INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, I have been leading monthly Shabbat morning spiritual gatherings in my ever-blossoming garden for people seeking a direct and personal encounter with the Divine. A rainbow of Jews—and, occasionally, non-Jews, who are always invited to join us—enjoy an alternative sacred space to celebrate Shabbat with like-minded souls.

As all of us, locals and visitors to Israel alike, settle in, I share a spiritual teaching on the weekly Torah portion, followed by a guided contemplative spiritual practice that leads into quietude, and, from there, a chanting of sacred melodies, a sharing of insights, and a concluding Kiddush lunch. Energies of connection, compassion, and community grow.

Through the years, a great number of participants have asked me essentially the same question: "Yiscah, can you recommend a book modeled after your Shabbat sacred gatherings?" "Is there a book of spiritual practices anchored in biblical texts and possibly even in the weekly Torah portion?" "Is there a book that will teach me hands-on techniques to encounter the Divine within me and beyond?"

For years, I replied, "Not to my knowledge."

But in January 2022, as I visited the family gravesites of the Piaseczner Rebbe (Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, twentieth century, Poland) in the Warsaw Jewish cemetery, I received the Divine Call to write this volume. It became clear that my own next step and a way for me to leave the world with my own legacy was to move from "Not to my knowledge" to "Yes, in fact, I am writing a book on this right now."

Our Dual Human Needs

We live in a consumer-based world that defines success, fulfillment, and happiness through the acquisition of physical goods, the assignment of titles to our names in recognition of specific accomplishments, and

the accumulation of wealth and power. While these attainments can lead to an easier life, an easier life does not always equate with feeling successful, fulfilled, happy, and sustained.

On the contrary, I have found that feeling successful, fulfilled, happy, and sustained comes from different attainments: feeling connected to our authentic selves, and building an ongoing relationship with the Divine Presence deep within us. Just as we need to sustain our bodies—to ingest, chew, swallow, and digest healthy food and water—I am convinced that all of us need to sustain our souls in the same ways.

If we understand Judaism as a spiritual practice, then Judaism's sacred texts can provide the foundation for the "end destination" of experiencing uniquely intimate encounters with our Creator as manifested through the Divine Presence within each of us. This is why some of the Hasidic masters refer to Torah as *lechem and mazon* (bread and food) and *mayim* (water). We need to ingest, chew, swallow, and digest the Torah we intellectually acquire. Then, and only then, can the text move into the heart, allowing for our emotional and visceral encounter with the Divine. Internalized, heartfelt Torah knowledge vivifies and enlivens us spiritually, as healthy food and water vivify and enliven the body.

During the interwar period in Warsaw, a Hasidic leader, the Piaseczner Rebbe, observed that many of Warsaw's Jews believed in God, practiced Jewish observance with devotion, dedicated time to learning Torah, and attended prayer services in synagogue—and yet, seemed to lack awareness of the Divine Spirit within themselves. The sense of vitality he knew each of us has the capacity to experience within Judaism appeared absent. It was as if the Jews he knew were moving about without souls, as if they had stopped breathing.

Believing in the existence of the Divine was in itself insufficient because, he understood, our *emotional landscape* provides the pathway for each of us to experience the Divine Force both within and beyond us. While external acts of observance, study, and prayer play major roles in sustaining the Jewish people, the *internal experience* of a personal and unique encounter with the Divine is a Jew's spiritual umbilical cord with one's Creator.

Thirty years after the Piaseczner Rebbe's observation and across an ocean, the renowned artist Leonard Cohen similarly noticed: "We no longer believe we are holy. . . . There is an absence of God in our midst."[1]

The biblical narratives in Genesis portray the patriarchs and matriarchs as people who directly encounter God in their midst. In fact, Abraham's call to leave a culture steeped in idol worship is often understood as a call to leave the familiar for a yet-to-be discovered new and radical way of living with God, which he would teach to future generations: "For I [God] have loved him [Abraham], because he commands his children and his household after him that they keep the way of the ETERNAL, being righteous and just" (Gen. 18:19).

The Piaseczner Rebbe compares the painful experience of sensing distance from God to that of a child who yearns for a missing parent.[2] Spiritually, one may feel estranged and exiled from the deeper parts of oneself, without even knowing why.

By contrast, an encounter with the Divine may bring a sense of closeness and connection, and an open heart to experience the diverse and fluid feelings produced by the human condition. Quite organically, without force or manipulation, one may then begin sensing the Divine Presence in one's interactions with other people, too. Becoming sensitive to this Presence in human beings may enable this sense in our engagement with birds, fish, vegetation, trees, herbs, flowers, and plants as well—and eventually evolve into an awareness of the Divine Spark in soil, water, metals, gems, and other inanimate creations.

This can happen because the Divine Creator's presence within the individual is the same presence around and beyond the individual. The more I encounter this energy within myself, the more I sense the same externally. My essence, as a creation by God, is God. This perception of my essential being helps me foster connections with the same Divine Energy around me. Essence connects with essence as the God beyond becomes synonymous with the God within. The Zohar refers to the Divine Creator as a reality of both immanence and transcendence with the teaching, "The greatness of God . . . fills all worlds and encompasses all worlds."[3] Likewise, the prophet Jeremiah proclaims, "For I fill both heaven and earth—declares GOD" (Jer. 23:24).

This way of internally "being Jewish" can significantly affect how we externally "do Jewish." The behavioral expressions of Jewish tradition may now transform from seemingly robotic, stagnant, and lifeless actions to heartfelt and emotional experiences imbued with aliveness and fluidity. Observance of Jewish practices, prayer, and study may now be energized and permeated with soul and spirit.

Into the Soul

Becoming increasingly aware of the internal dimension to our lives brings us to our deeper selves—the domain of the soul.

Every human being is a duality. "The ETERNAL God formed a Human from the soil's humus, blowing into his nostrils the breath of life: the Human became a living being" (Gen. 2:7). The "soil's humus" creates the human being's physical body; "blowing into his nostrils the breath of life" gives the human being a spiritual dimension, a soul. Only after both exist together does the verse conclude that this creation is now "a living being."

The Hebrew words for soul and for breath are *neshama* and *neshima*, teaching us that we can experience our soul through the energy in our breath. Each time we inhale, the giving of the life force that was originally breathed into Adam and Eve repeats itself. Our own breathing cycle—receiving and returning breath as we inhale and exhale—invites us to become aware of the Creator's presence within us. We may also understand the nonphysical spiritual breath as the life force of our soul keeping our physical body alive—another awareness that can bring us closer to sensing the Divine Presence within us.

"What Is God?"

It is also true that those of us who strongly believe in God may still find it difficult to articulate what it is we believe in. Adding to this uncertainty, the Jewish tradition employs several names for God (or GOD): the Creator, the Eternal (or the ETERNAL), the Divine, and the Omnipotent, to name a few. How can a person cultivate an intentional awareness of God without some sort of understanding of what God means?

As someone who dedicates time daily to furthering my awareness of the Divine, I have long felt the urgency to answer the challenging "What is God?" question for myself. After grappling with this over decades, my conclusion is that there is no answer. The infinite Creator of all life cannot be defined within the parameters of limited language. God's infinitude transcends all attempts to pin God down through a human definition.

In this volume, I invite you the reader to consider, instead, "What is God for me?" I invite you to know God through your own lens, hopefully one of a curious explorer.

All the while, when I myself speak of "the Divine," or use another name, I am often specifically referring to my own understanding and experience of God. If the internal dimension is indispensable, I cannot do otherwise. I experience God as energy flowing within me—my mind, body, heart, and soul. Cultivating various practices of breath awareness sharpens my experience of the energy of life moving through me. My intuition speaks to me through the "still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12) of the Divine Presence. The voice invites my limited self to become more Godly and part of the Infinite. Without any supporting empirical evidence, I simply know the voice to be true—without doubt, without question, and even if I do not like the message.

This voice invites me to explore the deeper part of myself, where pristine truth dwells. This voice reveals clarity, direction on the path of my life journey, and the most creative energies in my being. This voice speaks spontaneously, without any advance notice—any attempt on my part to manipulate or force it to communicate with me fails. This voice opens the gate to my internal dimension: the dimension that includes inner serenity, trust, compassion, connection, wonder, closeness—and also total nakedness, defenselessness, and raw vulnerability. I trust this part of me—that regardless of how low the lows in my life may bring me to, somehow the internal dimension of my life will work out to the benefit of my spiritual well-being. I cannot overemphasize that this is purely subjective and may be unique to my experience, rather than an absolute dogmatic conclusion.

The voice I hear does not need me to recognize it. However, *I* need to develop the sensitivity to become aware of what is already occurring within me for my relationship with the Divine to be a real force in my life. As I do this, I begin to naturally sense the Creator's presence around me in all of Creation. For me, this voice that softly speaks from my deepest marrow captures what I mean by the word God and all the other names the Jewish tradition uses to refer to God.

Some readers may feel a resonance with other names, such as "the Force," "the Universe," "the Infinite Energy," or "_____." What I am strongly arguing for has less to do with identifying a name and more to do with cultivating an awareness of a nonphysical "something" within ourselves and the world—a "larger than me" mindset that the Jewish tradition refers to as God consciousness.

I invite you to replace the word "God" with whatever resonates with you. What is it you believe beckons you to be in service to advancing your own inner being and that of all other beings? What requires you to become a producer, rather than a consumer, to better the world?

Potential Readers of This Book

This book is addressed to all those who wish to explore their spiritual side, both Jews and non-Jews, both traditionally practicing Jews as well as Jews committed to nontraditional modes of Jewish practice. In casting a wide net, this book may prove useful to clergy and teachers who wish to address spiritual practices through a Jewish lens by delving deeply into the weekly Torah portions. Just as importantly, this book is meant to offer unaffiliated, spiritually seeking Jews who are unaware that the Jewish tradition contains a wealth of mystically infused texts and practices what I believe many of them hope to find in other people's traditions.

At the same time, since I myself have been inspired by other spiritual traditions (Tibetan Buddhism, First Nation North American spirituality, Christian mysticism), I know how valuable learning from other cultures can be. This book shares how the Jewish tradition can "be a light unto the nations" (Isa. 42:6, 49:6) by teaching all people how to be in relationship with the Divine and with the world at large. For non-Jewish theologians and clergy, this book addresses how awareness of a person's soul affects

people's engagement with others and with the greater world. For non-Jewish laypeople, this book offers a spiritually informed way to live in the world and combat the growing crisis of separateness.

At its essence, this book is for people searching for other ways to live—with compassion, love, humility, and gratitude. It teaches how to live a more heart-driven and less power-driven life that approaches each human being as a creation in the image of the Creator.

Starting Your Inner Garden

Imagine yourself in the role of the gardener. The gardener is in service to care for all the trees, plants, bushes, and flowers, one at a time. The gardener diligently tends to the garden, ensuring that each plant receives the proper hydration, combination of sun exposure and shade, and type of soil conducive to its unique needs to blossom.

You, the reader—as a gardener—are invited to plant and cultivate your own unique inner garden with forty-seven assorted seeds that correspond to forty-seven weekly Torah portions.[4] Each seed contributes to the garden's beauty: the beauty of a higher God consciousness.

For each of these Torah portions, the volume offers you a "chewable," multitextured teaching that supports the prophet Amos's vision twenty-eight hundred years ago: "A time is coming—declares the Sovereign God—when I will send a famine upon the land: but not a hunger for bread or a thirst for water, but for hearing the words of God" (Amos 8:11). As you digest each week's nuggets, a process of internalization may begin to manifest in you, affecting you in positive and profound ways.

Middot *as the Cultivator*

As someone who spends significant time nurturing my physical garden, I diligently seek ways to refine and improve this physical work. Each of us can also continuously work on our inner, spiritual gardens, improving the ways we serve them best.

Jewish tradition prioritizes the refinement of one's behavioral traits and dispositions as essential to living an authentic Jewish life. In 200 CE, Rabbi Judah haNasi, the leading rabbinical authority in Israel at the time, codified in writing a guide for ethical and moral behavior, *Pirkei*

Avot (Ethics of the Fathers). Many centuries later, in nineteenth-century Lithuania, Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin Salanter founded Musar, a movement aimed at developing ethical and moral character, built upon ideas in classical rabbinical literature focusing on the refinement of *middot* (*middah* in the singular), one's emotional dispositions and character traits. *Middot* also describe the active behavior that infuse seemingly otherwise passive dispositions. For example, I may be naturally inclined to receive guests in my home. However, when I cultivate this inborn *middah* as a mindful way to connect with other people, then my behavior reflects the *middah* of hospitality, an important practice in the Jewish tradition. In our day, new streams of Musar are building upon Salanter's innovations.

This book considers *middot* primarily as resources in a person's spiritual toolbox—seeds to plant in our inner garden. Through this consciousness, *middot* extend far beyond becoming a good person or a good Jew. Refinements of our *middot* enable us to perceive God's world through God's lens, transforming us into Godly beings. As the Designer of all the *middot*, the Creator imbues the human being with the potential to reveal diverse ways of becoming Godly. Each *middah* teaches us how to "show up" in the world with more sensitivity and intention. Continued refinements become the means for strengthening inner awareness of and encounter with our souls. External ethical and moral behaviors can draw inspiration from our spiritual DNA—the inherent potential to not only be a good person, but to be a Godly one—hopefully bringing forth the blossoming of a magnificent garden of the soul.

As one example of how this works, we might consider the *middah* of forgiveness. All of us hurt each other, even unintentionally. Where hurt can compromise the integrity of a relationship, forgiveness can heal the ensuing pain. And forgiveness can be even more restorative on a larger scale, strengthening the fabric of any society that values healthy human relationships. Certainly the Jewish tradition places significant value on both seeking and granting forgiveness. In the daily morning prayer service, a section dedicated to confessing one's sins and then asking the Eternal to forgive plays an important role. On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, forgiveness reigns as the paramount mood, and the tradition recognizes its seriousness by calling this holiday the holiest day of the

year. For any and all of these reasons, the *middah* of forgiveness might be seen as contributing to each of us becoming a better human being.

Even more, this volume reveals spiritual and Divine manifestations in this *middah*. Forgiveness may enable us to manifest the Divine Presence in our lives (see "Va-yiggash: Seeking and Granting Forgiveness" in chapter 1, "Genesis"). As the Eternal forgives us, we can reflect this healing process by forgiving others. Forgiveness may now become a sacred act nourishing our intimate connection with our Creator.

Thus it is that each *middah*, as a planted seed that blossoms, may anchor our spiritual work in nurturing a sense of the Divine Presence in the world. All our gardening can be rooted in the delight of sensing the Divine Presence. The Jewish mystics call this the spiritual dimension of *Gan Eden* (the Garden of Eden)—in essence, the garden of spiritual delights.

Structure of This Volume

The volume is organized into five chapters: Genesis (Bere'shit—twelve commentaries), Exodus (Shemot—ten commentaries), Leviticus (Va-yikra'—seven commentaries), Numbers (Be-midbar—eight commentaries), and Deuteronomy (Devarim—ten commentaries).

Each of the forty-seven commentaries includes six components:

1. The name of the weekly Torah portion, followed by the *middah* of the week. For example: "Bere'shit—The Need to Connect with Others."
2. Selected verse(s) from the weekly Torah portion containing the week's *middah*.
3. "Where We Are": a brief summary of the biblical text as it unfolds from the prior Torah portion to the one under discussion, to familiarize readers with biblical narratives and traditions and contextualize the selected verse(s).
4. "At First Glance": traditional commentaries and Rabbinic narratives on the selected Torah verse(s), such as from the Babylonian Talmud (legal discussions and interpretations of biblical narratives by leading Rabbinical scholars in ancient Babylon, third–sixth centuries); the midrash (additional expansive Rabbinical exegesis interpreting biblical narratives, compiled primarily in the Middle East and northern Africa,

fifth–thirteenth centuries); renowned biblical commentators, including Rashi (Shlomo Yitzhaki, eleventh c., France), Ibn Ezra (Abraham ibn Ezra, eleven–twelfth c., Spain), Nachmanides (Moses ben Nachman, thirteenth c., Spain and Jerusalem), and Sforno (Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno, fifteenth–sixteenth c., Italy); and other thinkers, among them Rabbeinu Bahya (Bahya ben Asher ibn Halawa, thirteenth–fourteenth c., Spain), the Bekhor Shor (Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor, twelfth c., France), the Hizkuni (Hezekiah ben Manoah, thirteenth c., France), the Me'am Lo'ez (Yitzchak ben Moshe Magriso, eighteenth c., Turkey), the Netziv (Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, nineteenth c., Poland).
5. "A Deeper Dive": spiritually infused teachings primarily by the Hasidic and Neo-Hasidic masters that address each text's deeper spiritual dimension, opening pathways to encounter the Divine Presence (more on this below), as well as my own insights on advancing spiritual awareness and God consciousness.
6. "The Practice": emotional, experiential, and heart-centered spiritual practices involving visualization and breath work to help cultivate and nourish the spiritual teachings in "A Deeper Dive" (see meditative preparations for this weekly practice further below).

Annotations and the bibliography will hopefully give you a clear path to planting new seeds in your garden.

I would add that I see the volume as part of an expansive paradigm shift in which Judaism recognizes the legitimacy of each of our individual voices. As I share my own commentaries, understandings, and resources, may you the reader honor and elevate your voices and resources as well. In this way, week by week, may you begin to cultivate your own spiritual garden.

The Hasidic Masters and Their Spiritual Descendants

The radical stream known as Hasidic thought began in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe with the Ba'al Shem Tov (Israel ben Eliezer), who emphasized and encouraged the cultivation of spiritual closeness with the Divine Presence, regardless of a Jew's knowledge of Torah or level of observance. His innovative approach has been understood as

the deeply needed spiritual resuscitation of a people in Europe who were barely surviving, both physically and spiritually, because of poverty, disease, pogroms, and antisemitic policies. The hope was that this novel way of being Jewish would begin to move the spiritual needle from barely surviving to thriving.

The close-knit circle of disciples of the Ba'al Shem Tov's teachings became the first generation of the Hasidic masters, known as the Hasidic rebbes. Their disciples are referred to as Hasidim, literally meaning "the pious ones."

In the interwar period, a new or Neo-Hasidic approach to both commentary and practice began to gain traction. The contemporary Israeli scholar Moshe Idel explains: "Neo-Hasidism and its reverberations are more concerned with a community that shares ideas, attitudes, and a richer and more variegated intellectual and spiritual life, while the older forms of Hasidism represent a community that is more interested in producing what I call 'performing bodies', with a lesser emphasis on belief and striving for an intense spiritual life."[5]

Ironically, the Ba'al Shem Tov's efforts to push back on the dry status quo Judaism in his time eventually became another dry status quo nearly two centuries later. This new void was then filled by the likes of Neo-Hasidic thought leaders such as Martin Buber, Hillel Zeitlin, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Shlomo Carlebach, and Arthur Green, and, more recently, by thinkers (including women) such as Nancy Flam, Estelle Frankel, Shaul Magid, DovBer Pinson, Josh Feigelson, and Or N. Rose.[6] Insights by Buber, Green, Heschel, and Schachter-Shalomi, among others, enhance this volume. Sadly, I was unable to provide additional commentaries written by Hasidic women prior to the Holocaust for no other reason than that none were available.

Although the Piaseczner Rebbe himself was addressing traditional Hasidim, I understand his teachings as also imbued with Neo-Hasidism's emphasis on cultivating a spiritual life. He clearly challenged the status quo of "performing bodies" as an effective way to honor one's spirit.

My first teacher of Jewish meditation and contemplative practice, Rabbi Dr. James Jacobson-Maisels, suggests that the best way to understand Hasidism is through what he calls "a methodology of practice."[7]

He argues that the Hasidic rebbes, especially the Piaseczner, assumed you would be trying out their teachings in your own life, and so, to truly understand them, you have to implement them.[8]

Institute for Jewish Spirituality Executive Director Rabbi Josh Feigelson furthers this insight: "These great teachers of Torah were not only masters of the Jewish textual tradition, but, critically, interpreted Torah as a spiritual practice grounded in mindfulness. In this, they made Torah come alive: it is more than simply a set of interesting or provocative ideas; it is an eternal conversation and set of practices through which we reveal the Divine Presence that resides within and amongst us."[9]

"A Methodology of Practice"

I believe such "a methodology of practice" can respond deeply to the anxiety, depression, confusion, and sense of being overwhelmed so prevalent, if not accelerating, in our times. Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook (nineteenth–twentieth century, Jerusalem) says, "When we stop paying attention to the inner life of a person, everything becomes confusing and unclear."[10]

The objective of this book's practice, commonly referred to as the "sit," is to reclaim, restore, and renew a God consciousness through a personal and intimate experience with oneself. While the term "sit" itself derives from Western Buddhist communities, both Jewish and non-Jewish meditation modalities have come to integrate the practice of staying in a seated position for a dedicated time.

Our "sit" objective of exploring and discovering our deeper, Godly selves takes on added importance when we consider that the biblical narratives in Genesis describe leaders who dedicated time in seclusion to commune with the Divine. In particular, from the birth of Moses in Exodus until his death 120 years later at the end of Deuteronomy, we see a leader who appears to have spent more time in private solitude with God than with the public. Consequently, when we dedicate time for a "sit," we are not only opening ourselves up to experience God consciousness (as if that weren't enough!). We are simultaneously reclaiming an important part of the Jewish tradition that dates back four thousand years, even before the actual Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

I have been reclaiming this ever-evolving practice for more than a decade, with unexpectedly amazing results. My daily "sits" have opened me up to deep religious experiences, times when I excavate precious gems of awareness of what always existed but was hitherto concealed, many moments when I too hear the "still small voice" of the Divine Presence, within and beyond.

I would suggest that readers approach each chapter's "sit" practice as a partnership with the text. It contains four steps:

1. *The practice of breath awareness*. This gently brings us into the present by directing our attention to our inner breathing cycle. As you inhale, imagine that God is breathing the breath of life into you. Try to experience that more than breathing yourself, you are being breathed into. In this sense the Supernal exhalation transforms into the earthling's inhalation.

Then pause for a moment to take in this moment of being alive, of receiving the gift of life through the breath. Try to open yourself to the idea that all of us are reliving Adam and Eve's original experience when they received the first breath at Creation.

Then, with gratitude for living, gently return this gift to God, understanding that it is not ours to keep. We do not own it; it is on loan. The earthling's exhalation now transforms into the Supernal inhalation.

As you empty your body of all its breath, pause for a moment to gaze at the absence of breath—observing how you experience this short moment of "death"—before beginning the breath cycle anew.

During these cycles, direct your awareness to the life-giving energy moving through you. Try to sense its movement, as it descends from the universe above, entering through the crown of your head and palms of your hands, moving through your body, into the core below the navel and further down your legs and out through the soles of your feet into the earth. Likewise, direct your attention to the life-giving energy moving from the core of the earth, entering your body through the soles of your feet, moving up through your core, ascending further as it leaves through the palms of your hands and crown of your head into the universe.

As contemporary meditation teacher Rav Dovber Pinson remarks:

> The process of simple, conscious breathing can teach us more about ourselves, about life and about the Divine creative process than all of the intellectual philosophies. . . . Breath meditation helps us to "unlearn" and awaken from the dream that we exist as an independent entity. Breath in the most overt way shows that we "need" the outside world for oxygen. Accordingly, we are thus able to see ourselves as one with the universe and the Ultimate Beingness that continues to give rise to the universe.[11]

Try to enter fully into your being-breathed-into cycles to enhance this opportunity. If you become distracted, as all of us do from time to time, consider using an anchor to bring your attention back to your breathing. An anchor is a physical experience that helps the practitioner remain centered and aware. For instance, you may place your hands below your navel with your fingers facing and touching each other. As you receive breath, your belly expands, and your fingers will naturally move apart from each other. As you return breath, the belly contracts and the fingers resume touching. Some find placing their hands on their heart helps them stay focused, as they feel their heart beating. Others focus attention on the subtle sounds of inhaling and exhaling through the nostrils. These anchors can sensitize us to the embodied experience in the "sit." Step 3 is also likely to be useful.

2. *The contemplative practice of text review*. Immerse your consciousness into the ideas in the text as you review and reflect on the week's *middah*. Dedicate time to contemplating how these teachings inform your personal self—mind, body, heart, and soul. Be encouraged to see your individual self in the text, and then to find the text within you.

3. *The practice of quieting down the mind.* While immersed in your breathing cycle and thoughts, integrate the "quieting down the mind" method designed and taught by the Piaseczner Rebbe, a technique

to help the practitioner gain spiritual control over one's never-ending onslaught of diverse thoughts, each competing for attention.[12]

First, direct your awareness to whatever thought is most strongly moving through your mind at this moment. With nonjudgmental curiosity, ask yourself, "What am I thinking?"

Now, explore and expand this one thought in both breadth and depth. This should naturally begin to slow down the torrent of many other thoughts anxiously vying for your recognition.

From here, you can move into a more relaxed, reflective, and responsive (rather than reactive) state.

As you become aware of a quiet emptying out, fill the new empty space in the mind with a thought expressing spiritual awareness, such as by gently repeating a phrase from the Torah. The Piaseczner Rebbe suggests you choose a verse that helps you connect with the spiritual part of yourself, such as "The ETERNAL alone is God; there is none else" (Deut. 4:35). Recite your chosen verse (the Jewish version of a mantra) repeatedly until you sense it is filling up your consciousness. The experience may feel sacred. As the American writer and translator Stephen Mitchell puts it, "The point of all spiritual practice is to wake up from the dream of a separate self."[13]

Now,—as an experiential practice to help you plant, cultivate, and nurture the *middah* of the week—seek guidance from God to help you refine those parts of your personality touched upon in the week's *middah* that need more attention. Reaching out to the Divine now may also help you become more aware of and present for a relationship with the Divine.

The Piaseczner would bring the practice to a close by repeatedly chanting Psalms 86:11, "Teach me Your way, O ETERNAL One; I will walk in Your truth; let my heart be undivided in reverence for Your Name," set to a beautiful melody. You might adopt this or another verse in song, or conclude by chanting a deeply resonant melody without words.

These first three steps apply to all of the commentaries. You may wish to bookmark their pages now, since, as you will later see, within each practice section of the forty-seven commentaries, you will be

encouraged to reference these pages to begin the initial three phases of the practice.

4. *The middah practice*. The fourth step is the central focal point in each portion's practice, intended to cultivate the specific *middah* of that portion and awaken one's inner being and connectedness to the Divine in ways that academic review of the selected verse and *middah* cannot. Imaginative visualizations invite you to express yourself creatively and fully, in the past, present, and future, without externally imposed boundaries.

Throughout the *middah* practice, invite yourself to gently move away from what may sometimes feel like a dulled and closed heart to sense open-heartedness and vulnerability. The practice becomes the path to connect with the weekly teachings in your own subjective, emotional, and spiritual way, one that requires less judgment and more openness to possibilities.

To maximize the effect of each week's practice, visit this daily for at least five minutes during the week of the Torah portion, like a gardener paying day-to-day attention to the garden. Since more than five minutes are needed to practice all the steps, choose the step that seems to resonate with you most each day. Or, perhaps, depending on your mood or schedule, you may wish to "sit" for more than five minutes some days and combine a few steps. Feel free to customize your daily practice as it feels meaningful and possible.

As you become acclimated to daily practice, the door opens to many variations. Consider bookending your day by visiting your inner home for five minutes soon after waking up and for five minutes before going to bed. Perhaps on Shabbat or days when you have more free time, spend a little more time (many meditation guides suggest twenty minutes) on your practice.

Guidance for the Gardener

Just as my work in my physical garden never really ceases—requiring daily intention and attention—likewise the spiritual garden I cultivate

through my practice requires ongoing care. A midrash suggests this ongoing engagement between the gardener and the garden: "When the Holy Blessed One created Adam, He gave him all the trees in the Garden of Eden and said, 'See how beautiful and praiseworthy My deeds are. Everything that I have created, for you I have created, take care not to spoil and destroy the world.'"[14]

Rav Ya'akov HaLevi Filber, a contemporary Israeli rabbi, comments on this midrash: "The role of the human being is not merely to abstain from spoiling and destroying the Blessed Holy One's world, because the human being was not created in order to be a passive creation who does not make nor create anything. Rather the fundamental role of the human being is to enhance and complete the world."[15]

The prophet Isaiah compares a person's soul to that of a plant in a garden, proclaiming in reference to the people of Israel, "They are the shoot that I planted, the work of My handiwork in which I glory" (Isa. 60:21). Commenting on this verse, Moshe Alshich, the Alshich HaKadosh (sixteenth century, Turkey and Safed, the Holy Land), sees God as saying, "The soul in each person's body is the shoot that I have planted with My own hands, the spirit that I drew from under My Throne of glory."[16]

Expanding upon these teachings in light of this volume, I encourage readers to see the Divine Creator as having gifted each of us with a "starter garden" of basic *middot* that we can plant and cultivate. As we do, we may increasingly sense the Presence of the Divine, similar to the physical garden that reveals the Presence of the One in nature.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (eighteenth century, Ukraine) even compares conversing with the Omnipotent to making a bouquet out of the beautiful plants we have gathered in our garden.[17] Planting seeds of the Divine can blossom into beautiful bouquets. And, as with my own garden, we not only add; we prune, we weed—we pay attention to cultivating and gently letting go in ways that become a mindful practice in of itself.

A Blessing for You

I hope you will view this book as an infusion of spiritual oxygen of sorts: a hands-on how-to guide for cultivating your spiritual practice—one

Torah portion at a time, one *middah* at a time, one week at a time, one day at a time, one minute and even one moment—this moment—at a time.

Ve-zo't ha-berakhah—and this is the blessing: You, the reader, now have before you a packet of assorted *middot* to plant in your own spiritual garden. The Torah commentaries that follow are your guide to uniquely plant the seeds of the Divine. May the Gardener of all gardeners bless your garden with all the beauty that you hope and dream for, and as it takes root, may your higher consciousness of the Divine blossom.

NOTES ON TRANSLATIONS

1. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical verses follow THE JPS TANAKH: Gender-Sensitive Edition (otherwise known as RJPS, the Revised Jewish Publication Society translation of the Hebrew Bible), issued in print and on Sefaria in 2023.

2. Generally speaking, RJPS adopts the following approach to divine names: The tetragrammaton (YHVH) is typically rendered as "GOD" (in small caps). Other words for God (such as Elohim) are typically rendered as "God." When these terms appear together (e.g. as YHVH Elohim), they are typically rendered as "the ETERNAL God" or "the ETERNAL your God" (with " ETERNAL" in small caps). For further details, see the "Preface to the Gender-Sensitive Edition," xvi–xviii (also available at purl.org/jps/rjps-preface).

3. Unless otherwise indicated, either in the notes or the bibliography, almost all of the other quotations in the commentaries and in the introduction have been translated by this author from the original Hebrew.

4. This volume adheres to the policy of maintaining the original Hasidic masters' God terminology in quotations, to be faithful to how they themselves saw the world. Elsewhere, the commentaries do not gender God, so that readers can experience God however they themselves experience God.

PLANTING SEEDS OF THE DIVINE

1

Genesis (Bere'shit)

Bere'shit

The Need to Connect with Others

> And God created humankind in the divine image, creating it in the image of God—creating them male and female. . . . The ETERNAL God said, It is not good for the Human to be alone.
>
> Gen. 1:27, 2:18

Where We Are

The six days of Creation bring us to the formation of the human being. Every physical entity—from light to animals—precedes this moment.

The formation of the world comes to completion on the seventh day with the introduction of Shabbat—the appointed day of rest.

At First Glance

God creates the human being in the singular, but all other creations (e.g., schools of fish, blades of grass, granules of sand) in the plural. Why?

In the Mishnah, the Rabbis discuss why the human being was created in the singular:

> It was for these reasons that the human being was created as one person: (1) Scripture teaches that anyone who destroys a life is considered to have destroyed an entire world; and anyone who saves a life is considered to have saved an entire world. (2) And also to promote peace among the creations, so that no person would say to their friend, "My ancestors are greater than yours." (3) And also, to express the grandeur of the Holy One blessed be He: For a human being strikes many coins from the same mold, and all the coins are alike. But the King, the King of Kings, the Holy One blessed be He, strikes every person from the mold of the First Person, and yet no

person is quite like the other. Therefore, every person must say, *bishveli nivrah ha'olam*—"For my sake the world was created."[1]

On the above teaching that each person is obligated to say that "for my sake the world was created," Rashi (Shlomo Yitzhaki, eleventh c., France) comments: "That is to say that I am as important as an entire world, and therefore I would not diminish the world through sin; rather, I will enhance the world through good deeds."[2]

And yet, might this teaching foster arrogance and a sense of inflated self-importance? There must be another way to understand this.

A Deeper Dive

By unpacking the letters of the word *bishveli*, the Ba'al Shem Tov (Israel ben Eliezer, eighteenth c., Ukraine) teaches that it does not only mean "for my sake," but also can be read as *b'shvil sheli*, "in my path."[3] In other words, the human being had to be created in the singular to highlight that each one of us has our own unique path. Hence, as the Mishnah teaches, each of us is obligated to say, "For in my path, the world was created."

With a mix of relief and gratitude, I view this as the Creator's expression of a world that leaves no one out. There is more than enough room for each of the world's inhabitants to follow a unique calling and customized path.

This may be the ultimate proclamation of the all-inclusive space that many of us desire. God's world contains space for every human being. God's world does not exclude anyone.

Several generations after the Ba'al Shem Tov, Reb Simcha Bunim of Pryscha (eighteenth–nineteenth c., Poland) expands this idea through a comment on the following Mishnah: "Rebbe said, 'What is the *derech*—"path"—of integrity that a person should choose for oneself? Whatever brings beauty to the doer and invites beauty from the world around them.'"[4]

"That is to say," Reb Simcha Bunim comments,

that the soul of each individual has its own style in the service of God, in the performance of Torah and commandments, which he

should not change [due to societal expectation]. Therefore, he should not take a path that is not special or unique to him, even though he greatly admires the way of service of another individual; he must hold fast to his path. And that is the proof that his path is true. And this is the sense of the above Mishnah that he has a path for himself that is correct for him by which he holds. Nevertheless, he can praise and admire the path of his fellow.[5]

Rav Kook (Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, nineteenth–twentieth c., Jerusalem) suggests that "everyone should greatly cherish one's own unique path."[6] Elsewhere he points out that "true *shalom*—peace—is impossible without appreciating the value of pluralism intrinsic to *shalom*. The various pieces of peace come from a variety of approaches and methods that make it clear how much each one has a place that complements another. Even those methods that appear superfluous or contradictory possess an element of truth that contributes to the mosaic of *shalom*."[7]

Returning to Reb Simcha Bunim: "Thus, for a person to embark on a path of truthfulness requires not only the analytical demand for self-awareness, but the spiritual acumen to recognize that there is a spark of the Divine within each person."[8]

While these teachings may help diminish the above concern that focusing on one's own uniqueness may lead to arrogance and an inflated sense of self, other concerns may arise. For one, even if a person intellectually agrees that it is good to cultivate an awareness of the Divine Spark in other people, might that person ultimately choose to focus solely on cultivating oneself instead?

In Genesis 2:18 we learn: "It is not good for a person to be alone." In light of the previous verse, we might ask: Why is this so? Why is it not good for a person to be alone, especially since this is how God created each of us? Aside from the utilitarian biological, economic, and psychological reasons, we might contemplate the answer to this through a spiritual lens.

Biblical scholar and linguist Nechama Leibowitz (twentieth c., Israel) observes that not only is it not good for an individual human being to be alone; it is also not good for all of humankind. An essential word in

this verse, *he'yot*, is usually translated as "to be"—hence, "It is not good for a person *to be* alone"—but, she says, "to be" is not the most precise translation. *He'yot* is more accurately translated as "existence"—and as such, the teaching is better understood as "It is not good for existence for a person to be alone."

From this, a teaching often attributed to Leibowitz explains that God created each of us as an individual with the inherent *need* to be in relationship with another, to connect with another and to share with another.[9] This simultaneously benefits both the individual and all of humankind.

In bringing these two verses together, where each one complements the other, we may come to realize that each of us is created to explore, discover, encounter, honor, and express our unique inner selves by walking our unique path. Each of our lives possesses inherent value with its own God-bestowed life journey. And this very sense of our individual unique self becomes the most precious gift we can offer another human being.

In fact, through a spiritual lens, the purpose of all of Creation was, and continues, to bring and reveal relationship, closeness, and connection—with oneself, with God, with other human beings, and with all of God's creations. Each time one enters into a relationship with another, one is actually advancing Creation to its next stage, by bringing healing and purpose to the world as a cocreator with our one Creator.

The Practice

1. Begin with breath awareness.
2. Then, reflect on the text.
3. Move to quieting down your mind.

These three steps are explained in detail in the introduction.

4. Visualize what your ideal path in life would look like. Consider your options. What are your thoughts? What feelings awaken for you?

Seeing it as a physical path, visualize yourself as a curious hiker. You've received the opportunity to explore any landscape of your choice. What would be your dream scenario? What would awaken your passion? What

do you believe is worth your dedication? Climbing up a challenging, winding mountain trail in a thick, wooded forest? Walking far along a quiet beach hearing the crashing waves as they meet the shore? Or . . . ?

As you begin to venture out on your chosen path, how do you imagine you will feel? How would you like to feel? And as you meet fellow travelers moving along their own paths, envision that at any intersecting point, the sense of connection enhances your own joy—as if the two of you are excited to share your stories of your individual path with each other. This intersecting, encountering, and sharing with each other brings you closer to each other. And you then realize it was only because you were on the path that is your ideal path, the path that the Divine calls you to embark on, the path that brings inner joy, that you are able to share your inner joy with others who are on their unique paths as well.

Reflect on this, examining it as a curious observer. What are you thinking? How are you feeling?

How does it feel not to connect—and then to connect?

Noaḥ

Talking to the Divine

> Make an opening for daylight in the ark.
>
> Gen. 6:16

> Then GOD said to Noah, "Go into the ark,
> with all your household."
>
> Gen. 7:1

Where We Are

The six days of Creation bring us to the formation of the human being. Every physical entity—from light to animals—precedes this moment. The formation of the world comes to completion on the seventh day with the introduction of Shabbat—the appointed day of rest.

Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden for having eaten from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Eve gives birth to two sons, Cain and Abel, and when they are grown Cain kills Abel. Ten generations after Adam, humanity's evils abound. God decides that the depravity must be destroyed so that a new world can emerge in its place. He calls Noah, the righteous one, to build an ark and populate it with pairs of all living creatures. Noah, his family, and their menagerie will act as progenitors of this new world.

At First Glance

In his commentary, Rashi (Shlomo Yitzhaki, eleventh c., France) wonders why God commanded Noah to build an ark when there were so many less painstaking ways to save him. Rashi offers a talmudic explanation: "so that the people around him had time during the 120 years it took

Noah to build the ark to ask 'What do you need this for?' and so that he might answer them, 'The Blessed Holy One is about to bring a flood upon the world'—perhaps this may cause people to reconsider their mean-spirited behavior."[1] Even in this ultimate judgment, God leaves space for a turning toward good.

As this first section of this parashah (Torah portion) continues, we read a detailed description of how Noah is meant to build the ark. In the midst of these instructions, Noah is told to make a *tzohar*. What exactly is a *tzohar*? Its root denotes some form of light, and that makes sense: while living inside the ark for a prolonged period of time, Noah's family and all the animals would need to be able to see. But what kind of light was it? Rashi observes: "Some say this was a window; others say that it was a precious stone that gave light to them."[2] Ibn Ezra (Abraham ibn Ezra, eleventh–twelfth c., Spain) holds that *tzohar* specifically "means an opening through which light would enter."[3]

And yet how could one window, or precious stone, or opening illuminate the entire ark, three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide, and thirty cubits high (even if a cubit's exact measurement remains unclear)?

This apparent disconnect may drive us to search for an additional understanding—one that may lead us to uncover the hidden *middah* of talking to God.

A Deeper Dive

The Ba'al Shem Tov (Israel ben Eliezer, eighteenth c., Ukraine) teaches that the word *teivah*, normally translated as "ark," can also mean "word." By reversing the order of the first verse quoted above ("Make an opening for daylight in the ark"), he understands the verse to also mean, "Let the *teivah*—word [of Torah and prayer]—*matzhir*—radiate light."[4]

This type of light would seem to convey a depth of understanding: a sense of clarity, spiritual illumination, and awareness, as in the phrase, "Oh, I see. . . ." In other words, the words of Torah, and the words of prayer, will guide us, nourish us, and heal us.

Through the Ba'al Shem Tov's teaching, we can understand the Creator's invitation to "come into the *teivah*" as "come into the word of

prayer." There, we will find tranquility. There, nothing will extinguish our eternal flame—our love for the Divine. And there, too, we will be safe—from the waters of the flood.

We might arrive at this spiritual teaching by another pathway. Song of Songs (8:7) exhorts, "Vast floods cannot quench love, Nor rivers drown it." Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (eighteenth–nineteenth c., Belarus) explains: the vast floods refer to our preoccupation with earthly matters—financial sustainability, health-related issues, family, and other relationship issues.[5] The love that cannot be quenched is understood as the love for the Divine embedded in each of us.

But how do we go about "entering the ark" to survive the flood and experience this love? The great-grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (eighteenth–nineteenth c., Ukraine), teaches the spiritual practice of *hitbodedut*. The word itself means "to cause oneself to be alone." Rebbe Nachman would stress to his followers the importance of dedicating a significant time each morning to talking to God alone.

Ideally, he and his followers would enter a forest alone or otherwise seclude themselves wherever they could speak from the heart, opening themselves to uninhibited, unfiltered, pure connection to God. Yet *hitbodedut* was not intended to replace traditional participation in the daily communal morning prayer service. Rather, Rebbe Nachman intended for *hitbodedut* practice to precede the codified morning service in synagogue.

However, the Piaseczner Rebbe (Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, twentieth c., Poland) pointed out that holiness could not necessarily be summoned by set schedule. "Quite commonly, when we pray there is no inner motion to holiness, as one may not be ready to awaken spiritually," he lamented. "[Similarly,] the times when we do feel moved and alert we do not pray, as it may not be the set time for prayer."[6] Taking this understanding to heart, many modern Jews have come to engage in *hitbodedut* practice at any time during the day when they feel inspired.

Zev Wolf of Zhitomir (eighteenth c., Ukraine) teaches as well that there is no one way to come into your *teivah*. When, he says, God tells Noah to "take of everything that is eaten and store it away, to serve as food for you and for them" (Gen. 6:21–22), this "is hinting at the varied

possibilities of awakening within this service of prayer."[7] Some Jews may experience spiritual awakening from a prayer established in the prayer book. Others may hike in the woods or walk on the beach or sit at home. Likewise, some will awaken in community and others may awaken in solitude. Most importantly, the Divine invites each one of us to be in conversation, and in a way that speaks from the heart.

The Practice

1. Begin with breath awareness.
2. Then, reflect on the text.
3. Move to quieting down your mind.

These three steps are explained in detail in the introduction.

4. Visualize this scenario: You arrive at synagogue (or any other venue for communal prayer) one morning to pray, feeling more obligated than eager. You pronounce every prayer in the prayer book somewhat robotically while keeping pace with the community. From time to time, you notice your mind wandering to home concerns, business concerns, health concerns, family concerns, on and on. When the service ends, you close the prayer book, wish everyone a nice day, and leave. *How do you feel?*

Now, visualize the next scenario: You move through your day, maybe as robotically as you prayed in synagogue that morning, when suddenly, unexpectedly, you become aware of feeling deeply broken-hearted and overwhelmed. You seek out a moment to be with yourself. The call to pray surfaces. It feels as if the Divine is inviting you to honor this moment—to enter into your own ark, your own *teivah*, with your own words. Suddenly, you find yourself speaking to the Creator, your words rising spontaneously within you. *How do you feel*?

And now visualize the concluding scenario: Over the past weeks, you have been cultivating a "speaking to God on my own when troubled" practice. Now, you enter a synagogue or other communal prayer venue for morning prayers and hear yourself whisper the Piaseczner's teach-

ing, "When you undertake this practice, you won't ignore even a sigh, because even with a simple, slight sigh about this-worldly matters, a sigh that comes from within your *heart*, the heart of the Israelite, you can attain a great revelation of your soul and bring her closer to God."[8]

How do you feel?