

Yom Kippur Dialogues - Returning to the Self



Why Do We Need to Know Ourselves?

הוא הִגָּה אומֵר, אִם אֵין אָנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וּכְשֶׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מֶה אָנִי. וְאִם לֹא עֲכָשְׁיוֹ, אֵימָתִי

He [Rabbi Hillel] used to say: If I am not for me, who will be for me? And when I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, then when? (Avot 1:14)

When we forget the individual soul, when we stop paying attention to the inner life of the person, everything becomes confusing and unclear. Therefore, the beginning of teshuva (spiritual growth)...is the return to oneself, to the Source of one's soul. (Rav Kook SK 8:213)

A story of the great Hasidic Rabbi Zusya (Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol). On his deathbed he began to cry uncontrollably and his students and disciples tried hard to comfort him. They asked him, "Rabbi, why do you weep? You are almost as wise as Moses, you are almost as hospitable as Abraham, and surely heaven will judge you favourably." Zusya answered them: "It is true. When I get to heaven, I won't worry so much if God asks me, 'Zusya, why were you not more like Abraham?' or 'Zusya, why were you not more like Moses?' I know I would be able to answer these questions. After all, I was not given the righteousness of Abraham or the faith of Moses but I tried to be both hospitable and thoughtful. But what will I say when God asks me, 'Zusya, why were you not more like Zusya?' [Martin Buber, Tales of the Great Chasidic Masters]

When you work on improving your *middot* (character traits), you fulfil the commandment of walking in the ways of the Almighty (Deut. 28:9). Therein lies the importance of knowing yourself. (Alai Shur, p.197)

“If a person does not know themselves, what wisdom could they possibly have?” (Ibn Ezra) Knowing oneself is the foundation for fulfilling the Torah and its commandments. If you do not know yourself, you will not know what you have to watch out for. Being aware of your virtues will encourage you to elevate yourself even more. Being aware of your faults will keep you on guard not to give in to your negative tendencies. Lack of self-knowledge will prevent you from improving yourself. (Mussar HaTorah p.40)

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter used to say, “A person can live with themselves for seventy years and still not know themselves.” (T’nuat HaMussar, vol. 1, p.301)

Then one [messenger] said, “I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son!” Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah had stopped having her periods. Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “Now that I’ve lost the ability, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?” Then the Eternal One said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?’ Is anything too wondrous for the Eternal One? I will return to you at the same season next year, and Sarah shall have a son.” Sarah lied, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was frightened. Came the reply, “You did laugh.” (Genesis 18:10-15)

This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved. He prayed to the Eternal One, saying, “O Eternal One! Isn’t this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment.” (Jonah 4:1-2)

Seeing Both Virtues and Challenges in Ourselves

Rabbi Simcha Bunim teaches: Every person should have two pockets. In one pocket should be a piece of paper saying: "I am only dust and ashes." When one is feeling too proud, reach into this pocket and take out this paper and read it. In the other pocket should be a piece of paper saying: "For my sake was the world created." When one is feeling disheartened and lowly, reach into this pocket and take this paper out and read it. We are each the joining of two worlds. We are fashioned from clay, but our spirit is the breath of Adonai. (Tales of The Hasidim Later Masters, Martin Buber, p.249-50)

There are two extremes in being mistaken about oneself. There are people who have a strong tendency to always judge themselves favorably. Whatever such a person does they always assume that they have only the loftiest of motivations. When they shout at someone, it is always for the other person's good. They honor wicked people, it is an act of kindness. They feel depressed, it is because of thoughts of repentance. They pursue power, it is only to help others. They refuse to change their opinion, it is because they are always consistent. They are abrupt in speaking to others, they want to speak concisely. They act impulsively, it is because they behave with alacrity. They bear a grudge, it is to teach others a lesson. They lie, it is always for the sake of peace. They do not do others favors, it is because they are afraid that they will have ulterior motives. (Madraigat Ha'Adam: Cheshbon Tzedek, ch. 10) On the other hand there are people who always notice their own faults. Even when they perform good deeds, they judge themselves unfavorably. They always assume that they have negative motivations and never accomplish enough good. They consider themselves to be much worse than they actually are. Both extremes are harmful. If a person always judges themselves favorably regardless of what they do, they will never correct their faults because they assume they have none. Conversely, if a person sees everything they do in a negative light, they are apt to consider themselves a failure and feel despair about ever improving. Such a person will be guilt-ridden and depressed and they too will not try to improve. The most productive attitude is for a person to be aware of their faults, but also to be aware of their strengths and virtues. While they recognize their failings, they will also have the self-confidence that they can improve and grow. (Zelig Pliskin, Gateway to Self-Knowledge, pp.32-3)

One of the major difficulties in obtaining self-knowledge is that in our imagination we have an illusory picture of ourselves. The picture we have is without any shortcomings and our positive qualities are exaggerated a thousand times over. Moreover, it is possible that in our imagination positive points we actually have are missing from our view of ourselves and in their place are other virtues that in reality we are missing. The problem is that we relate to ourselves from the perspective of our imaginary picture. This picture is what is directing our actions and our words. If you sincerely want to know yourself, you will have to be aware of what is illusory and what is reality. You have to try to observe yourself as you actually are. (Alai Shur, p.151)

How Do We Get to Know Ourselves?

אמר רבי אילעאי, בשלשה דברים אדם ניכר: בכוסו, ובכיסו ובכעסו. ואמרי ליה אף בשוקו

Rabbi Ilai said: In three matters a person's true character is ascertained; in his cup, i.e., his behavior when he drinks; in his pocket, i.e., his conduct in his financial dealings with other people; and in his anger. And some say: A person also reveals his real nature in his laughter. (Talmud: Eruvin 65b)

A story regarding Eliezer ben (son of) Hyrkanos:

(Hyrkanos) said to him: Why do you weep? He answered him: I weep only because I desire to learn Torah. (Hyrkanos) said to him: Truly, you are twenty-eight years old—yet do you desire to learn Torah? No, go, take a wife and beget sons and you will take them to the school. He fasted two weeks not tasting anything, until Elijah—may he be remembered for good—appeared to him and said to him: Son of Hyrkanos! Why do you weep? He replied to him: Because I desire to learn Torah. (Elijah) said to him: If you desire to learn Torah get up to Jerusalem to Rabban Jochanan ben Zakkai. He arose and went up to Jerusalem to R. Jochanan ben Zakkai and sat down and wept. (R. Jochanan) said to him: Why do you weep? He answered him: Because I wish to learn Torah. (R. Jochanan) said to him: Whose son are you? But he did not tell him. (R. Jochanan) asked him: Have you never learned to read the Shema', or the Tefillah, or the Grace after meals? He replied to him: No. He arose and (R. Jochanan) taught him the three (prayers). (Again) he sat down and wept. (R. Jochanan) said to him: My son, why do you weep? He replied: Because I desire to learn Torah. He (thereupon) taught him two rules (of the Law) every day of the week, and on the Sabbath (Eliezer) repeated them and assimilated them. He kept a fast for eight days without tasting anything until the odor of his mouth attracted the attention of R. Jochanan ben Zakkai, who directed him to withdraw from his presence. He sat down and wept. (R. Jochanan) said to him: My son, why do you weep? He rejoined: Because you made me withdraw from your presence just as a man makes his fellow withdraw, when the latter is afflicted with leprosy. (R. Jochanan) said to him: My son, just as the odor of your mouth has ascended before me, so may the savor of the statutes of the Torah ascend from your mouth to Heaven. He said to him: My son! Whose son are you? He replied: I am the son of Hyrkanos. Then said (R. Jochanan): Are you not the son of one of the great men of the world, and you didn't tell me? By your life! he continued, This day shalt you eat with me. (Eliezer) answered: I have eaten already with my host. (R. Jochanan) asked: Who is your host? He replied: R. Joshua ben Chananjah and R. José the Priest. The sons of Hyrkanos said to their father: Get up to Jerusalem and vow that your son Eliezer should not enjoy any of your possessions. He went up to Jerusalem to disinherit him, and it happened that a festival was being celebrated there by R. Jochanan ben Zakkai. All the magnates of the district were dining with him... [As the meal began] R. Eliezer sat down and expounded. His face shone like the light of the sun and his effulgence beamed forth like that of Moses, so that no one knew whether it was day or night. They went and said to Rabban Jochanan ben Zakkai: Come and see R. Eliezer sitting and expounding, his face shining like the light of the sun and his effulgence beaming like that of Moses, so that no one knows whether it be day or night. He came from (his place) behind him and kissed him on his head, saying to him: Happy are you, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, because this one has come forth from your loins. Hyrkanos his father said: To whom does (R. Jochanan) speak thus? The people answered: To Eliezer your son. He said to them: (R. Jochanan) should not have spoken in that manner, but (in this wise), "Happy am I because he has come forth from my loins." Whilst R. Eliezer was sitting and expounding, his father was standing upon his feet. When (Eliezer) saw his father standing upon his feet, he became agitated and said to him: My father! be seated, for I cannot utter the words of the Torah when you are standing on thy feet. (Hyrkanos) replied to him: My son, it was not for this reason that I came, but my intention was to disinherit you. Now that I have come and I have witnessed all this praise; behold your brothers are disinherited and their portion is given to you as a gift. (Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, ch. 1-2)

Does the authentic self exist alone or in relationship?

The Eternal God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." (Gen. 2:18)

There is one who sings the song of their own soul, and in their soul they find everything, full spiritual satisfaction. And there is one who sings the song of their people. For that one does not find the circle of their private soul wide enough, and so goes beyond it, reaching for more powerful heights. And they unite themselves with the soul of the community of Israel, sing its songs, suffer with its sorrows and are delighted by its hopes... And there is one whose soul is lifted beyond the limitations of Israel, to sing the song of humanity. That person's spirit expands to include the glory of the human image and its dreams... And there is one who lifts beyond this level, until they become one with all creation and all creatures, and all the worlds. And with all of them that person sings a song... And there is one who rises together with the bundle of all these songs. All of them sing out, each gives meaning to the other. (Rav Kook, OK 2, pp.444-445)

Another interpretation: Four species--this is the Jewish people. Etrog has both smell and taste, so it is that some people are learned in Torah and fill their lives with good actions; Lulav--has taste but no smell, so it is that some people are learned in Torah but do not fill their lives with good actions; Myrtle--has smell but no taste as both smell and taste, some people fill their lives with good actions but do not learn Torah; Willow--has neither taste nor smell, so too do some Jews know no Torah nor do they fill their lives with good actions. The Holy One said, "We should be sure not to lose any of them. Rather, let's bind all of them together and they will atone for each other." (Pesikta D'Rav Kahanna 27:9)

When you want to find out about a person, see who their friends are. (Sefer Chasidim, no. 350)

Finding the Self

All good exists in a contracted form within one's point of smallness, just as it exists in all its breadth on the broad spaces of the soul's transcendent expanse. When one shrinks oneself and is filled with humility, they draw closer to point of essential selfhood and the center of their soul is revealed to them in all its majestic glory. Then, through its lens, one sees all the transcendent majesty which is found within the unfathomable greatness of the soul's essence "One who is small, is great." (Zohar I, 122:b) Pride distracts from this central, contracted point of the soul. When one loses this center, this collected spiritual storehouse in the wholeness of its spiritual bounty, they are deformed and nothing but the slivered shards of the spirit reveal themselves within. They are unable to reach the soul's transcendent light. Then one is of no-account, sunk in smallness of self which cannot be healed while untamed imagination incites them to think themselves lofty and great, while in reality they are lowly and lacking. "One who is great, is small." The soul's center, the source of humbleness, is the guiding star which lights up the brightness of heavens for the enlightened, that highest horizon of the transcendent soul as it opens out to its absolute expanse. (Rav Kook, Orot HaKodesh)

Some Questions to Consider

- How do we find our true selves in the context of community?
- Can we only find our true selves in the context of community?
- Is the self only created when reflected in others?
- What if we have a different view of our selves than others?
- How do we know which is the real self?
- What would you do if you knew you would not fail?
- What are the demands on the self?
- What are not the demands on the self?
- Which parts of yourself do you love?
- Who do you hope to be this coming year?
- How do you want knowing your self to help others around you?
- How might you take care of yourself in this coming year?
- Which parts of your self do you hide from others? Why?
- If others were to describe you, who would they say you are? Is that who you want to be?
- Which part of yourself do you need to let go of on Yom Kippur?
- Which part of yourself do you need to keep this Yom Kippur?
- What will you do differently this year as a result of this introspection?

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