

Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey: "Go To Yourself"

I'shem yikhud Kudsha Berikh Hu v'Shekhintei, "for the sake of unifying the Holy Blessed One and the Shekhinah".

For the sake of unifying All

lekh l'kha: to oneself, to the world

The Eternal said to Avram, "Go forth [*lekh l'kha*] from your land, your birthplace, and your father's house, to the land that I will show you."¹

One of the most famous commands in the Torah is that which God spoke to a human being whom we know first as Abram, and later, Abraham: *lekh l'kha*. This two-word Hebrew phrase is actually rather difficult to translate. It is possible that the first word is a verb, "go", and the second word is a verb intensifier, which is to say, the same verb, repeated for emphasis. In this case, *lekh l'kha* would convey the urgent meaning of "get going, go!" However, it is also possible that the second word is not a verb at all, but the word "for yourself" or "to yourself"; in Hebrew, the letter *lamed* can be understood as a prefix meaning "for" or "to". Thus, the medieval Bible commentator Rashi² pointed out that the phrase can be understood not only as "go forth" or "get yourself going", meaning not to delay; the command can also be interpreted as "go for yourself", meaning "for your own benefit, and your own pleasure".³ The Torah, after all, does record a divine promise that Abram was to be blessed with wealth, a good name, and many offspring.

For a mystic, the passage reads differently, requiring a deeper plunge into the text, below the *peshat*, the surface level of apparent meaning. Consider that to speak of the Eternal One can be an evocation not of an ancient, unique personality, but to hint at a non-anthropomorphic, all-encompassing and unifying Oneness of

¹ Genesis 12.1.

² He was known by the acronym of his title and name: **Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki**.

³ Rashi, comment on *parashat Lekh L'kha*, Genesis 12.1.

life which is always, Eternally, potentially present: an Eternity of, in, Oneness; a Oneness which contains and unifies Eternity in terms of both time and space – and beyond, to all other imaginable dimensions. All is One. Avram, from this point of view, has suddenly been touched by an intimation of a oneness, a wholeness which is so longed-for and welcome to him that he responds to it with a willingness to put everything else behind him. The alacrity of his response hints to the reader that he has seen something so moving that he is focused only upon the chance that he will be able to keep it. There is a sense of a moment when something opened his eyes, and he saw what he had never seen before.

Rashi suggests that it was for Abraham's own personal, material good that he was commanded to leave home. But the phrase *lekh l'kha* yields an even finer point of focus within this perspective to one open to mystical interpretation, that is, to seeking even deeper levels of meaning to explore. Thus Hasidic thought reached for a deeper, hinted meaning of the command *lekh l'kha*: not Rashi's go *for* yourself, but, employing the other possible translation of that letter *lamed*, "go *to* yourself": "every place that a person goes, he is going to his own self".⁴ In other words, as one goes about one's own business, in truth, one is encountering in the world around oneself a reflection of the world inside oneself. Or, put another way, if you would find the world, seek yourself. And if you would seek yourself, leave home: leave what you already know that you know. Uncertainty is the required first step toward discovery.

To follow in Abraham's steps, one goes forth into the world for one's own benefit, to discover reflections of oneself in all of what one sees and experiences.

⁴ Variations on this interpretation of *lekh l'kha* are attributed to the second Karliner Rebbe: *atzmo*, "one's self"; Shlomo Ephraim of Luncicz: *atm'kha*, "yourself", and several other sources; elsewhere, *l'kha* becomes one's "root", as Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, *Kedushat Levi*, *lekh lekha*.

This accords with Jewish social justice rhetoric, in which one is a participant in either perpetuating or healing the brokenness of the society in which one lives. A mystical perspective puts it differently: one does not participate in the brokenness of the world, one comes to see that one is part of it. One seeks healing for the world because in so doing one finds healing for oneself. To learn to love someone else despite the flaws that annoy one is to learn to love oneself, despite those same flaws; to make room for another in the world is to keep a place open for oneself. One goes forth to find oneself in the world around oneself:

"who is a true *hasid*, [one who does *hesed*, "kindness"]? one who is kind to his Creator." When a person does an act of loving kindness in this world below, he must intend it effect toward its parallel quality above. This is what it means to "show *hesed* to the Creator."⁵

By showing kindness to another human being, one is adding kindness to the entire world's store of it, and thus adding the power of that kindness to God, as well. Finding the ability to be kind to another opens us to the kindness in the world also there for us; to accept another flawed human being is, on some level, to come closer to accepting one's own flawed self. Thus we unify broken fragments in the world, and in ourselves.

When one finds evidence of brokenness – destructive behavior with no regard for consequences, an absence of human connection, the emotional pain and hopelessness of alienation – whether inside oneself or reflected in the world around one, "one must lift up the sparks" that one finds – sparks of God's presence, fragmented and out of all balance and order, but there for the finding, and the repairing. To find oneself in the world is to see that the world's brokenness is also one's own, and that one's acts to make the self whole are also a gift of healing from

⁵ Moshe Cordovero, *Tomer Devorah*, 5.27-28.

one's self to the world. This mystical teaching echoes throughout the kabbalistic exploration and development of the idea of the *sefirot*.

Unifying the self leads to unifying the All

What I have been describing as walking in Abraham's footsteps with mystical awareness accords with the basic teachings of Lurianic Kabbalah, which sees all of human experience reflected through *tzimtzum*, "withdrawal", *shevirat hakelim*, "the breaking of the vessels", and *tikkun*, "repair". *Tzimtzum* defines the initial act of God's creation of the world as a withdrawal of the divine self which fills the universe, so as to make room for Creation. In this small space, all of existence unfolds and finds its meaning. In human terms, as we imitate God, we learn that to enter the world creatively, we also must first withdraw, to make space for that which has yet to be. We step back from our own certainty that we already know, and allow a silence to occur, and wait and watch to see what is needed.

The doctrine of the presence of hidden sparks of the divine in the world which I referred to above interprets Luria's second concept, *shevirat hakelim*. When the act of creation began, the divine flow came forth, meant to fill vessels made of its essence. But the flow of the divine essence was too powerful for the vessels:

It [i.e. the vessel containing the lights within *Tiferet*] did not possess the capacity to bear the light, and [thus] these [vessels] shattered and "died,".... The light within them, that is, the [divine] vitality, departed [reascending] above to the womb of *Binah*, while the vessels [themselves] shattered and descended to the level of "Creation" [*Beri'ah*].⁶

The framework meant to convey God's abundance throughout the creation that would be nourished by it was not strong enough to bear the contact, and when the vessels shattered, some of the divine light was trapped within them when they "fell

⁶ Hayim Vital, *Derush she-Masar*, p. 20, cited by Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) , 135.

to earth”, as it were. The broken shards of the divine vessels are the material world as we know it, full of brokenness, unfulfilled potential, and tragedy; but within each shard of existence there is a potential discovery. A spark of divine light may be hidden within the experience of brokenness, despite the terrible suffering caused by the lack of fulfillment of meaning or potential; the spark that heals and redeems the world is found through a courageous engagement with the tragedy all human beings come to know, not the attempt to avoid it. To find a hidden spark of light and free it from the darkness is the mystic’s understanding of the purpose of human life: in so doing, we repair the world, by restoring the fullness of God’s presence in it.

The significance of Luria’s doctrine not only helps one look for a “silver lining” to ameliorate bad news; what follows is the human ability – and responsibility – to find and lift up the sparks that testify to the presence of God in the world, called *tikkun*, “repair”. This powerful concept, applied far beyond its original meaning, energized the social justice movement of liberal Judaism in the twentieth century.⁷ And the lesson comes even closer to the core of the self and its purpose when one looks deeper into this mystic teaching: the sparks of possibility may be found everywhere, in any act, as long as it is undertaken with the appropriate intention. Luria and his followers taught that

⁷ Luria transforms *tikkun ha’olam*, a Talmudic concept cited to support a specific and circumscribed legal category, and applies it in a way which far transcends its origins. The modern interpretation of *tikkun ha’olam* derives much more from the mystical redefinition than its Talmudic origins. For historical surveys of the meaning of *tikkun ha’olam* in Jewish usage, see Lawrence Fine, “Tikkun: A Lurianic Motif in Contemporary Jewish Thought” in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Intellect in Quest of Understanding*, ed. Jacob Neusner et al (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 35-53; Eugene Lipman, “Mipne Tikkun Ha’Olam in the Talmud: A Preliminary Exploration” in *The Life of Covenant: The Challenge of Contemporary Judaism – Essays in Honor of Herman E. Schaalman* ed. Joseph A. Edelheit (Chicago: SCJ, 1986), 97-110; and Gilbert Rosenthal, “Tikkun ha-Olam: The Metamorphosis of a Concept” in *Journal of Religion* 85, no. 2, April 2005, 214-40.

the project of human life is to separate the holy from the material world, and thus divest that world of all existence. *All existence will return to its original spiritual condition*, a state synonymous with the messianic age....The vision of redemption is a fundamentally spiritual one in which all things return to *olam ha-tikkun*....The responsibility for bringing all this about is a human one, not a divine one.⁸

To “lift up” the potential sparks which may be hidden, allowing them to add their brightness to the enlightenment of the world, is to add to the wholeness of the world through one’s smallest, as well as more significant, carefully mindful acts.

Although Luria’s definition focused upon spiritual *tikkun* in a way that rejected the physical world, interpreters of his doctrine found in it a compelling ethical teaching. The Talmud asserts that one who saves a life saves an entire implicit world⁹; for the mystics, every small act effects a small but profound step toward *tikkun*. If any act is pregnant with unknowable possibility, every act is potentially redemptive.

The more one’s acts are all in accord with this awareness, then one acts with the power of one’s undistracted *kavvanah*, and all one’s interior “selves” are unified in that act. The Jew who is a soccer mom, social justice activist, loving daughter, Torah student, and small business owner, in all her aspects of the same busy woman, can by her awareness of this mystical teaching, of the importance of every small act, bring a quiet awareness to all that she does, in every aspect of her fragmented being. The more she knows herself to be one whole person, unified in her ability to focus her impact on the world, the more unified she becomes in her sense of self. Through staying focused upon the sense that she is able to heal the world, she is also able to heal herself if, whatever challenges comes to her, she is a

⁸ Lawrence Fine, “Tikkun: A Lurianic Motif in Contemporary Jewish Thought” in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Intellect in Quest of Understanding*, ed. Jacob Neusner et al (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 39. Emphasis in the original.

⁹ BT *Sanhedrin* 37a.

Jew, and she responds out of her sense of the Jewish mystical ethic which seeks healing and wholeness in the world, and knows her power to help bring it about.

The mystic seeks always to respond to life out of the awareness of the hidden sparks that may be redeemed when an individual remains grounded and balanced in her own sense of self and purpose.