

The Evolution of 'Being with God' Through the Bible

Rosh Hashanah 2009

Jordan Michels - Copyright September 2009

One way of understanding the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, is as a chronicle of a peoples' relationship with themselves, each other, and especially their unknown, unmanifest, potential. These stories tell us of a changing understanding of our place and our role in the world. The essence of these relationships can be found in conversations between human and God.

The very first conversation between human and God recorded in the Torah was after Adam and Eve ate of the tree of knowledge, when they suddenly became aware of their nakedness. Apparently, they believed that they must have done something bad, because they attempted to cover themselves with vegetation. Next, God entered the garden. Interestingly God made no accusations or judgments or guilt trips. He did not ask Adam, "What have you done?" Instead God asked, "Where are you?"

Why did God ask, "Where are you?" God surely knew where Adam was. How can one hide from an omnipresent awareness? It is Adam's answer to this vital question that is so enlightening. Adam answered, "I was naked, so I hid." Only a baby knows how to hide from such a being. This peek-a-boo covering of our eyes was the final act that fully invested us in our ego nature, fully believing and defending our judgments of good and bad, right and wrong, true and false.

The most interesting part follows immediately after the above exchange. Not even mentioning the apple thing, God poses another question, "So who told you that you were naked?" Adam has the audacity to ignore this question altogether, and proceeds to blame Eve for what he imagines to have been his transgression. "She gave it to me." Eve in turn, blames the serpent. "The Serpent made me do it." Perhaps one way of looking at the Torah is as a way to answer God's unanswered question, "So who told us we are naked?"

Often the story of the Garden is misunderstood in seeing the eating of the fruit as a terrible mistake. The eating of the fruit, though, is a metaphor for our becoming self-reflective beings. This was an essential part of our evolution as human beings. The Eden story really is about the inevitable sense of separation that our ego awareness experiences, and the beginnings of human suffering.

Now, Adam can differentiate good from bad. In fact it is essential for his survival that he do so. God's little joke is that Adam can really never with any certainty know what is ultimately good, as he does not know the eventual outcome. All we have is our predications and our intuitions, and neither can ever be perfect. Perhaps we should call it the tree of the approximations or hunches.

Adam has traded his sense of Oneness for an illusion of knowledge. He feels naked, inadequate and ashamed. His impulse is to hide. He believes that some clothing might help this feeling. This is the beginning of his quest for identity.

As we created this new thing called identity, we became dependant on it. Ultimately, this is the source of all addiction, as we are afraid to lose our covering and feel naked again. We dislike fundamentalism when we disagree with someone. But fundamentalism is nothing more than taking a finite idea and believing it to represent an absolute truth. Fundamentalism is a cultural epidemic, and we have all been infected.

Attachment is a state where our well being or happiness depends on perceived positive events. The experience of suffering is the inevitable result, as our mind attempts to control the outcome of events we create resistance to the flow of life in our mind and body. We experience this resistance as tension, guilt, and anxiety. These in turn lead to paranoia and disease.

In the ego state of separation all other beings are seen as either serving our needs or as a potential threat. Conflict is inevitable and is expressed as control, power struggles, greed, defense, and attack.

So where is Adam really? He is caught up in his ideas about who he is and what he believes and trapped by his overwhelming feelings of shame, inadequacy and emptiness. In short he is no longer in the present moment where life energy flows and where the "I am" consciousness dwells.

To some degree, most of us are still hiding. We clothe ourselves with parts of our parents, our teachers, our culture. The amazing human capacity is our ability to create a sense of unity out of all these disparate parts. We call this unity of personality our self. This self is vital to navigate the world of time and space we live in, but it is not really who we are.. Indeed, to the degree this self controls us it enslaves us. The Greek philosophy tells us the key to a good life is to know thyself.

But the Jew asks, "But which self should we know?" We are not defined by minds or personalities, but rather our position and our orientation in relation to God, self and other. Our deepest essence is divine as we are made in God's image. In this sense all encounters are a meeting of two aspects of God. In the whole of the Torah, God never asks "who are you?", but only "where are you?"

I suspect that Adam didn't think "I'm hiding" was really the best answer to God's question. Still, it took another 20 generations before someone gave a better response.

As a matter of fact, after ten generations God became so impatient, seeing what monstrous creatures we were becoming in our ego mind consciousness that he/she almost put us all out our misery with a flood. But one man gave God some hope that we might be redeemable. What was so special about Noah? Well, the Torah is not too clear on this, but does say that Noah liked to walk with God. Perhaps, God reasoned if we walk along far enough together we might actually start a decent conversation. So Noah and his family were saved and we advanced another 10 generation.

Abraham was the first to give a meaningful response to God's greeting. In the binding of Isaac story, God is about to tell Abraham to take Isaac to the hills and offer him as a sacrifice. The Torah says, God put Abraham to the test. God called to him, "Abraham." Abraham answered with one word, "Hineini." Here I am.

This simple response forever set a standard for being truly present with the other. In hindsight there can be no other reasonable answer. When the infinite, eternal consciousness asks for an audience how can any response bounded in time and space be

adequate. What can one say to the I am consciousness but, “Here I am, present, available, open, ready, responsive, alive”. Nothing else is real.

Most readers assume the test is about Abraham’s obedience, but it is interesting that the word test comes immediately before the call and response, “Hineini”. Perhaps, the real test was just giving the right answer to God speaking Abraham’s name. Was Abraham really here, fully present? The binding of Isaac is a difficult story to understand. Rather than see the binding of Isaac as a test of Abraham’s obedience, it might be that at this stage of our evolution the only way that Abraham knew how to be fully present to the divine will was to be unquestioning obedient; not because God demanded Abraham’s obedience, but rather because for Abraham, full presence was synonymous with obedience.

To understand hineini we must understand it’s opposite. Judgment is the investment in an idea that is required for our happiness. It is the primal idolatry. The release of judgment is letting go of the past, or more correctly our memories and beliefs about the past.

Another name for this process is forgiveness. Forgiveness allows our focus to back into the present. Ultimately, hineini means dissolving all resistance to what is. In other words, it is complete acceptance of the present moment.

After another 500 years another shift in the human God encounter occurs. While Moses is in the wilderness he sees a burning bush. God called to him out of the bush, “Moses!, Moses!” Moses answered, Hineini (Here I am). And God said, “Do not come any closer, remove your sandals from your feet for the ground on which you stand is holy.”

This encounter shows a much more human side of the human/divine relationship. For Moses being present involves an active interest from God. God calls out of the Bush, not once, but twice. According to tradition this pattern never changes. God always calls Moses twice. Perhaps, Moses is too overwhelmed, too insecure to answer when called at first. He must process what is happening before he can say, “Hineini.” God response to the hineini answer has also shifted. He now asks Moses to recognize the holy encounter, by removing his shoes.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, Moses’ reticence and deep flaws, the God/Moses encounters develop a depth and an equality that remains our standard today. Moses speaks to him as an equal and negotiates authentically with God. In sanctifying, or making conscious, his encounters with the divine presence, Moses transcends his own self, overcoming his weaknesses. Moses becomes a model for prayer and for striving for freedom from our addictions.

As Abraham symbolized the birth of a people, and Moses the birth of a nation, Isaiah heralded that nation’s end. More than 700 years after Moses, Isaiah saw his homeland of Judea in conflict with its sister nation Israel to the North. He saw Israel fall to the Assyrians. Judea believed she was secure with powerful friends. But Isaiah saw correctly: that if things continued as they were, Judea’s downfall would not be far behind (although, in point of fact, many scholars believe that these chapters of Isaiah were actually written after Judea fell to Babylon). In any case, Isaiah had a different sense of Hineini. Writing in God’s voice, he says:

I responded to those who did not ask; I was present to those who did not seek Me. I said, “Hineini, Hineini to a nation that did not invoke my name. I

constantly spread my hands out to a disloyal people, who walk the way that is not good, following their own designs.

At a time when the people felt abandoned by God, blaming God for the bad turn of events, God answers, I am here; I am present in all circumstances, to all human beings. To Isaiah God had not abandoned Israel, but quite the opposite. The people had become alienated from their source of strength and faith and could no longer hear God.

For us to sense God we cannot be passive we must seek (*darash*), ask, invoke, and respond. In Isaiah, God is asking for more than obedience, and more than negotiation, but is looking for active partners. When God spoke *Hineini* it turned the world upside down. Now we must be as God recreating ourselves to better be able to hear, understand and respond to the still small voice within.

Although, Kabbalists claim their ideas originated as far back as the Garden of Eden it was particularly during the difficulties of the exile that Kabbalistic philosophy flourished. Kabbalah is the body of mystical knowledge that endeavors to explain the relationship between an infinite unknowable God and the finite world of the Creation that we experience around us.

Kabbalah is a way of seeing the world, beyond what it appears to be. Kabbalists don't see reality as an illusion as in Hindu religion, but rather as a projection of God. Further, they believe that this light of God became separated from the creator and thus seen as fallen divine sparks.

About 1400 years later the Jews of Eastern Europe were experiencing some challenges parallel to those of Isaiah. They were being persecuted by the Cossacks, economically crushed and assimilated into the non-Jewish population. In the 18th century a movement began by the Baal Shem Tov picked up on the message of Isaiah, "How could we be closer to God?" He recast the ideas of Kabbalah into what became known as Hasidism.

The Hasids took as literal Isaiah 6:3, "The whole Earth is filled with God's glory!" and combined it with the practice from Psalm 16:8 I place God before me always. The word Hasid comes from the Hebrew word *Chesed*. It is often translated as compassion. But it is better envisioned as the spiritual principle that drives us toward God, as the fire of transformation itself that leaves only what is real. The Hasidic masters saw our task as self transformation of our souls to be better able to see and to serve God. And they saw their mission was to pick up the fallen sparks and return them to God.

The Hasidic way was available to all. All that was required was an intense desire for God. Their methods were acceptance, joy, love, prayer, service and story.

Since everything we see is God in an altered form, the beginning of coming closer to God is acceptance of what is. This brings us into the present moment where God exists. Since our true nature is the 'I am that which I am becoming' consciousness, to align with our divine nature we must identify with Hope. Negative patterns in the present are unconscious resurfacing of the past. Resistance to negativity is useless. Rather we must transform negativity with love and compassion.

Prayer is a direct way to become more intimate with God. The Hasidic Masters were also masters of story. Story directly connects to the dream like nature of reality. It is through story that the heart is engaged, and the seeking mind activated. We can

approach our own life as a story, as a living dream if you will. Through understanding the patterns that present to us in our lives we can see how God is asking us to serve.

I want to offer a few of the practices of the Baal Shem Tov and his Great Grandson, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov that may still be of use today in teaching us presence, *Hineini*.

On Acceptance and Presence

God loves kindness and hides Himself within the very obstacle itself. One who lacks good sense sees the obstacle and retreats at once. But one who possesses good sense examines the obstacle and discovers God within it.- Nachman

There is a way that everything can be turned into good. –Nachman

All the world is a very narrow bridge, and the most important thing is not to fear at all.- Nachman

On Prayer

Speak to God in your own words in your own native language. Fix some time to go by yourself to some room or meadow and express your thoughts and feelings to God. Appeal to God with every kind of argument and endearment. Plead with Him to bring you to serve Him truly. Pour out your whole heart to God, including your regrets and contrition about the past and your yearning to come closer in the future, each person according to their level. Make it a habit to practice this regularly for an hour every day. Then be happy for the rest of the day. -Nachman

This is the best way of coming closer to God, and it includes everything else. No matter what is lacking in your life, even if you feel totally remote from God, talk it out and ask God to help you. This is something everyone is able to do, great or small alike. Everyone can talk to God and thereby reach the highest levels.-- Nachman

There are two degrees in the study of Torah, Torah of the mind and Torah of the heart. The mind cogitates, comprehends and understands; the heart feels. ... I have come to reveal Torah as it extends to the heart as well.- BST

On Service

Every single thing one sees or hears is an instruction for his conduct in the service of G-d. This is the idea of spiritual service - to comprehend and discern in all things a way in which to serve God. BST

“Every person must say: The whole world was created for me” (Sanhedrin 37a) .

If the world was created for me, it is therefore my constant obligation to examine and consider what is needed to repair the world and provide everyone's needs, and to pray for them. Nachman

Man's world consists only of the present. Whatever you can do to serve God, do immediately and determinedly without delay. –Nachman

On Hope

When a person refuses to allow himself to fall into despair but instead vitalizes himself by seeking out and gathering together his positive points, this produces melodies, and he can then pray, sing and give thanks to God. -Nachman

The most important thing of all is to look to God at all times with longing and yearning, even when things are not going as well as you would like in your prayers and devotions. Never despair, no matter what. And as soon as God gives you the opportunity to do something holy, do it at once. Nachman

Do not hate your brother in your heart. He who hates... even if his hatred does not bring about any harm to the fellow, and even if he doesn't speak ill of him - transgresses a negative command. –BST

So, God asked us, “Who told you that you were naked?” If Adam had not chosen to ignore the question, maybe he would have said something like this: “I just made it up to explain why I felt so cold all of a sudden, until I could think of something better.”