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SEEKING AND ATTAINING PERSONAL CLOSENESS TO GOD, THE CREATOR AND MASTERMIND OF CREATION

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“How can I get closer to God? How can I feel God’s presence in my life?” are questions we ask when we feel a spiritual need, something within us that seeks higher meaning and purpose, a longing to go beyond the endless feedback loop of our own limited imagination and appetites and their gratification.

Our dissatisfaction may deepen when we begin to see that our treasured moral autonomy,¹ measuring goodness by what feels good to us personally—what’s convenient, comfortable, and career-enhancing—often is not durable: that it doesn’t produce long-lived fulfillment and happiness, and it doesn’t relieve our recurring feelings of emptiness, fragmentation, and futility. For some, that awareness comes with the despair that shadows days of feeling powerless to alter the external conditions and internal disabilities that poison our happiness. We may even reify such circumstances, convinced that it’s all just the way life is, that it’s far beyond anyone’s power to change.

But in those moments we may also admit that we don’t always know or live up to what will turn out to be rewarding for ourselves and our loved ones, our community, our business, and even our nation; and we may be forced to admit to ourselves that we’re not the best arbiters of right and wrong that should guide our lives to make them meaningful and satisfying.

When we come to the point of desperation, the crisis of recognition that we’re not in control of everything and we don’t have all the answers to life’s challenges, when it feels like we’re going over the edge, it’s also possible, if we’re searching for help, to begin to see we don’t have to be the victim of circumstances beyond our control or the self-sabotaging subject of our own personality and character defects—that there is hope and faith we can actually transform ourselves, making our way with the Torah of God to guide us.

Of course, we can continue to ignore the wreckage of our own lives and that of family, community, and democracy all around us, rationalizing our own way through the wasteland of abandoned moral-spirituality.

On the other hand, we can finally admit without reservations, that we don’t own and control everything. We can admit we have been acting foolishly, like immature know-it-alls who do think they own and control everything but in fact possess nothing of true and lasting value. We can swim against the tide and choose to live with moral clarity and purpose by getting closer to the Source of our existence, to God, the *righteous*² Creator and Mastermind of Creation.

The answer to the question of *how* to do that depends on whether we mean “closer” from our point of view or God’s. If it’s about our limited experience as one of humankind, then whatever gives us joy, a feeling of releasing our tensions and stress, makes us want to laugh and sing—gets us out of ourselves—*feels* like we’re closer to God.

Perhaps you have tried to get closer to God from your point of view and, for a few moments or hours or even days, you had feelings and thoughts of being near to God. But you discovered it didn’t have any staying power. It didn’t transform the hum-drum quality, the emotional and spiritual drudgery of your day-to-day life; it didn’t radically change the deep disharmony within you, which often left you questioning the meaning of your life and how you’ve been living it; and maybe it didn’t meaningfully change your ungainly relationships at home, at work, and at play. Perhaps, nothing about your life left you truly fulfilled, contented, and at *peace*;³ nothing remedied your deeper aimlessness, regardless of your commitments to work or relationships or recreation, despite having achieved a great deal of mastery in those realms.

Torah Judaism, on the other hand, approaches the question of how to get close to God from *God’s* point of view. That *we* are not the source of all *truth* ought to be obvious in so far as we’re seeking to get close to *the Source* of everything. The question then becomes: How can I get close to God from God’s point of view?

In Genesis 15:1, the Torah describes how Abraham got close to God: “...the word of Adonai came to Abram⁴ in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram; *I* am your

shield, and your *reward* [רָשָׁן] will be great.”⁵ (Emphasis added.)

Abraham’s existence was about to be radically reordered, from having comfort and prosperity through his mastery of material circumstances to a life in which his “rewards” will be *spiritual*. From then on he will make great sacrifices but the effect will be to clarify a previously elusive desire to express some kind of goodness he could feel within himself—his yet-to-be-fully aroused soul. His reward will be limitless, yet it will seem to require no sacrifice at all.

What exactly, then, would be the reward?

When we fulfill a commandment⁶ (Hebrew: *mitzvah*), like showing *compassion* for someone who desperately needs to be treated with kindness, simply because God teaches us to help that person cope with painful problems, *we* feel better. It’s a very special kind of feeling, a *spiritual reward*, not like earning money for doing a job; but, instead, it’s the feeling we have when we use the best part of ourself, our soul, given to us by God, to add our special goodness to the goodness in the world that God has created and directs. Then we experience the wonder and beauty of allying ourself to God in the creation and masterminding of goodness in the world.

In this experience we come to know first-hand the farthest reaches of our soul, that capacity to add unique goodness in the world, a gift the Creator breathed into our species—which brings to our consciousness an unmatched awareness of the closeness of our Creator (*kiravat elokim*—קִרְבַּת אֱלֹהִים).⁷ In effect, since we have realigned our own will, we are now palpably accompanied from moment to moment in daily life by the Creator and Mastermind of Creation. So we come to experience what Psalm 73:28 describes: “But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works.”⁸

The hurdle we face in attaining closeness to God is that God is a spirit—non-material (בְּלִתֵּי גוּף). We can no more comprehend the incorporeality of God than we can know how our own incorporeal mind works—that is, the ability of our *soul-mind* (*neshama deiah*—נֶשְׁמַת דַּיָּה) to understand the spiritual and emotional meaning of *moral freedom*,⁹ and to use our intellect, reasoning and creativity to act on that understanding, a capability that contemporary neurobiology has demonstrated to exist operationally apart from, and regulates, the brain.

The *spiritual* essence of our soul-mind, which we experience through the *physical* brain, is much the way we experience the *spiritual* essence of God (as described to us in the Torah), through the *physical* creation—a parallel spirituality that links us to God, the Creator of our soul-mind, Who “breathed into” us (i.e., implanted) our spiritual wherewithal to ally ourself to God’s providential unfolding and masterminding of the Creation.

The DIY details of bringing to life the spiritual nexus between God and oneself may be illustrated by considering how we get close to a spiritual essence other than God—say, *truth*, for example. Then one’s questions would be, “How can I get closer to the truth? How can I feel the presence of truth in my life? Of course, since in essence truth is spiritual, without inherent physicality, we can only get close to it by actually living the qualities we ascribe to it. In other words, we can only get close to it when we tell the truth,¹⁰ especially when other lives and significant spiritual values, such as justice and compassion, are at stake.

Consider again, we know the spirit of God through its expression in the physical world, which is the same way we know our own spirit, our soul-mind, by its expression in the physical world. The human soul-mind regulates the brain, which directs the rest of the embodied neural system that governs the musculature, that finally powers our physical movement.¹¹ We shall never understand the spirit we call God any more than we shall ever fully understand the fundamental character of our own spirit, except as a gift we receive, unlike all other creatures, in the image of our Creator. Likewise, we can never truly know God’s incorporeal spirit. But we can comprehend how God’s spirit is manifested in the Creation, which is revealed to us in its physical and spiritual lawfulness (the cause of which, the scientific laws of physics cannot illuminate).

We know the physical lawfulness of the Creation from physics, chemistry, astronomy, engineering, and the like. None of us doubt the lawfulness of gravity or innumerable other scientific laws. But for some of us, it’s much harder to accept the spiritual lawfulness of the Creation, which nevertheless is true.

The *mitzvah* to tell the *truth*,¹² for example, is a *spiritual law*. Not only because we can read it in the Torah; but because, given the unity and integration of God’s Creation, there is a kind of dialectical link between physical and moral-spiritual laws, such that a lie will inevitably influence some aspect of the physical universe because of its lawfulness. It’s a lesson most of us learn in childhood: one lie inevitably leads to another lie, and another, and another, until the whole edifice of deceit crumbles when their effects encounter the lawfulness of physical life and we’re caught up in the blowback of our wrongdoing, sometimes immediately, sometimes long-delayed, sometimes personally, sometimes indirectly by the effects our lies have on loved ones, friends, and others.

The point is, the spiritual lawfulness of the Creation is not equivalent to having laws written into statute books, which may or may not be enforced, depending on police and prosecution resources at any moment in time, the weather, or sheer dumb luck. Instead, the righteous *justice* of God’s spiritual laws has been integrated into the moral-spiritual infrastructure¹³ of human society. They are always enforced—sometimes within minutes, sometimes taking a lifetime.

Abraham's transformation from living for material rewards to living for spiritual rewards describes how we can get close to God by activating our soul-mind, our inherent, distinctly human potential to adopt and act on values that extend beyond self-interest to Torah-ideals, even at great personal cost, because we perceive them as closing the distance between us and the Creator's lawfulness of the physical and spiritual worlds. When we do that, we get close to God according to what God regards as rewarding, which is revealed to us in God's Law, the *mitzvot*, which govern the entire Creation.

This is why Torah-Judaism has always taught that the only way to get close to God on God's terms is by honoring the *mitzvot* conveyed to us in the Torah—committing ourselves to the Torah's demands for righteousness, truth, justice, freedom, peace, and compassion. Since everything else is diversionary self-delusion, which we engage in to relieve the anomie and alienation that comes with the endlessly unfulfilling, mindless pursuit of material rewards—which in time, ironically, lead many of us on a round-about path to discover our hoped-for life of meaning, clarity and purpose in spiritual rewards, as Abraham did.

¹ Now, in the early decades of the twenty-first century, “autonomy” in America is widely regarded as the criterion of personal life that trumps all other values. Sociologically, dedication to moral autonomy has evolved into a cultural phenomenon of mass narcissistic self-preoccupation, self-conceit, and self-entitlement, weakening the institutions of family, community, enterprise, and government. This contemporary incarnation of autonomy is a far cry from its etymological history, beginning in ancient Greece, where *autonomia*, from *auto-nomos*, referred to the self-governing city-state. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, autonomy was a much-considered concept in moral and political philosophy, often in relation to an individual’s “personal liberty” within a broader political context.

² God’s Sovereignty may be thought to be righteously exercised because it is not random but gauged to our actions, on whether they uplift and dignify humankind in particular and the Creation generally or degrade and destroy them, always judging us according to the Torah’s *mitzvot* that clarify the choices we have and their eventual consequences.

³ Peace (*shalom*—שלום) is understood as *completeness*—that one’s life achieves an otherwise impossible harmony based on the total integration of body, mind, and spirit with God’s commandments (*mitzvot*), which have been gifted to us in the Torah as the best means to navigate the Creation and align our will with Divine Providence. However, the conceptual essentials of *shalom* apply not only to our personal life but also to our communities, politics, environmental policies, and international relations.

⁴ Abraham’s name before it was changed in Exodus 17:4-5

אחר הדברים האלה הִיָּה דָּבָר-יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם בַּמַּחֲזֵה לֵאמֹר אֶל-תִּירָא אַבְרָם אֲנֹכִי מִגּוֹ לְךָ שְׂכָרְךָ הֲרַבָּה מְאֹד

⁶ Both Jews and non-Jews have been known to mistakenly believe that “observant” (orthodox) Jews are forced somehow to obey all the commandments. Although the Torah does not explicitly mention “free will” (except in regard to offerings), it makes clear the people are free to choose whether or not to obey the commandments. In Genesis 2:16-17, God commands Adam not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, so Adam has the choice to obey or not. In Deuteronomy 30:19, we read: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.” However, we have little choice as to the *consequences* of failing to uphold God’s law. Practically, the *mitzvot* are understood to be God’s gift, to help us avoid the moral and ethical pitfalls we encounter. For example, in Deuteronomy 6:24 we read: “And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that He might preserve us alive, as it is at this day.”

⁷ From Psalm 73:28—בְּאֵדֵי יְהוָה מַחְסֵי לְסַפֵּר כָּל-מַלְאכֹתֶיךָ | וְאֲנִי | קִרְבַּת אֱלֹקִים לִי-טוֹב שְׁתִּי | הוֹדוּ מַחְסֵי לְסַפֵּר כָּל-מַלְאכֹתֶיךָ (“But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works”).

⁸ Ibid. In a similar spirit, Psalm 23 (our translation here) expresses for many their experience of dedication to non-material rewards, such as justice and compassion: “God is my shepherd, I lack nothing. I’ve been given green pastures to lie in, led to waters in places of repose, my life renewed again. And guided in the righteous paths, as befits the name of God. Though I walk in a valley of darkness, I fear no harm for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You spread a table before me, for all my enemies to see. You anoint my head with oil, my cup is overflowing. Only goodness and love I’ll pursue then, all the days of my life. And I will live in the house of God, for all my remaining years.” (An accompanying streaming music file can be found at https://www.gatherthepeople.org/resources/Media/21_GOD_IS_MY_SHEPHERD.mp3.)

א מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד יְהוָה רֵעִי לֹא אֶחְסָר: ב בְּנֹאוֹת דָּשָׁא יִרְבִּיצֵנִי עַל-מִי מִנְחוֹת יְנַהֲלֵנִי: ג נִפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבָב יִנְחֵנִי
בְּמַעְגְלֵי-צֶדֶק לְמַעַן שְׂמוֹ: ד גַּם כִּי-אֶלֶךְ בְּגִיא צַלְמוֹת לֹא-אִירָא רָע כִּי-אַתָּה עִמָּדִי שְׁבֵטְךָ וּמִשְׁעַנְתְּךָ הֵמָּה
יִנְחֵמֵנִי: ה תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי | שְׁלַחֵן נֶגֶד צַרְרֵי דַשְׁנָת בְּשִׁמּוֹן רֹאשֵׁי כוֹסֵי רוּחַ: ו אַךְ טוֹב וְחָסֵד יִדְפּוּנֵי כָּל-יְמֵי תַי
וּשְׁבֵתִי בְּבֵית-יְהוָה לְאֶרֶךְ יָמִים

⁹ *Moral freedom*, the inherent potential human ability to choose between good and evil, is the cornerstone of every other kind of freedom, but especially the political and economic varieties.

¹⁰ However, exceptions exist that enable one to navigate complex ethical situations where strict adherence to the truth might result in greater harm or conflict. Yevamot 65b teaches that one may alter the truth to preserve peace between people. Similarly, to maintain peace between a husband and wife or between friends, in some circumstances it is permissible to withhold certain truths or to present them in a less direct way. If telling the truth would lead to self-aggrandizement, altering the truth is permitted. For instance, when a person is asked if they have achieved something notable, they may minimize their accomplishments to avoid arrogance. Bava Metzia 23b-24a allows for altering the truth to protect someone’s dignity, especially in cases where the truth could cause needless embarrassment. If telling the truth would put someone in physical, psychological, or emotional danger, sometimes it is permissible to lie. This includes situations where telling the truth could lead to unjust punishment or harm. Ketuvot 17a allows for small lies that are intended to make others feel good, such as complimenting a bride on her beauty, even if one doesn’t believe she is exceptionally beautiful. The Talmud also discusses when one may lie to prevent theft.

¹¹ That the soul directs and governs the body is a well-established theme in Judaism, as reflected in several sources. It's implied in Berakhot 10a and Niddah 30b. Midrash Tanchuma, Pekudei 3 discusses the metaphor of the soul as a king and the body as the king's servant, suggesting that the soul governs the body and that the body should serve the soul's higher purposes. Maimonides (*Guide for the Perplexed*) discusses the relationship between body and soul, emphasizing that the intellect (a faculty of the soul-mind) is what truly defines a human being and that the body serves the intellect.

¹² Exodus 20:16

¹³ See Moshe ben Asher, "Moral-Spiritual Infrastructure: Touchstone of Movement-Building Community Organizing," *Social Policy*, 50(4):55-64 (Winter 2020).