence.

The disciple is told to keep the Word in his heart and in his soul at all times (while walking, sitting, sleeping, upon awakening), and to teach his children its importance. The practice of



the inner Word or Name should become second nature, a part of the individual's very being, like a mark on his hand.

The practice of putting a *mezuzah* on the doorpost of the house is another symbol for the inner practice of God's remembrance.\* The doorpost of the house and the gate are common mystic metaphors for the third eye, which is where the mystic collects his attention before entering the inner regions—the house or temple of God.

Like all seekers of eternal truth and reality, Jewish mystics have always valued inward prayer and meditation over formal prayers and rituals. The Jewish Sufis of Egypt and Spain, for example, clearly wrote about the importance of meditation in experiencing divine bliss, and the uselessness of external superficial worship or scriptural reading.<sup>18</sup>

In eighteenth-century Jerusalem, there was a school of Jewish mystics named Bet El (house of God). This school was headed by a Yemenite kabbalist named Shalom Sharabi, and they were called *mekhavanim*, meaning those who concentrate. The group was known to have practiced some form of meditation. In place of outward prayer "came the insistence on the living of a pure and holy life, underlying which was a joy as sincere as it was silent; a silence which was helpful and productive; a brotherly love. There was no pilgrimage to graves, no use of amulets."<sup>19</sup> The description of this Bet El community is similar to Philo's description of a first-century sect he called the Therapeutae whose members devoted their lives to contemplation and self-control.

The Hasidim of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Eastern Europe valued the devotion of the simple people who

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\* *Mezuzah*: a small piece of parchment on which the biblical passages from Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and 11:13–21 are inscribed. It is kept in a small case and attached to the doorposts of the Jewish home.

prayed without words but with longing and love, over formal prayer and the study of scripture. The Hasidim called this fervent devotion *devekut*, cleaving or attachment to God. It is similar to what many mystics call the inward prayer that arises spontaneously from the heart. The disciple opens his heart to God and "becomes the recipient of a fresh influx of divine energy from the divine realm."<sup>20</sup>

Martin Buber, the twentieth century philosopher, wrote eloquently about the Hasidim and their emphasis on inward devotion:

No prayer is stronger in grace and penetrates in more direct flight through all the worlds of heaven than that of the simple man who does not know anything to say and only knows to offer God the unbroken promptings of his heart. God receives them as a king receives the singing of a nightingale in his gardens at night, a singing that sounds sweeter to him than the homage of the princes in his throne room.<sup>21</sup>

Buber brings a well-known Hasidic parable to illustrate this point. A villager in the prayer house of the Ba'al Shem Tov brought his son to pray on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*). The young man was quite dull intellectually and couldn't read. He normally tended sheep and cattle, and brought his shepherd's whistle with him in his pocket. Several times during the prayers, when he felt especially moved, his soul desired to play on the whistle. He begged his father for permission but his father forbade him to do so. The legend takes on a vivid shape and color as the prayers themselves are personified, hovering and striding among the people in the prayer hall. Finally, Buber recounts:

The great confession\* returned for the last time and, before the evening descended and God judged, lay yet once more before the ark of the Lord, its forehead on the floor and its hands extended. Then the boy could no longer suppress his ecstasy; he tore the whistle from his pocket and let its voice powerfully resound. All stood startled and bewildered. But the Ba'al Shem raised himself above them and spoke, "The judgment is suspended, and wrath is dispelled from the face of the earth."<sup>22</sup>

This story illustrates the power and importance of heartfelt devotion when we pray. We need to turn our mind and soul inwards. Like the child, we need to lose consciousness of others and forget our individual sense of self. We need to transform our time of prayer into a sacred period of communion between our innermost being and the Lord. As Maharaj Charan Singh said:

They [saints] tell us the real art of praying to the Father. They put us on the path, they tell us how to withdraw our consciousness to the eye center, and how to attach to that Spirit; and how with the help of that Spirit we have to make progress through those regions, to make spiritual progress within, and then come back to the level of the Father. That is real prayer. Prayer doesn't mean asking the Father, or repeating some set words, which we see being done practically everywhere. So prayer should be of the heart. Prayer is attending to your meditation.

So that meditation provokes the grace of the Lord to forgive us [for] what stands between us and the Father, and that is repentance. To attend to meditation is to repent for

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\* The great confession is the most important prayer on the Day of Atonement.



what keeps us condemned in this creation, to repent for our sins which we have been collecting in our previous lives. That is repenting; repenting is nothing but attending to our meditation, because we do not know for what we are suffering, we have forgotten what we have done in the past. So we can only repent when we know for what we are suffering, what we are being punished for. Since we do not know, and since the mind is the one who has collected all those karmas, so repentance is to remove all those wrappings from the mind, to remove all those coverings from the mind, to burn all the dross which we have been collecting from birth to birth, from ages to ages. That is real repentance, and that only meditation helps; there is no other prayer but meditation. Meditation is a real prayer to the Father. That is a real knocking at the door of the Father, to forgive us [for] whatever may be standing between us and the Father.<sup>23</sup>



## The Way of Life

To follow a spiritual path means a complete transformation of one's way of life. While true spiritual masters teach their disciples a system of meditation by which they can unite their souls with God, they emphasize that the hours spent sitting in meditation cannot be divorced from the rest of a person's day. The masters say that one's whole life must be imbued with the spirit of meditation—that meditation is not an activity done in the isolation of an ivory tower every morning, followed by a daily life encrusted with worldly priorities. Meditation means living a life saturated with love, with the light of God. There can be no separation between meditation and the other hours of one's life.

Ultimately, as one progresses in meditation, the masters teach, all the positive human virtues will manifest themselves automatically. Meditation purifies us from within, from our core, and rids us of the negative qualities of lust, anger, greed, attachment, and ego. As we progress on the inner path, we will develop the virtues of chastity rather than lust, forgiveness

rather than anger, detachment rather than attachment, generosity rather than greed, calmness rather than agitation, obedience and humility rather than ego.

However, even before a disciple has actually made inner progress, the master advises him to imbue his daily activities with the atmosphere of meditation by living a spiritual way of life. This means accepting and adhering to specific standards of morality. Living a moral and ethical life builds a solid, positive foundation for the disciple's inner progress in meditation. As Maharaj Charan Singh explains:

We live in the atmosphere which we build by meditation for the whole day. We don't forget meditation even in a dream, even in our worldly activities, and we try to deal with people in the light of that meditation. Our dealings should be straight, in fact our whole way of life should be straight. That is real meditation. Merely closing ourselves in a room for a couple of hours and then forgetting the path for the rest of the day is not real meditation. Its effect should be with us all the time. It is a very hard struggle, but we have to retain the atmosphere that we build in meditation.<sup>1</sup>

The focus and intention of Judaism has always been to create a completely hallowed, religion-centered existence. In biblical times, the Ten Commandments established the ethical and moral basis for the spiritual life; also included in the Hebrew Bible are many other mitzvot, commandments relating to daily behavior. The scope of the spiritual way of life as taught by the prophets of the Bible is delineated in this passage:

And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart



and with all thy soul; to keep for thy good the commandments of the Lord, and His statutes, which I command thee this day.

*DEUTERONOMY 10:12-13*

This passage is an all-embracing description of the way of life God requires—fearing him, walking in his ways, loving him, and serving him with all one's being. This is the behavior required of a disciple of any mystic tradition. Fearing the Lord and being in awe of him implies a true understanding of his greatness and the individual human being's insignificance. The fear is born of wonder and love and of the desire never to displease.

Walking in God's ways means following a way of life guided by love for him—it includes obedience and self-discipline, so that his ways—our spiritual nature—dominate our mind, while our worldly ways and nature are sublimated. Serving the Lord includes the service of meditation and remembrance, as well as all other activities that impart the spirit of humility and service rather than selfishness.

In "Ethics of the Fathers," written during the talmudic period, we read of the importance of proper conduct of life on this worldly plane as preparation for the inner spiritual life:

Rabbi Jacob said: This world is like a vestibule before the world to come. Prepare yourself in the vestibule so that you may enter into the main chamber.<sup>2</sup>

Entry into the main chamber—the divine realm—is the result of great effort in meditation and living properly in this world. The "world to come," a phrase often taken to mean life after death, mystically refers to the *hekhalot*, the palaces or mansions—the inner spiritual regions.

In Hasidism, the goal of life was described as *devekut*—cleaving or attachment to God and ultimately union with him. The means to achieve this lofty spiritual level was to raise the profane daily life to the level of the holy. Hasidism taught that “there is no area of life in which God cannot be served, that there is no final division between the holy and profane.”<sup>3</sup> Instead of allowing his spiritual side to become immersed in the profane or worldly realms, the hasid was enjoined to raise his everyday actions to a spiritual level. At every moment, he could serve God—even in the way he ate, spoke, or engaged in commerce.

Rabbi Menahem Mendel of eighteenth-century Vitebsk, Poland, discusses the attainment of *devekut* through self-sacrifice and the relinquishing of worldly attachments:

There can only be attachment when everything that separates has been removed. The Ba'al Shem gave this illustration. When two pieces of silver are to be soldered together it is only possible to do so after the silver itself has first been scraped clean at the place where they are to be joined if the join is to take adequately. If there is tarnish or any other dividing matter on the silver, the join is bound to be ineffective.... Attachment to God, blessed be He, must follow the same pattern. A man must first scrape away something of his self so that there is no tarnish nor anything else to act as a partition. Then can *devekut* be achieved. But as long as anything else is held onto there can be no real attachment. It is well known that attachment to material things means that there is pleasure in these things. Man's pleasure in having them is so strong that it permits no distraction of the mind from them, his thought being constantly occupied with these things. This applies to every kind of pleasure.<sup>4</sup>

The Ba'al Shem Tov also taught of the need for self-discipline and one-pointed devotion to God:

His thoughts should cleave to the heavenly realm, and he should not eat or drink to excess, nor seek pleasures. He should not concern himself with the affairs of this world but try in all matters to detach himself from the physical, for by centering his attention on this world, he accentuates his material nature. The sages cautioned us, the object of sight is preserved in memory and memory stimulates lust....

He should see himself as belonging to the heavenly realm, and all the people residing in this world should seem as of little importance, for this entire world is like a grain of mustard against the heavenly realm; and it should be all the same to him whether people like or dislike him, for their likes and dislikes are of no consequence. Similarly he is to pay little attention to his bodily lusts which are a continuation of the original temptation with which the serpent tempted man.<sup>5</sup>

The Jewish mystics of sixteenth-century Safed discussed the need to overcome the perversions of the mind. Their description of the perversions is universal:

The worst character traits which impede a person's cleaving to God are the following: pride, anger, impatience, a sorrowful disposition, hatred, envy, lust after bodily pleasures, the desire to dominate, the seeking after honor, the showing off of his good deeds before people. The opposite of these is humility in its extreme form.<sup>6</sup>

Effort has to be made to control the *yetzer ha-ra*, the evil inclination. Without this effort, one cannot progress in medi-



tation. But ultimately, it is the meditation practice itself that will give full control over these negative tendencies. To some extent, a disciple has to abstain from these negative things in order to withdraw to the eye center, but he can escape from them permanently only when his mind is attached to the holy Name within, which will pull him upward. Then the mind will have no inclination to move in a downward direction. Even temptation becomes a thing of the past, for the mind is no longer interested in such activity. The relationship between the inner spiritual practice and the disciple's outer way of life cannot be overstressed. When both are practiced, a person's whole life becomes devotion to the Lord.

Some Western theologians misunderstand the relationship between mysticism and ethics, and see opposition where in reality there is interdependence. That is because mystic literature generally stresses the need to remove oneself from the concerns of the world and attend to inner meditation. However, in order to meditate, in order to follow the spiritual path within, the disciple must adhere to ethical and moral principles. They are the prerequisite and foundation of true mystic practice, and all masters of the highest order require their disciples to obey them.\* If you read about a master who does not insist on morality or ethical behavior on the part of his disciples, you can be sure he is not a true mystic.

## Four Basic Principles

There are four basic principles according to which a serious spiritual seeker needs to live his or her life. These principles

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\* For further discussion of this subject, see the excellent section "Mysticism and Ethics" in J. R. Puri, *Guru Nanak: His Mystic Teachings* (Dera Baba Jaimal Singh, India: Radha Soami Satsang Beas, 1982).

serve as the anchor, the foundation, for the spiritual life. Without such a commitment, one cannot expect to make any kind of progress. However, if we follow these four principles, we will create the atmosphere of meditation within us the whole day, and everything we do will be suffused with spirituality, love, and devotion to God. Mystics of all periods and cultures have required the same disciplined way of life of their followers, but when they pass away and their living lineage dies out, their teachings become diluted, corrupted, or obscured.

These principles help the serious seeker of spirituality by eliminating negative behavior patterns, which inevitably lead the mind downward and outward. Since the goal of the spiritual life is to bring the attention inward and upward, to focus on the spiritual essence, the Word or divine presence within, it is important to channel our energy and thoughts in the direction of the spiritual and not to dissipate ourselves in worldly or negative pursuits.

Adhering to these principles implies a life of self-discipline and self-control, though not asceticism. They are not rituals, austerities, or otherwise exercises in self-denial. They are necessary limitations on our expenditure of energy in the world. Like the Ten Commandments, they provide a structure and foundation for the spiritual life.

In order for our soul to merge back in the Father, we need to decrease our karmic burden, which keeps us tied to the world. We may recall that it is to settle our karmas, our never-ending account of give and take with the world, that we come again and again into a material form. We need to release the sparks of light which are imprisoned in husks of gross matter. Living by these four principles helps us minimize the accrual of new karmas. These are the four principles:

- Adherence to a lacto-vegetarian diet,
- Abstention from alcoholic drinks, narcotics, and other mind-altering drugs,
- Living a clean, moral, and honest life,
- Meditation for two and one-half hours each day according to the instructions given by the master at the time of initiation.

### *THE VEGETARIAN DIET*

Killing of animals, whether for food or sport, cannot be justified. There is a great deal of karmic responsibility incurred in killing. In order for our soul to make the journey back to God, we must try to live in the world without adding to our heavy burden of karmas. Maharaj Charan Singh explains the vegetarian diet clearly and forcefully. He says:

We must abstain completely from taking meat diet of any kind, for one day we will be called upon to pay for it dearly. What we kill today as our food will one day kill us in return, for this entire world is nothing but a crop of our karmas. "As ye sow, so shall ye reap." This law is inviolable and unchanging. Our load is already heavy and burdensome. We should stop adding to the burden that we are already doomed to bear.<sup>7</sup>

It is true that even on a vegetarian diet we are taking life. Vegetables and fruits are alive, yet we eat them. We are taking life just by breathing air and drinking water, for there are many microorganisms that we cannot see but whose life is extinguished by our contact with them. We cannot live in this world without killing; life subsists on life. However, the penalty for killing lower life forms like vegetables is much less than for



killing fish or animals. The karma accrued from killing plant life is easily paid off with daily meditation.

When we kill animals, the pain they feel can hardly be described. Anyone who has visited a slaughterhouse can attest to its horror. Animals feel pain and pleasure as we do. The Lord, who is merciful and compassionate, could never condone the infliction of such pain on his creatures. The law of karma will require us to repay this heavy karmic debt of killing.

Vegetarianism is not new to Judaism. In the Bible, God clearly instructs man to eat a vegetarian diet:

And God said: "Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed—to you it shall be for food; and to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is a living soul, [I have given] every green herb for food."

GENESIS 1:29–30

In explaining this passage, Rashi, the biblical commentator of ninth-century France, wrote: "God did not permit Adam and his wife to kill a creature and to eat its flesh. Only every green herb shall they all eat together."<sup>8</sup>

Despite this clear biblical commandment, the eating of meat was rationalized and justified in many sectors of Judaism. Some scholars maintained that, from the time of Noah, God permitted meat-eating because the people were not sufficiently evolved to follow a vegetarian diet. As a compromise, perhaps, or in answer to a gnawing conscience, Judaism developed the practice of *kashrut*, of clean and unclean types of meat and fish, and created a separation between meat and non-meat foods.

Although the rabbis based this practice on their understanding of certain biblical sources, it does not free us from the karmic responsibility of taking life. In fact, many Jewish scholars and mystics saw the laws of kashrut as a reminder that man was meant to be vegetarian and would eventually return to vegetarianism in the time of the Messiah.

There have been many Jewish mystics who kept to a vegetarian diet. First-century Philo of Alexandria, in his treatise, *The Contemplative Life*, wrote about a vegetarian sect of Jews called the Therapeutae:

The table too is kept clear of animal flesh, but on it are loaves of bread for nourishment, with salt as a seasoning, to which hyssop is sometimes added as a relish to satisfy the fastidious.<sup>9</sup>

Moses Maimonides, the great Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages, also advocated a vegetarian diet. He wrote that meat is prohibited because "living creatures possess a certain spiritual superiority resembling in some ways the souls of rational beings."<sup>10</sup>

The sixteenth-century followers of Rabbi Isaac Luria of Safed and Luzzatto's eighteenth-century followers in Italy did not eat meat or even kill insects.<sup>11</sup> In recent times, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, chief rabbi of Palestine, advocated vegetarianism. He wrote a treatise called *A Vision of Vegetarianism and Peace*, in which he stated his belief

that God wants people to be vegetarian and that meat was permitted as a concession to people's weakness. He [Kook] thought that the many prohibitions related to the slaughtering and eating of meat were meant as a scolding and reminder that people should have reverence for life; this would



eventually bring people back to vegetarianism in the days of the Messiah.<sup>12</sup>

Many illustrious rabbis of contemporary Israel have been vegetarians. For example, Rabbi David Cohen, the chief disciple of Rabbi Kook, was a vegetarian, as were his two children, one of whom became the chief rabbi of Haifa, the other the wife of the Ashkenazic\* chief rabbi of Israel, who was also a vegetarian.

Another well-known Jewish vegetarian was Isaac Bashevis Singer, the contemporary Nobel-prize winning writer and chronicler of pre-World War II Eastern European Jewish culture. His short story "The Slaughterer" eloquently portrays the anguish and guilt of a young man who serves as the ritual slaughterer for his community.<sup>†</sup> Singer reflects on his own practice of vegetarianism:

The longer I am a vegetarian, the more I feel how wrong it is to kill animals and eat them. I think that eating meat or fish is a denial of all ideals, even of all religions. How can we pray to God for mercy if we ourselves have no mercy? How can we speak of right and justice if we take an innocent creature and shed its blood? Every kind of killing seems to me savage and I find no justification for it.

I believe that the religion of the future will be based on vegetarianism. As long as people will shed the blood of innocent creatures there can be no peace, no liberty, no

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\* Ashkenazic Jews are those descended from Jews who had settled in Germany and Eastern Europe. Sephardic Jews are those of Spanish or oriental descent. Because many of their customs and rituals differ, there are two separate rabbinical authorities in Israel.

† The story is reproduced in the book *Life is Fair*, by Brian Hines, published by Radha Soami Satsang Beas in 1999.



harmony between people. Slaughter and justice cannot dwell together.<sup>13</sup>

Elsewhere, Singer has said:

Early in my life I came to the conclusion that there was no basic difference between man and animals. If a man has the heart to cut the throat of a chicken or a calf, there's no reason he should not be willing to cut the throat of a man.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the fact that vegetarianism has not been a mainstream dietary practice in Judaism, consciousness of the importance of compassion for animals, summarized in the Hebrew phrase *tsa'ar ba-a'lay hayyim* (not to cause sorrow to any living creature) is integral to the Jewish tradition. The motivation behind many Jewish laws in the Bible was to avoid causing pain to animals. For example: "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth the corn" (*Deuteronomy 25:4*) and "Thou shalt not plow with an ox and an ass together" (*Deuteronomy 22:10*). Eating prior to providing for one's animals was forbidden, as was hunting for sport. This sensitivity to the life spirit or soul of the animals suggests an awareness of the sanctity of animal life as well as of human life. This awareness ultimately leads to the vegetarian diet.

Jewish ritual slaughter, as in Islam, requires killing the animal with one stroke. This was motivated by the desire to lessen the animal's suffering. But it would be foolish to believe that any type of slaughter could eliminate the great pain felt by animals when they are killed; all creatures feel terrible fear and pain on having their lives taken from them. It would be self-delusion to think that any type of slaughter is compassionate.

Vegetarianism was practiced to some extent in almost all religions of the world, even if the contemporary followers of these religions are ignorant of this. Among Christians, the Seventh Day Adventists have maintained the vegetarian diet. The Hindu and Jain religions of India strongly advocate vegetarianism, as did the original teachings of the Buddha. Even Muslims, who are traditionally meat-eating, give up meat on certain holy occasions, implying an awareness of the desirability of vegetarianism for a spiritual life.

Maharaj Charan Singh has said that all true saints have been vegetarian and have taught their disciples to follow the vegetarian diet:

No true saint, of any age or country, ever allowed his disciples to eat flesh. After the passing of time, their followers, who remained disciples in name only, started taking the prohibited food and alcoholic drink.<sup>15</sup>

#### *ABSTENTION FROM ALCOHOL AND DRUGS*

All true mystics speak out strongly against the use of alcohol, narcotics, and other consciousness-altering drugs. Maharaj Charan Singh says:

They are verily the worst of poisons. They gratify only for a moment. The end is constant remorse and disease. Their use so clouds our vision and so warps our sense of values that we fail to differentiate between good and bad, fair and foul, right and wrong. The result is that we commit deeds that land us in insuperable difficulties. Alcoholic drinks are truly the mother of all vices. They lead us to evil actions. A moment's pleasure unmistakably weaves a long net of pain and suffering.<sup>16</sup>

There are several places in the Bible where God counsels abstinence from alcohol for those individuals who wish to dedicate their lives to him. When Aaron, Moses' brother and high priest of the Israelites, wishes to renew the holiness of the sacred tent, God commands him: "Drink no wine nor strong drink, thou, nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the tent of meeting, that ye die not" (*Leviticus 10:9*). Elsewhere, the future mother of Samson is instructed by God not to drink "wine nor strong drink, and eat not any unclean thing," for she is about to conceive a son who will be a Nazirite—a type of Jewish ascetic devoted to God (*Judges 13:2–24*).

Drugs and alcohol cloud our minds and direct our attention to the level of the senses. If we indulge in these substances, we will inevitably create more karmas which will bind us to this world. Alcohol and drugs also weaken our willpower and open us up to a spectrum of influences.

Since the 1960s in many circles of Western society, drugs have been looked upon as a source of spiritual enlightenment. However, as Maharaj Charan Singh made very clear, this is misguided, erroneous thinking. We can gain nothing positive from these drugs—only pain and suffering.

There is a difference between spiritual experience and the hallucinations one gets from drugs. Spiritual experience is gained from conscious meditation, which is hard work. It would be very convenient if spirituality could be gained by taking a pill or injection, but that is not the case. It requires a life of dedication and self-sacrifice as well as the struggle of mental concentration.

Experiences gained through drugs are different from one another because these experiences are projections of the mind, and our minds differ. But the spiritual experiences of mystics do not differ from one another; they are visual and auditory impressions of an actual journey taken by the soul when it enters



the inner regions. And all souls take the same journey through the same inner regions back to the Lord, although the descriptions may vary in emphasis.

We have control over our spiritual experiences. In meditation practice, we learn to take the soul into the inner regions at will and return to the body at will. But with drugs there is no control; when the drug's effect wears off, we cannot freely enter the state experienced under its influence.

Spiritual experiences help us overcome our lower tendencies and become better people. We start to control our senses. But with drugs, we remain slaves of our senses and may even lose control of our minds. Drug experiences thus have nothing in common with true spiritual experience.

#### *A CLEAN, MORAL, AND HONEST LIFE*

The principle of morality is multi-faceted, affecting every aspect of our lives. One of its specific requirements is to control and limit sexual activity within the confines of legal marriage. In order to embark and then proceed on the spiritual path, we must develop "a sound moral personality." As Maharaj Charan Singh explains:

One must be chaste both in mind and body. For a husband, womanhood ends with his wife; and for a wife, her husband represents the entire manhood. Both of them stand on a rocklike and unshakeable foundation of this moral principle. The disciple must lead a simple, straightforward and pure life, setting a noble example to others. Practice is better than precept.<sup>17</sup>

True mystics always emphasize the importance of a moral life. The common practice in the West, of couples living together without legal marriage, is not acceptable for disciples

on the higher spiritual path. We cannot expect to make spiritual progress if we create intimate entanglements with many people. Family life circumscribes our interactions and creates the atmosphere of moral purity and commitment. Since there are certain natural urges for intimacy, companionship, family, and home that are satisfied through marriage, the mystics generally advise people to get married and live a householder's life rather than trying to live the life of an ascetic.

An upright moral life incorporates all the ethical and moral principles included in the Ten Commandments and other religious codes. By adherence to these principles while practicing meditation we cease adding to the karmas we have already accumulated. The soul is thus gradually freed to return to its true home. The practice of morality cleans the vessel of our body and mind; meditation fills it with love of God. These principles are the foundation of all religions and societies. In fact, the spiritual path cannot be traveled if the disciple does not conduct himself or herself properly.

Thirteenth-century Obadyah Maimonides used the allegory of the pool of water to describe the relationship between the outer and inner cleansing—morality and meditation:

Imagine a certain person who, possessing a very old pool, desireth to cleanse the latter of dirt and mire and to restore it.... He must therefore ensure that the pool cease to be polluted, occupying himself with its gradual cleansing until it is completely purified. Only after having ascertained that there remaineth therein no impurity, can the *living waters that go forth from the House of God* flow therein.\* ... The foregoing is an allegory alluding to the purification, cleansing and purging of the heart, the correction of its defects and failings and its being emptied of all but the Most High.<sup>18</sup>

\* A reference to the divine holy Name or Word. Italics in original.



A similar image is used by the Eastern masters. They say that we must clean our hearts before the Lord can enter, as even a dog will not sleep in a filthy place. They also say that if our "cup" is turned upside down, it cannot be filled. Similarly, if we are filled with desire, attachment, ego, and the other perversions, there will be no room for the Lord to enter.

Obadyah emphasized repeatedly the importance of adequate moral preparation before starting on the spiritual path:

The practice of the precepts is intended as a preliminary moral discipline for man with a view to his being granted the true Torah which is intended for him. Therefore strive in order to acquire those preparatives and discard thy reprehensible traits; "they shall not dwell in thy land, lest they make thee sin against Me ... for they will be a snare unto thee" (*Exodus 23:33*).<sup>19</sup>

The saints teach us to live a normal life as responsible members of society, sincerely performing our duties to our family, employer, and country. We have to earn our livelihood honestly and decently. We should not live off the charity or goodwill of others. We cannot cheat, steal, or otherwise deceive our fellow human beings and then expect to be capable of sitting in meditation. Our mind would be too disturbed and scattered. Thus, if we live in harmony with ourselves and others by following these three principles, meditation becomes possible.

### MEDITATION

At the time of initiation, the spiritual master imparts the technique of meditation. As discussed earlier, this involves the repetition (*simran*) of the five holy names in order to still the mind, contemplation (*dhyan*) on the form of the master, and sound practice (*bhajan*)—listening for or to the inner sound.



Disciples are advised to gradually establish the habit of regularity and punctuality in meditation. Two and one-half hours is the prescribed length of time—approximately 10 percent of the day. Although 3:00 a.m. is considered the ideal hour for meditation—the time of elixir as the Indian and Persian mystics have called it—any time will do, as long as one can sit still and concentrate undisturbed. The early morning is preferred because then the mind is fresh, free of the day's worldly thoughts, tensions, and disturbances. But all times are appropriate for devotion to God.

In meditation, the master says that we should be like soldiers—we must do our duty at the front. The mind is doing *its* duty—distracting us from our spiritual goal and keeping us attached to the goings-on of the world. We should do our duty and not lay down our weapon—the sword of the divine Name. We cannot expect the master to take on our responsibilities. He is the general. The general instructs his soldiers but does not fight in the infantry.

To concentrate the mind, withdrawing the attention from the world and the body and bringing it to the eye center, is a struggle of years for most disciples—of a lifetime or even several lifetimes. But, the masters emphasize, that is nothing compared to the lifetimes the mind has been roaming about in the world creating attachments on the physical plane.

It is only by obediently sitting in meditation that the disciple can subdue the mind. Even if the mind rebels, one has to sit. It is its nature to rebel. At first we have to fight with the mind in order to sit, but eventually meditation itself will create the desire in us for more meditation.

Practice maketh a man perfect, and regularity and punctuality in meditation slowly but surely stills the roving mind. Just as a constant flow of water wears down even the hardest

of stones, so does constant simran weary the mind's running out. Every second the senses are beguiling the mind, but if we lead the life of a true satsangi we will save ourselves from their snares, begin to enjoy meditation, and succeed in overcoming the obstacle of the mind. The mind is, indeed, the root and cause of all strife and trouble. It sows discord and makes us hanker after material goods.<sup>20</sup>

And when we do make spiritual progress, the saints urge us to be discreet and make no show of the grace we may receive within. Few would appreciate what we have really experienced. Using it to gain attention and respect from others would simply increase our ego and stop the upward and inward progress. The Indian mystic Kabir said:

When you have found the jewel of Nam,  
Keep it tied up most safely in your bundle.  
No one, alas, appreciates its worth,  
And there is no one who desires to buy it;  
The world, O Kabir,  
Is ignorant of its great value.<sup>21</sup>

## Remembrance, Association, and Service

There are other activities that can help to preserve the atmosphere of meditation, to build the love and devotion in which we have to live.

First, the masters suggest that after our daily period of meditation is complete, we should continue with our repetition practice, our remembrance of God, mentally within ourselves at any time during the day when our mind is not otherwise engaged. Often, when we are waiting for a train, washing dishes, or doing some other routine task, our mind is drifting aimlessly,



worrying about problems, creating new desires, or otherwise roaming uncontrolled. The mystics suggest that we put our mind to good use in continued repetition. "Hand to task, mind in the Lord" is a well-known proverb. An additional benefit of continuous remembrance is that we will feel our master's presence with us throughout the day and thus be aware of his protection and grace.

This constant repetition of the inner names is the essence of the biblical commandment recited during the daily prayers:

Therefore shall ye lay up these My words in your heart and in your soul.... And ye shall teach them to your children, talking of them, when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

*DEUTERONOMY 11:18-19*

Mystically, the repetition enjoined in the Bible is the inner remembrance of God's holy Name, not an outer prayer or ritual.

The second aid the mystics give their disciples is what the Indian saints call *satsang*, literally, association with the truth. The real *satsang*, therefore, is when the soul merges into the Supreme Lord, as only he, in his permanence, is true. In effect, however, anything that reminds us of God, the spiritual master, and the true mystic teachings is *satsang*, as these things keep our mind focused on our goal. Sitting in the presence of the master and hearing his discourses is *satsang*; going to group meetings where we are reminded of the master's teachings is also *satsang*. Even the reading of books about the teachings of the saints is a form of *satsang*, as it reminds us of the truth.

The purpose of *satsang* is to build love and devotion for God, to help the disciple adhere to a spiritual way of life and



his or her master's teachings—in short, to gain encouragement in the struggle with the mind and keep up enthusiasm for meditation. Satsang is considered the fence around the crop of meditation. Maharaj Charan Singh explains:

We can read the books, we can mix with good satsangis, we can attend group meetings. We should try to keep that atmosphere of love and devotion around us, in which we have to live. If we go away from this atmosphere, then the mind pulls us back to worldly thoughts. To build that atmosphere is essential for meditation. Maharaj Ji [Maharaj Sawan Singh] used to call this atmosphere of meditation a fence around the crop. Crops can grow without a fence, but there is always a danger of somebody ruining your crop if it has no protection. So we need to protect whatever meditation we do by keeping up that atmosphere of love and devotion around us.<sup>22</sup>

Spiritual seekers need a welcoming and non-judgmental atmosphere where they can ask questions about the spiritual path, satisfying their minds and gaining intellectual conviction that this is indeed the right course for them. Sometimes people traveling the path get assailed by doubts; grief or worry might distract their minds from the goal; sometimes they fall prey to the renewed lure of the world. These are all stages in the strengthening and proving of the disciple. Satsang removes doubts and strengthens the faith of the seeker and disciple alike. Of course, the real satsang is within—hearing the inner sound—the soul meeting its Lord.

The concept of satsang is at the core of Judaism. In the Kabbalah, *K'nesset Yisrael*, the congregation of Israel, is given mystical significance and is identified with the *Shekhinah* (presence) and the *kavod* (glory), both references to the divine

Name or Word of God.<sup>23</sup> In the Bible, the psalmist praises the mystical community:

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is  
For brethren to dwell together in unity!  
It is like the precious oil upon the head,  
Coming down upon the beard ...  
Like the dew of Hermon,  
That cometh down upon the mountains of Zion;  
For there the Lord commanded the blessing,  
Even life for ever.

*PSALMS 133:1-3*

The precious oil and the dew are metaphors for the inner Word, the nectar. Baptism or anointment with oil is a metaphor for initiation. In these passages the psalmist is singing the praises of the community of devotees. They are a means for the holy Name, the Shekhinah, to enter the physical realm.

Group prayer in Judaism is believed to invoke God's grace on the entire people of Israel. Its importance can also probably be traced to an understanding of the need for reinforcement and encouragement of religious belief. Ecclesiastes says:

Two are better than one; because they have a good reward  
for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow;  
but woe to him that is alone when he falleth, and hath not  
another to lift him up.

*ECCLESIASTES 4:9-10*

In advising their disciples, the masters also stress the importance of voluntary service as another way of keeping one's life focused on the spiritual path. The highest type of service



that a disciple can render is service with his soul—meditation and union with the Name, the Word. One can also do service with the mind, which includes reading spiritual books, thinking of the spiritual master and his teachings, continuing the inner repetition practice and remembrance of God while going about one's daily life—in short, any mental activity that keeps a person focused on the teachings and the master, and that inspires the desire for meditation.

Service with the body is another option—physical activity devoted to helping others. People are meant to help one another, according to their ability. In Judaism, the duty of helping others is firmly embedded in the religious and social consciousness. This reflects the true understanding that all people are inextricably linked.

There is an incorrect perception among many in the Western world that the inner spiritual path emphasizes meditation at the cost of helping others. Some critics or scholars think the two approaches are mutually exclusive and contradictory. But all masters of the highest order, East or West, have taught the importance of helping one's fellow human beings. They not only preach this principle, but they demonstrate it through their living example. However, they urge us to keep a balance so we can attend to our primary duty of uniting our soul with the Lord. They do not wish us to get so involved with the problems of others that we lose our balance and then have nothing to offer. The great sage Hillel of antiquity stated this principle, and the need for balance, quite succinctly:

If I am not for myself, who will be?

If I am only for myself, what am I?

If not now, when?<sup>24</sup>



Maharaj Charan Singh counseled:

We must help people in the world. We are born for that purpose. Only humans can be helpful to humans. But we should not be involved so much that we do not have time for our own selves. Keeping our other duties in view, we should try to be helpful to others, according to our means.<sup>25</sup>

Service to others cannot be a substitute for spiritual practice. Our goal is to love and serve God and merge into him. But a natural outgrowth of love for God is love for others; we realize that the same Lord exists in everyone and feel a natural kinship. We therefore wish to help others.

One can also do service with one's money or possessions—this reminds us that material wealth is for us to use but not become attached to, “so that honestly earned money is put to proper use,” as the mystics often say. In Judaism, providing material care for the indigent of the community is a long-standing tradition, which has developed into strong institutional philanthropy. Similarly, in India it is customary that the poor of the community are fed, housed, and often clothed and given medical care through money given in *seva*, or service to the master. Funds or goods donated in *seva* by the disciples are used for the welfare of the community, never personally by a true spiritual master or his family.

All the outer forms of service will eventually lead to the highest type of service—meditation. By serving others in God's Name, we become humble. In serving others, our ego is diminished. Humility is necessary for us to sit before the Lord in meditation. Thus the outer service will eventually lead to meditation.

In Judaism, the longing to serve God is beautifully expressed in the poem “Yedid Nefesh” (Heart's Beloved), which

is recited in some synagogues at the close of the Sabbath. Service of God is linked with receiving his companionship and inner light. This poem reflects the longing to serve God that is felt by the true spiritual lover.

Heart's beloved, merciful Father,  
draw me to your service,  
I yearn for you as the stag yearns for water,  
Let me bow down before your splendor,  
Your friendship is my choicest delight.

Glorious One, light of the world,  
my soul pines for you,  
Heal me by letting your light shine on me,  
Then I shall be strengthened and restored,  
I shall serve you always.

Eternal One, show mercy to Abraham's child,  
How long have I sought you!  
My God, my heart's desire,  
take me into your presence,  
Hide not from me, delay not.

Reveal yourself, O beloved, shelter me,  
Let the earth be radiant with your glory,  
Hasten, O beloved, it is time,  
Take us into your grace, as in days of old.<sup>26</sup>

## Love and Longing

The goal of living a spiritual way of life is to develop love for the Lord. Meditation is a means to that love. Ultimately, that love will carry us to him. Our religion, status, country of birth—

none of these things make any difference to the Lord—only the love and devotion we have been able to develop, only the ability to subdue the mind and concentrate on the divine music within, will bring us to him.

Solomon ibn Gebirol, the medieval Jewish mystic, spoke of the disciple's need for love in order to proceed on the path:

A great ardent love must accompany him who would embark on this pilgrimage. Then he can obtain ecstasy and escape from the bounds of this physical world and reach the height which is for his soul.<sup>28</sup>

In Hasidism, the master was the means of achieving *devekut*—divine love and attachment to God. He was often called the gateway to God:

The zaddik not only brings heaven down to the people; he also acts as a means by which the people rise upward toward heaven. This is accomplished by *devekut*. *Devekut* is one of the key words in hasidic literature, and means the clinging or cleaving of man to God. It is the object of all the commandments and the goal of all spiritual living.<sup>28</sup>

As the disciple treads the path, as love grows within, a great longing for union with the beloved is experienced. Rabbi Schneur Zalman (1745–1813) of Liadi, Poland, founder of the Habad school of Hasidism, wrote of *rinah*, the state of bliss or ecstasy of the soul as it experiences its innate love and longing for its source. This is the stage of *devekut*.

*Rinah* is the revelation of the soul's great yearning, where it longs and pines to attach itself to God, and to include itself in the Infinite Light [the light of Ain-Sof].<sup>29</sup>



The longing for divine union is expressed with similar intensity in the following passage from Psalms:

O God, Thou art my God, earnestly will I seek Thee;  
My soul thirsteth for Thee, my flesh longeth for Thee,  
In a dry and weary land, where no water is.  
So have I looked for Thee in the sanctuary,  
To see Thy power and glory.

PSALMS 63:2,3

*The Song of Songs* of the Bible has long been viewed by Jewish mystics as an allegory in which the bride, the individual devotee, expresses her longing for union with her husband, the beloved, the Lord. The writer, reputed to have been King Solomon of ancient Israel, used the imagery of physical love as a metaphor for spiritual love. The sensual imagery of the *Song of Songs* is also mirrored in the writings of Muslim, Hindu, and Christian mystics.

By night on my bed  
I sought him whom my soul loveth;  
I sought him, but I found him not.  
I will rise now, and go about the city,  
In the streets and in the broad ways,  
I will seek him whom my soul loveth.  
I sought him, but I found him not.  
The watchmen that go about the city found me:  
"Saw ye him whom my soul loveth?"  
Scarce had I passed from them,  
When I found him whom my soul loveth;  
I held him, and would not let him go,  
Until I had brought him into my mother's house,  
And into the chamber of her that conceived me.

SONG OF SONGS 3:1-4

This is a parable of the disciple struggling in meditation. First he struggles but is unfulfilled; he cannot get in touch with the Lord within. He becomes restless and roams about in search of the Lord. When he finds him, he attaches himself to him—this is the state of *devekut*. He goes to his “mother’s house”—his origin, the inner regions—into the “chamber of her that conceived me”—the eternal home, the source and origin of the soul. When the disciple’s soul actually merges into the Lord, he achieves the state the Hasidim called *yihud*, union. The final stage the Hasidim described was *ayin*, nothing, because it is the state where the individual ego has totally merged into the Lord—where the drop merges in the ocean, the moth in the flame—where consciousness of self, of individuality, is lost and the disciple experiences the nothing of selflessness. This is the state of dying while living.

Another passage from *The Song of Songs* expresses the desperation of the seeker obsessed by longing for the beloved:

I opened to my beloved;  
But my beloved had turned away, and was gone.  
My soul failed me when he spoke.  
I sought him, but I could not find him;  
I called him, but he gave me no answer.  
The watchmen that go about the city found me,  
They smote me, they wounded me;  
The keepers of the walls  
took away my mantle from me.  
I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,  
If you find my beloved,  
What will ye tell him?  
That I am love-sick.

SONG OF SONGS 5:6–8

Similar in feeling are the poems of the Indian mystic and saint, Mira Bai. She sings of her suffering:

Dear Lord, come and grant me Your vision;  
I cannot stay alive, away from You.  
Like the lotus without water,  
The night without the moon,  
Is your dear one without You, O Lord.  
In anguish I wander day and night,  
Pangs of separation gnaw at my heart.  
Days drag without hunger,  
Nights without sleep.  
Lips fail to tell the tale of my sorrow.  
What should I say?  
I have no words to convey my longing.

Pray come, quench the fire within my heart.  
You know all, torment me no more;  
Have mercy, O Lord, come and meet me.  
Mira, forever Your slave,  
In love surrenders at Your feet.<sup>30</sup>

In a poetic style typical of Eastern mystics, the psalmist complains that the Lord is hiding his face from him:

How long, O Lord, wilt Thou forget me for ever?  
How long wilt Thou hide Thy face from me?

*PSALMS 13:2*

In the same vein, Jehudah Halevi, a Jewish mystic of the twelfth century, wrote of his longing to see the face of the Lord:



To meet the fountain of the life of truth I run,  
 For I weary of a life of vanity and emptiness.  
 To see the face of my King is mine only aim;  
 I will fear none but him,  
 nor set up any other to be feared.  
 Would that it were mine to see him in a dream!  
 I would sleep an everlasting sleep and never wake.  
 Would that I might behold his face within my heart!  
 Mine eyes would never ask to look beyond.<sup>31</sup>

Bulleh Shah, the eighteenth-century Sufi mystic of the Punjab, expressed his devotion and longing for union with God by using a similar image of the Lord hiding his face from his loving disciple:

His face is a light, the world is its veil.  
 He has concealed himself in the veil,  
 covering his face with its hem....

Guess who has come in disguise—  
 how the Trickster has put on a mask!  
 In the fold of my cloak hides the Thief, friends—  
 to whom shall I complain?  
 To hide and seek and to play tricks—  
 such is your greatness, my Love!<sup>32</sup>

During the course of the spiritual journey, the disciple often experiences periods of dryness, when the Lord seems to have hidden his face from him. The master says that this withdrawal actually increases the love of the disciple for the Lord because it makes him aware of what he is missing. There is a poignant hasidic story which illustrates this phase of spiritual devotion:

Someone once asked the Besht [Ba'al Shem Tov] why it was that sometimes when a man attaches himself to the Lord, in the very middle of his attachment he finds himself suddenly very distant from God. The Besht answered him with a parable: When a father wants to teach his son to walk, what does he do? He takes his son and stands him on the ground in front of him, puts his hands out on either side so that the child does not fall, and the child walks between his father's hands. When the child comes close to where his father is standing, the father withdraws a little so that the child will come further and further. Thus the child learns to walk. So it is with God. When a man burns with religious fervor and cleaves to God, He withdraws from him, so that the man learns how to strengthen himself more and more in his attachment to the divine.<sup>33</sup>

The ultimate union with the Lord, the state of the soul's merging into the highest spiritual regions and dying while living, is the state of God-realization. Among some Jewish mystics this state was called the divine kiss. The *Song of Songs* alludes to communion with God as his kiss: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (*Song of Songs* 1:2,3). In Hasidism this state was called *yihud*, union, and ultimately *ayin*, nothing.

The physical death of the devotees of God was also called God's kiss, as their souls would experience union with the Divine when they died. The Talmud teaches, for example, that the great prophet Moses died by a kiss from God. Kabbalah scholar Adolphe Franck explains:

The death of the righteous is referred to as God's kiss.... This kiss is the union of the soul with the substance from which it springs.<sup>34</sup>

The *Zohar* gives its mystical commentary:

In one of the most mysterious and most exalted parts of heaven there is a palace of love. The most profound mysteries are there; there are all souls well-beloved by the Celestial King, the Holy One, praised be He, together with the holy spirits with whom He unites by kisses of love.<sup>35</sup>

The divine love is universal. It is present within us all, always. It needs only to be awakened. With the grace of a perfect master, we can remove the veils covering our soul. Then the soul, of its own nature, will soar to the Lord. The sparks will merge in the divine light.



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## GLOSSARY

### Abbreviations:

Arab.	—	Arabic
Aram.	—	Aramaic
Gk.	—	Greek
Heb.	—	Hebrew
H/P	—	Hindi / Punjabi
Per.	—	Persian

**Adam Kadmon** (Heb.) Original, or primal Adam. A kabbalistic extension of the figure of Adam in the Bible; the causal being from which the creation was generated; the macrocosm of the individual human being, who is the microcosm.

**Adi Granth** (H/P) The Sikh holy scriptures. Known also as Guru Granth Sahib and Granth Sahib, it consists of spiritual poetry by Guru Nanak and others in his line, and also by Kabir, Ravidas and other Indian mystics. It was collected and compiled by Guru Arjan at the end of the sixteenth century.



**Ain-Sof** (Heb.) Literally, limitless, without end. Term used in the Kabbalah to refer to the Godhead, the Supreme Being or region of pure spirit from which the creation emanated; also refers to the divine essence which sustains the creation.

**Anahad Shabd** (H/P) Eternal Word; a term for the divine creative power, the unstruck Sound.

**Assiyah** (Heb.) Literally, Making; the realm of actualization, the physical universe, according to the Kabbalah. Of the four realms, *Assiyah* is the lowest, where matter predominates and where the creative power or Word is veiled. It is also described as corresponding to the level of *Samael*, the evil angel or the devil.

**astral region** Etheric or light region; first region above the eye center, above the physical plane.

**Atzilut** (Heb.) Literally, Emanation, possibly derived from the root *etzel* (beside, next to), implying "next to God." In the Kabbalah, the heavenly regions are divided into four main realms. *Atzilut* is the highest realm, next to (or sometimes described as including) the Godhead.

**ayin** (Heb.) Literally, nothing; without substance; a different grammatical form of *ayn* (as used in *Eyn-Sof*, the primal divine Source). According to the Kabbalah, *ayin* is the first and highest of the two *sefirot* which, together with *Eyn-Sof*, make up the three-part Godhead. *Ayin* is also used in Hasidism to designate the state of "nothing," the state of total self-transcendence and union with the Divine.

**B.C.E.** Before the Common Era or Christian Era; equivalent to B.C.

**Ba'al Shem Tov** (Heb.) First of the hasidic masters, he lived in late eighteenth-century Poland. His name literally means "master of the good name."

**Bani** (H/P) Word, holy Name. The term is also used to refer to scriptures of various religions, especially the *Adi Granth*.

**bhajan** (H/P) Literally, worship. In *Sant Mat*, *bhajan* refers to the spiritual practice of listening to the inner sound or Word during meditation.

**bhakti** (H/P) Devotion.

**Brahm** (H/P) Lord of the causal region, from whom the universe below generated. The lord of judgment.

**Briah** (Heb.) Creation; refers to the realm of archetypes, the causal realm, from where the lower creation is projected. According to the Kabbalah, *Briah* is the region directly below that of *Azilut*.

**C.E.** Common Era; Christian Era; equivalent to A.D.

**causal region** Region of creation, causation, from where the causal, astral, and physical regions have emanated. The region of universal mind.

**chakra** (H/P) Wheel. Subtle energy center in body.

**chariot** See *merkavah*

**darshan** (H/P) Beholding, seeing. Gazing at someone with total love and concentration. True *darshan* (inner *darshan*) takes place at an inner level of consciousness and is the encounter between the disciple and the Radiant Form of the master.

**devekut** (Heb.) A hasidic term for attachment or cleaving to God. A very high state of consciousness achieved through meditation.

**dhunatmik Name** (H/P) The name that is sound based, sound related, or revealed in the form of sound; esoterically, the divine Sound or Shabd which cannot be expressed in speech or writing, nor heard with the physical ears.

**dhyan** (H/P) Attention, concentration contemplation; the second aspect of the spiritual practice taught by the saints, in which the disciple contemplates on the form of the master within during meditation in order to hold the mind still at the eye center. True contemplation is achieved naturally once the attention is focused and the mind becomes fully concentrated.

**dying while living** The state of consciousness experienced as a result of meditation, i.e., transcending, or “dying” to one’s outer worldly life while becoming alive to the spiritual life within.

**El** (Heb.) God; probably derived from the ancient Akkadian and Semitic language roots for “power” or “to be powerful”. *El* was head of a pantheon of gods espoused by the pre-Judaic Canaanite religion. In the Bible and other ancient Semitic texts, *El* is used as general term for God. *El* also appears as a part of the names of both people and angels, as in the biblical prophets Elijah, Eliezer, Ezekiel, and the angel Gabriel. *El* may also be the root of the Arabic *Allah*.

**Elohim** (Heb.) God; plural form of *El* and *Eloha*; the most common name for God in the Bible, sometimes appearing as *Elohim Tsevaot* (the Lord of Hosts), referring to the angelic “hosts” in the hierarchy of creation. Sometimes the term is also used to mean angels, holy men, or judges.

**fountain, fountain of living waters** A metaphor for the ever-flowing Word of God. In a largely agrarian society, situated in a hot and arid area of the world, the central role of water in the maintenance of physical life is readily understood. Just as a river brings life to the desert, so too does the living water of the Word or creative power bring



life to the parched desert of the physical world, where souls are knowingly or unknowingly burning in the heat of their desires and concerns, thirsty for a refreshing touch of the spiritual water.

**gilgul** (Heb.) Literally, rolling. Reincarnation, transmigration; term used in post-twelfth-century Kabbalah.

**guru** (H/P) Teacher, master. Literally, he who brings light into darkness.

**hagah** (Heb.) According to contemporary scholars, *hagah*, as used in the Bible, refers to a meditation practice involving repetition of words or sounds.

**hasid** (Heb.) Devotee. Disciple of a hasidic rebbe, or master.

**Hasidism** Mystical, devotional movement in Judaism which began in late eighteenth-century Poland. The Ba'al Shem Tov was the first hasidic master.

**Hebrew Bible** The canonical Jewish Bible, consisting of the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), the Prophets, and Writings. Christian sources generally refer to these scriptures as the Old Testament.

**hekhalot** (Heb.) Literally, palaces, mansions; used in reference to the seven spiritual stages or inner regions, found within the seventh "heaven" or inner region, as described by Jewish mystics, mainly of the Talmudic period.

**hitbodedut** (Heb.) Seclusion, self-isolation. According to some modern scholars, *hitbodedut* refers to meditation practice. *See also merkavah.*

**Holy of Holies** Originally the innermost compartment of the Tabernacle in which the Ark of the Covenant was kept. The Ark contained the Ten Commandments written on stone and given by God to Moses, according to the

story in the *Pentateuch*. Only the priests were permitted entry to the Holy of Holies. Later, the Holy of Holies became the innermost shrine in the Temple at Jerusalem, where the most sacred rituals were performed. It is a metaphor for the highest spiritual regions on the inner journey.

**Hukam** (H/P) Order, command, divine law; the term was used in the *Adi Granth* to refer to the divine law or will, the Word.

**ibn Gebirol, Solomon** Also called Avicbron, ibn Gebirol lived in eleventh-century Spain and was author of *Mekor Hayim* (Fountain of Life), published in Latin as *Fons Vitae*, a seminal work of Jewish mysticism portraying the process of the creation as a series emanations from the primal source of divine light.

**Jagat Singh, Maharaj** The living master from 1948 to 1951 in the line of Radha Soami mystics at Beas.

**Ka'aba** (Arab.) The great stone at Mecca, which is the most holy Muslim pilgrimage site. According to Muslim tradition, it is where Abraham entered into the covenant with God.

**Kabbalah** (Heb.) Literally, receiving, tradition. The most renowned aspect of Jewish mysticism, which can be considered a movement and influence in itself; the term refers specifically to a large number of complex, esoteric works dating from the thirteenth century which draw on the Bible, the Talmud, and much legendary mystical material. The most famous piece of kabbalistic literature is the *Zohar*, by Moses de Leon of thirteenth-century Spain. It also includes the works of Solomon ibn Gebirol, Moses



Cordovero, Abraham Abulafia, and Isaac Luria, among many others.

**Kabir** (1398–1518) Indian mystic of Varanasi (Benares), Uttar Pradesh, a weaver by profession. Kabir Sahib's poetry is well-loved and recited throughout India; some verses are included in the *Adi Granth*. He was a contemporary of Guru Nanak.

**Kal** (H/P) Literally, time; the negative power, Brahm, the lord of judgment, lord of the second spiritual region.

**Kalma** (Arab.) The divine Sound, Word.

**karma** (H/P) Action. The law of karma refers to the law of cause and effect, action and reaction. Karma keeps people bound to this world of duality and the realms of the mind.

**kashrut** (Heb.) The Jewish system of ritually clean and unclean foods, based on biblical injunctions.

**kelipah** (Heb.) Shell, husk. According to the teachings of the sixteenth-century kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria, at the time of creation there was a cosmic catastrophe—the mythic breaking of the vessels, when the primal divine light became released into the creation in an uncontrolled manner. Sparks of that light, which are the individual souls, adhered to the *kelipot* and became trapped at the material plane. *See also* **tikkun**.

**keter** (Heb.) Crown. The highest of the *sefirot*, or divine emanations, in the kabbalistic system.

**Koheleth** (Heb.) The king of Israel who is the voice of Ecclesiastes in the Bible. According to tradition he is King Solomon, son of King David. Scholars, however, do not believe that he was the author of Ecclesiastes.

**logos** (Gk.) Literally, reason, intellect, calculation, intelligence, word, speech, discourse. Esoterically, an ancient term used originally by Greek mystics, and later by many



others in Mediterranean countries and the Middle East, for the creative Word. Scholars have commonly translated it as Word, Reason, Intelligence or Intellect since it is by this power that all the creation is ordered and organized, expressing the supreme intelligence and wisdom of God.

**Luria, Rabbi Isaac** An important sixteenth-century Jewish mystic of Safed, Palestine, he was also called by the acronym of his name, *ha-Ari*, the Lion. His teachings were distilled into writing by his disciple, Chaim Vital.

**Maggid** (Heb.) Literally angel, speaker, or channel. The term was used for great sages, rabbis, and preachers.

**Maimonides, Moses** Twelfth-century philosopher, mystic, and rationalist who lived in Spain, North Africa, and Egypt; author of the *Guide for the Perplexed*. His son Abraham and grandson Obadyah were mystics in the Sufi tradition.

**mauj** (H/P) Will; when used in a spiritual context, it refers to the divine will.

**maya** (H/P) Illusion or delusion; given a feminine persona as the spinner of the web of illusion. According to Hindu mythology she is the wife of Brahm, the lord of the second region.

**memra** (Aram.) Literally, utterance, word; the divine creative Word or holy Name, derived from the Hebrew *ma'amar*.

**Makom** (Heb.) Literally, place, abode, dwelling; an epithet of God, referring to His abode, the spiritual realm of eternity; also, God's presence.

**merkavah** (Heb.) Chariot, vehicle. Metaphor for the spiritual light and sound by which the mystic descends or ascends through the inner regions, the *hekhalot*. See also *Hekhalot*.

**messiah** Saint, master. Literally, anointed one, from the Hebrew *mashiach*.

**Mira Bai** Indian woman saint of sixteenth-century Rajasthan.

**mitzvot** (Heb., *pl.*; *sing.* **mitzvah**) Commandments, good deeds.

**Nahman of Bratzlav, Rabbi** An important hasidic master or rebbe who lived from 1772 to 1811. He was well loved for his mystical tales and teachings.

**Nam** (H/P) Name, holy Name. Designates the dynamic power of God, which creates, enlivens, and sustains the universe, and through which the soul returns to its source. The central reality of the teachings of the saints.

**Name** Holy Name, inner Name of God. Not a written or spoken name, but the divine life force or essence, the Word of God, the Shabd, the divine sound. *See also* **Nam**.

**Nanak, Guru** (1469–1539) Born near Lahore (now in Pakistan), Guru Nanak spent a large part of his life traveling to distant places to spread the teaching of the Name. He was the first Guru in the line of the ten Sikh Gurus whose teachings are recorded in the *Adi Granth*.

**negative power** Kal, the lord of judgment, lord over all regions from the causal and below, called negative because his realm is impermanent and subject to dissolution, as opposed to the true spiritual region of Sach Khand, which is everlasting.

**Om** (H/P) Sound of the second spiritual region.

**Paltu** (1710–1780) A disciple of Govind Sahib who lived in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, a town sacred to the Hindus. He spoke out fearlessly against the prejudices and super-

stitutions of organized religion and was consequently burned to death.

**Philo Judaeus** First-century Jewish philosopher and mystic of Alexandria, Egypt.

**Pind (H/P)** Matter, the physical region, realm where matter predominates.

**Radha Soami (H/P)** Literally, *Radha* – soul; *Soami* – Lord. Refers to the absolute Supreme Being, as well as to the relationship of the soul and the Lord. The term was also used as a name for Soami Ji Maharaj.

**Radiant Form of the master** The spiritual form of master, which seen within during meditation. The Radiant Form guides the disciple on the inner journey through the spiritual regions.

**Ram Dhun (H/P)** God's sound, God's inner music.

**Ram Nam (H/P)** God's Name.

**rebbe (Heb.)** Rabbi, master; this term has been used in Hasidism to designate the spiritual master or teacher.

**Rumi (1207–1277)** A Persian Sufi mystic; disciple of Shamas-i-Tabriz; author of the *Masnavi* and other poetry; in India he is called Maulana Rum.

**Sach Khand (H/P)** True place, true, eternal region; the region of the Supreme Being. The fifth and highest region, from where the perfect masters originate.

**Safed** A city near the Sea of Galilee in Israel which was an important center of Jewish mysticism beginning in the sixteenth century.

**Sahansdal Kanwal (H/P)** First inner region above the eye center, the astral region of the thousand-petalled lotus, so called because the light of this region appears as an intense central flame surrounded by a thousand petal-like flames.



**saint** Holy man, mystic, adept. Not a title for someone canonized by a church or religion, **but a term specifically** used to designate an individual who has attained God-realization.

**Sant Mat (H/P)** Literally, teachings of the saints. The universal mystic teachings given by saints since the beginning of creation, whose core is a meditation practice on the inner, spiritual Name or Word, the divine creative power which creates, enlivens, and sustains all life (*surat Shabd yoga*). In contemporary times, the teachings of the saints have been conveyed by the Radha Soami masters at Beas, India.

**Sarmad (1618–1661)** A Jewish trader from Kashan in Persia, he settled in Delhi in his later years and taught the practice of devotion to the Word. He was an ecstatic dervish with a large following who went about naked and antagonized the religious authorities. He was beheaded under the orders of the Emperor Aurangzeb.

**Sat Shabd (H/P)** True Word.

**satsang (H/P)** Literally, association with truth. Gathering of devotees for the purpose of instilling devotion to the master and his teachings.

**satsangis (H/P)** Those who attend *satsang*; disciples of a spiritual master who practice his teachings.

**Sawan Singh, Maharaj** Also known as the Great Master, he was the living master in the Radha Soami line from 1903 to 1948 and resided at Beas. He was the master of Maharaj Charan Singh.

**Sefer ha-Bahir (Heb.)** Literally, Book of Brilliance. An early, anonymous work of Jewish mysticism, discovered in twelfth-century Provence, France.

**Sefer Yetzirah (Heb.)** Literally, Book of Formation. A pre-kabbalistic work of Jewish mysticism, it was probably

- written between the third and sixth centuries, possibly even earlier. Only 2,000 words long, the book expresses the structure of creation through mathematical symbolism.
- sefirot** (Heb. *pl.*; *sing.* *sefirah*) A term first used in the *Sefer Yetzirah* (second to fourth century) to describe the expressions or powers derived from the primal divine power, which are the 'building blocks' of the creation. In the 13th century, the term became the most important symbol of the Kabbalah, used to describe the process of the emanation of the divine Essence from its source in the Godhead and its subtle manifestation as the various divine qualities that act upon each other to bring about the creation. The term probably derives from 'cipher' or numeral. It may also be related to *sapir*, 'sapphire', a biblical term indicating the radiance of God, which is metaphorically described as the light of sapphire. The *sefirot* are also called names, utterances, lights, stages, crowns, garments, etc.
- seva** (H/P) Literally, service. The term is often used for voluntary service in a religious or spiritual context.
- Shabbat** (Heb.) Sabbath.
- Shabd** (H/P) Sound. Inner Word or holy Name of God; audible life stream, divine life force; essence of God, soul, and master.
- Shabd mystics** Those perfect mystics who originate from the highest region, Sach Khand, and teach *surat Shabd yoga*, a system of meditation by which the disciple can unite his soul with the Sound or Word (Shabd).
- Shekhinah** (Heb.) Divine indwelling presence; the feminine "aspect" of God, according to the Jewish mystics.
- shefa** (Heb.) Divine flow; abundance; grace; a reference to the divine creative power that is called in the Bible the Wisdom, Name, and Word.



- shemittot** (Heb.) Cosmic cycles. *See also* yugas.
- simran** (H/P) Literally, remembrance. Refers to the remembrance and repetition of holy names given by the master at initiation; the first part of the meditation process, designed to still the mind and focus it at the eye center.
- Soami Ji Maharaj** (1818–1878) Born Shiv Dayal Singh in Agra, Uttar Pradesh, as a child he was raised on the scriptures of the Adi Granth. Soami Ji was a disciple of Tulsi Sahib of Hathras and started preaching the path of the Word after spending the greater part of seventeen years meditating. His teachings have been collected in *Sar Bachan Poetry* and *Sar Bachan Prose*. He was the first to use the term Radha Soami to designate the soul and the Lord and their relationship. His disciple and successor, Baba Jaimal Singh, was the first master to settle at the place now known as the Radha Soami colony at Beas, in Punjab.
- Sound** A reference to the spiritual, inner Sound, the creative power that pervades and sustains the entire creation. *See* Word, Name, Shabd.
- surat** (H/P) Inner hearing and attention of the soul; also refers to the soul itself.
- surat Shabd yoga** (H/P) The method of uniting the soul (*surat*) with the Shabd (*Sound*), the inner or holy Word of God.
- Talmud** Collection of 1,000 years of rabbinical thinking (fourth century B.C.E. to fifth century C.E.), based on interpretations from the Bible, mostly concerned with law but also contains moralistic, mystical, and legendary material. Exists in Babylonian and Jerusalem versions, reflecting the thinking of the two rabbinic academies.
- Tao** (Chinese) The divine essence or principle that pervades and sustains the entire creation; the creative power; equivalent to the Shabd or Word; God's holy Name.



**tikkun** (Heb.) Literally, perfection, restoration. A kabbalistic concept explaining the process by which the divine light, which has been scattered in the material creation owing to its adherence to the *kelipot* (the shards of matter), may return to its source in the primal Light of God. It explains how the divine forces or aspects (the *sefirot*), which are out of balance and antagonistic to one another, may come into balance, and by which the *Shekhinah* (the divine indwelling presence) may unite with the Lord. Tikkun is achieved, according to the teachings of Rabbi Isaac Luria, by certain meditational practices involving unifications of divine names and focused performance of rituals and recitation of prayers.

**Torah** (Heb.) Literally, teaching, revelation; strictly speaking it refers only to the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), but often it is used for the entire *Tanakh* (Pentateuch, the Prophets, and the Writings). Christians generally refer to this collection as the Old Testament. The term Oral Torah is used for the later texts, such as the Mishnah, Talmud, etc.

**Trikuti** (H/P) Literally, the three prominences; the causal region; the second of the five regions above the physical plane. The home of the mind, it is the source of all action.

**Tulsi Sahib** (1764–1845) A son of the ruling family of the Peshwas in Maharashtra, he settled in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh. He was the master of Soami Ji Maharaj and is known for his two books, *Ghat Ramayan* and *Ratan Sagar*, through which he expressed the teachings of the Word.

**varnatmik name** (H/P) Expressible; the name of God that can be spoken or written, in contrast to the *dhunatmik* Name, which is inexpressible. *See also dhunatmik Name.*

**Vital, Rabbi Chaim** Disciple of sixteenth-century Rabbi Isaac Luria, he transcribed his master's teachings.

**wheel of 84** According to Indian philosophy, there are 8,400,000 species into which a soul can incarnate during the cycles of reincarnation and transmigration. This cycle of transmigration is often referred to as the *wheel of 84*.

**wine divine** In Muslim and Jewish mysticism, God's holy Name, inner sound, inner Nectar.

**Wisdom, Wisdom of God** (Heb. *Hokhmah*, Gk. *Sophia*) The divine emanation of the Word or holy Name of God; one of the most common ancient Middle Eastern terms for the creative power, it gives the name to the Wisdom Literature of the Bible (Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes). In the Kabbalah, it is the second of the sefirot (emanations), the projection of the divine will into the creation.

**Word** (Heb. *davar*) The dynamic power of God which created, enlivens, and sustains the universe, and through which the soul returns to its source. Equivalent to the biblical terms Name or Wisdom, and the Indian Shabd.

**Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy** Disciple of the eighteenth-century hasidic rebbe, the Ba'al Shem Tov, he recorded his master's teachings for posterity.

**yetzer ha-tov** (Heb.) Good or positive inclination.

**yetzer ha-ra** (Heb.) Evil or negative inclination.

**Yetzirah** (Heb.) Formation; the third world or realm below the highest realm of *Atzilut* (Emanation). In the *Zohar*, it is said to be the abode of the angels, led by *Metatron*, the chief archangel. It probably corresponds to the astral realm in more modern terminology, and is the level directly above the physical world.

**YHWH** (Heb.) Name for God created by a unique conjugation of the verb "to be" in past, present, and future tenses simultaneously. Expresses timeless quality of God. A prohibition on uttering this name was instituted

in the second century B.C.E. Instead, God was called *ha-Shem* (meaning 'the Name'), Adonai (Lord), etc. Out of respect, only the consonants of the name YHWH are spelled out in capital letters. The name Jehovah was an inaccurate rendition of YHWH.

**yihud** (Heb.) Literally, union. Hasidic term for the state of unification of the soul with God, achieved by transcending particularity and differences.

**yugas** (H/P) Ages, cycles of time. According to the Indian system, there are four *yugas*. *Kal Yuga* is the Iron age, the age of judgment, the nadir of the cycle of four *yugas*. The highest and most spiritual age is *Sat Yuga*, the golden age, the age of truth. Between the two are the Silver age and the Copper age. Presently we are living in *Kal Yuga*.

**zaddik** (Heb. *sing.*; *pl.* *zaddikim*) A righteous or pious person; among the Hasidim, a spiritual teacher or master.

**zikh** (Per.) A Sufi term for remembrance or repetition; a mystic practice.

**Zohar** (Heb.) Literally, radiance, shining. Title of a multi-volume work of Jewish mysticism purporting to have been written during the talmudic period by Simon bar Yohai, but which scholars have shown to be the work of a thirteenth-century Spanish mystic, Moses de Leon. Based on traditions from earlier periods, the *Zohar* contains a wealth of mystical material and deep insights which reveal the thread of the universal mystic teachings. The term is also used for an aspect of the inner light.

**8,400,000 Species** See wheel of 84.



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