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Final Paper—Kabbalah and Sacred Psychology

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Humility and the Artist

Of all the stories on humility (anavah), I most love the tale of Simha Bunam of Pzssiska, who “used to carry two kvittel in his pockets,” on one of which he had written, “I am dust and ashes”; and on the other, “This entire world was created for my sake.” (1) This is a central challenge of humility: to know true humility, grounded in God, we cannot negate our sense of self, but must center it between living as dust and ashes, no more significant in ourselves than any other grain of ash; and, on the other hand, living as though our particularity matters—each of us one face of God, a unique contributor to the physical-spiritual world.

To find this center place, in which we are able to discern when to pull each of these kvittel from our pockets, requires attention to the balance between Chesed and Gevurah. For the open-heartedness of Chesed alone requires little in the way of self-consideration. One can be dust and ashes and also live by a generous heart, welcoming in and serving all who come—perhaps even seeing “all who come” as greater and more worthy than one’s self. But Chesed alone will unbalance us, diminishing our capacities to understand what we have to give, so that our

humility becomes bent into something that resembles humility, but is really a stopping-up of the flow of God.

In Toldot Yakov Yosef 172c by Yaacov Yosef of Polnoye, we read that “It is possible to be so humble that your very humility keeps you far from God. A humble person may not believe that his own prayer can cause the Presence to flow through all the worlds. But how then can you believe that even angels are nourished by your words? Know the power of your prayer and serve your God in fullness!” (2) This is a particular challenge for artists. A startling number of my former students at the New Hampshire Institute of Art struggled to believe their art was worthwhile to the world, regardless of their talent. Many visual artists cease making art once they leave a school setting, as do many writers. If we look at everything we do as a form of prayer, then our work, too, is prayer. How are we to know the nourishing power of our prayers—or our words—or our work? How do we discern?

As we choose our journeys and goals, we need Gevurah to help our discernment, to keep the Presence of God flowing. Attention to the limits and restraint of Gevurah occurs when we remember to “pull out” the latter kvittel: “This entire world was created for my sake.” If the world was created for my sake, I had better be careful that I don’t allow my energies to be frittered away. I must treat with care and thanksgiving the time and gifts I have been given, choosing carefully how to invest them. For if I am serving God, then to let my talents skitter away in the wind is disrespectful, and not humble at all. To live in

humility is to respect my presence on the earth in the service of the greater Presence of the universe.

In some ways, it is too much humility, and thus *ineffective* humility, that has kept me from completing and publishing my own fictive and poetic works thus far. I have an excellent education in writing, and my work is strong enough for publication. I do have a chapbook and a few publications, from those times when I pushed myself to a spurt of sending work out. I have friends whose agents have agreed to look at my books once they are completed.

Yet time and again, I have turned away from my books, and turned towards the “real people” who needed me. This was a quality of Chesed, and I honor it as such, because the great and abiding love I have for others has shaped my life and has made profound differences in the lives of those I love. There are one or two people who might not be here on the earth, living with open hearts, had I not entered their lives. I would never undo what I gave them, for it was rich and bountiful, and everything I gave returned to me tenfold. But at the same time, I do believe that “dust and ashes” entered into me too much in other ways. While my classmates worked on publishing their books, and moved into careers with sustainable incomes, I did not. Often, in spite of all the encouragement I received, I suffered from being unsure that what I have to say, and how I say it, is more than “dust and ashes.” It is easy to think: *there are so many out there who are at least as good; I am not needed there.*

Thus, at 41, having left a solid income and college teaching position to enter seminary, I find myself facing a mountain of debt that cannot be paid by a minister's salary alone. Now that I have three children, the landscape of my world has changed. I cannot afford to neglect Gevurah, nor to practice any but the truest humility, the kind that links me to Keter. My creations come from "the darkness that shines." (3) And it is true that "To connect with this [I] have to let go of [my] concepts and go beyond the small ego." (4) To go beyond small ego is to move to a place of deeper presence and less judgment, including less judgment about the self. It is to live in the flow of energies that are, perhaps, not tangible or visible, but run a palpable course that can carry me. It is to relinquish the notion that I am the creator of my works.

When I do go beyond "small ego", what comes—poetry, fiction, nonfiction—is useful. It brings joy and more to those who read or hear it. But what I create is not from me; it is from beyond me, from "Divine No-thing-ness" of Ayin. (5) In the space of creation, I disappear, I am in the space of Ayin, and through me things are born. In the words of my Sufi Dhikr teacher, Sheikh Yassir Chadly, "There is nothing you can think that God did not create, and nothing you can create that God did not think of first, that does not exist because God created it." I believe in the mystical power of *muse*, of learning a craft in order to be a channel for the holy. The broadest, most direct muse is the spirit of God Itself, and when I am connected and beyond my self, I feel like a clear channel of light.

Time and space and being have disappeared, and there is only what I am creating, and its connection to something not-me.

There is no distance between God and me. There is no “me” at all. I move into Ayin, without content or form, and then move out of it again through the form of story or sound. But I am not fully out of it. I am still in there, in and out at once, Ayin and the world of the hands, typing, and the story taking form, and then skimming into the dark shine of nothingness, hardly aware of what comes through me until I am here again in my body, and I read it.

After the writing is over, and the piece lives in the world, I get stuck. What now? It is birthed. It is here. It is not an umbilical cord between myself and Ayin any more. Now the world calls for judgment. Is it good? Is it worthy? Is there something to be done with it? To send it out, I must believe it worthy. To send it out implies hubris! Surely I should make it better first. Surely it should remain here by my side until it is good enough. It is not good enough if it is not perfect! But to be perfect, to seek perfection before venturing into the world, is not humble.

If I follow the luminous thread of self-less-ness, the clear breath of being a vessel or a chamber for the divine, I can live in gratitude and deep humility. The question becomes: how to do this during the sending-out phase, the letting-go phase of my work. I must look at myself with Chesed, be openhearted enough to believe in this work as “of use” in the world. I must use Gevurah to place limits on myself, to instruct myself in the use of my time and the value of the work as one

manifestation of God. I must be filled with humility, pausing to be grateful for the chance even to send work out, and praying thus: “Align [my] will with the divine will, and the Holy One will make [my] will its own.” (6) I will put my work out there. If it is the will of God, it will find a home in the world beyond me. If it is not the will of God, it will not. I need not be attached to either outcome. I need only continue to be the vessel, the chamber, the conduit for what comes.

This is related to equanimity, too. To find that praise and blame for my work mean nothing. To be attached only to the process of creation, and to the daily work of submitting my work to venues where it may be read, God-willing and if it is in the service of God. I love the idea of being like a Shofar. “A shofar itself does not contain any sound. It only produces sound when someone blows through it. It is therefore written, ‘Lift up your voice like a Shofar.’” —(Orach Le’Chaim by R. Avraham Chaim of Zlatchov, trans. R. Aryeh Kaplan) □ (7) I imagine myself as the Shofar. Just as it has a whole and holy form in order to make sound, I must learn the craft of writing, so that I am an instrument through which divine breath can flow. If the Shofar were broken, it would not be a Shofar, and if I were not trained in writing, I would not be a writer. Each has a form, but neither is the living force that comes through to make audible impressions on those who are listening.

It is a great *relief* to think this way. It is *relief* to live with humility. I can work harder and more easily when I need not be attached to the outcome. Then the work of my heart—which has always been to do the work God called me to do—

can flourish. I can live by serving God with the gifts God gave me. I no longer have to be haunted by the echoes of what I have not done, nor wait for the right time to do them. I can acknowledge that the time is now, for I feel God's time upon me. I can work without concern of anything but genuineness in the process of universal connection that writing brings.

□□ It is certainly a form of prayer. As Or Ha'emet 2b, teachings of the Maggid collected by Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev says, "A person should be so absorbed in prayer that he is no longer aware of his own self. There is nothing for him but the flow of life; all his thoughts are with God. He who still knows how intensely he is prayer has not yet overcome the bonds of self." (8) To overcome the bonds of self, as happens in writing and prayer, is an opening thing. The heart, and Chesed, are therefore happy—open—alive. Meanwhile Gevurah continues to structure time and limits to make a space for this prayer and overcoming of self.

To set aside time for writing, or for any art, is to make room for the breath of God. To be an artist of any kind calls for the development of sheleimut—"the ability to hold and contain opposing forces within our selves." (9) Not only are Chesed and Gevurah Sephirot that must be held in balance within me, but also the kvittel—two forces—two beliefs. When I am writing, neither enters in, for I am closer to Ayin. But when it comes time to publish, I will pull out "the world was created for my sake" and send out my work—and then, once it is gone, allow myself to be "dust and ashes."

I will continue to struggle with this, I know. Even now, writing this paper, I hesitate to send it. I have been so ill, and I do not trust my brain to be clear, my voice to be what I would like it to be, to bring enough warmth to my subject. There is so much more I would like to say! But the time comes for letting things go to a reader. I would be a fool to assume that magically, with one stroke of insight, I could find perfect balance, knowing the perfect time, no matter how I would like that to happen.

The acceptance of the fact that this struggle will continue over time is a kind of humility, itself. I see it as one of the forces of the universe, or God, that we become unbalanced, then balanced, in our seeking of virtues. Perhaps this balance-unbalance process is the greatest gift of God, for we can more easily accept others in their sway from small ego to boundless gratitude, from low self-esteem to grandiosity to true humility. Accepting our flaws in this way is humble, and working to improve them is also humble; and doing both at once while also acknowledging our beauty is perhaps the most humble of all—for it can bring us closer to God when we see our imperfection and our perfection, in one moment, intertwined.

*References 1-8 from class handouts on humility; reference 9 from *Sacred Therapy*, p. 222)