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Jewish ~~Mysticism~~  
Mysticism  
and the Spiritual Life

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## “Pass Not Away”

### *Yearning for a Seamless Life of Connection*

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In the Tractate *Shabbat*: “Rabbi Judah said in the name of Rav: ‘The welcoming of guests is greater than greeting the *Shekhinah*,’ for Scripture says, ‘Pass not away, I pray you, from your servant’ (Genesis 18:3). Said Rabbi Eleazar: ‘Note that the ways of God are not those of man. Among people, a lesser person could not say to a greater one, “Wait until I come to you,” but Abraham was able to say that to God.’”

We must understand this verse that says, “Pass not away.” How could this be said with regard to the presence of God, since the whole earth is filled with His glory and there is no place devoid of Him? How then could one possibly say, “Pass not away,” as though to assume that afterwards that place would not contain His glory? This is simply impossible. We must also understand how Rav’s claim that making guests welcome is greater than greeting the *Shekhinah* can be proven from this passage. Might we not say that in the performing of that commandment one also evokes the presence of the *Shekhinah*? Commandment, after all, is called *mitzvah* because it joins together (*mitzvah/tzavta*) the part of God that dwells within the

person with the infinite God beyond. It may be, then, that the *mitzvah* is not really greater than greeting the *Shekhinah*, but rather that it too contains the *Shekhinah*, and in fulfilling it one has both [commandment and presence]. We also have to understand Rabbi Eleazar's point here, that the lesser does not ask the greater one to wait, and yet Abraham did so. Could we not say that there too, in the greeting of the guests, there was a receiving of the *Shekhinah*? This is especially so since the righteous are called "the face of the *Shekhinah*" in the *Zohar*, as His presence dwells in them. When Abraham received the guests, that is, the angels who appeared to him in human form, surely that itself was an act of greeting the *Shekhinah*.

The truth is, however, that the real fulfilling of any commandment lies in the greeting of the *Shekhinah*, in becoming attached to God or joined together. Thus the rabbis said: "The reward of a *mitzvah* is a *mitzvah*," meaning that the commandment is rewarded by the nearness to God that the one who performs it feels, the joy of spirit that lies within the deed. This indeed is a "greeting of the *Shekhinah*," and without it the commandment is empty and lifeless, the body-shell of a *mitzvah* without any soul. Only when it is done with the longing of the divine part within it to be connected to its root, along with the divine part of all the rest of Israel, can it be called a *mitzvah*. In all service of God, whether in speech or in deed, both body and soul are needed to give it life. That is why the wicked are called dead within their own lifetime: their deeds are without life.

This is what really happened to our father Abraham. He was engaged in discourse with God ("greeting the *Shekhinah*"), as we learn from the verse, "The Lord appeared to him" [Genesis 18:1]. When he saw the guests coming, he asked of God that there too, while he was to be engaged in welcoming the guests, "Pass not away, I pray you, from your servant" [Genesis 18:3]. There too may I remain attached to You, so that this not be an empty *mitzvah*. Be with me so that I may perform the *mitzvah* in such a state that it too be a "greeting of the *Shekhinah*."

Now Rav's point that the welcoming of guests is greater than greeting the *Shekhinah* is proved by Abraham's action. Were this not the case, Abraham would hardly have left off a conversation with God to go do something of less certain value. This is especially true since "they appeared to him as Arab nomads"; they did not have a divine appearance. The *mitzvah* itself was very great even if it [was] not a "greeting of the *Shekhinah*." Abraham decided to fulfill this commandment with absolute wholeness. Therefore he said, "Do not pass away, I pray you, from your servant."

Now we also understand the point being made by Rabbi Eleazar. Indeed among people the lesser person cannot ask the greater to wait for him while he attends to some other matter. The greater one will not be present in that other place; if he is here he cannot be there! But of God it is said: "The whole earth is filled with His glory!" [Isaiah 6:3]. He asks that God not depart from him; "there too may I not be cut off from my attachment to You." He could say this only because wherever one goes he does not go away from God. He is there as He is here; Abraham only asked that he not be cut off from Him. Understand this.<sup>1</sup>

RABBI MENAHEM NAHUM OF CHERNOBYL, ME'OR EINAYIM

This exquisite teaching of Rabbi Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl (d. 1797) describes a compelling orientation and strategy for living a Jewish spiritual life. It clearly articulates and resolves a central tension facing contemporary Jewish spiritual seekers: how to cultivate an intense, personal devotional practice and remain steadfast to engaging actively in the world with kindness and with justice. Indeed, Menahem Nahum suggests that for the truly adept, they are one and the same practice.

Abraham is our model. The text provides us with a window into his inner life as a reflection of what ours might ideally become. We know Abraham as a person who speaks and listens directly to God. In the biblical scene before us, "God appeared to him at the terebinths of Mamre" (Genesis 18:1). We understand that God's "appearing" to Abraham means that he was engaged in conscious communion with

God, intercourse of some kind, what we might call “prayer” (understood most broadly). Clearly, Abraham’s mind and attention were focused on *HaKadosh Barukh Hu* (the Holy One of Blessing). When the three visitors appear before him, walking toward his desert tent at the heat of the day, Abraham asks God not to go away while he runs to take care of his unexpected guests.<sup>2</sup> Menahem Nahum explores the oddity of such a plea (not only does a person of lesser status not make such a request of one greater than he, as Rabbi Eleazar notes, but where was God, the Omnipresent, to go, after all?) and realizes that Abraham’s request was of a more subtle nature than might appear at first blush. Abraham was asking the Holy One to come with him on his mission so that he would continue to have a sense of God’s presence even as he changed from engaging in one sort of *avodah* (service, devotion, worship) to another.

How compelling it must have been for Abraham to have been communing with God. No other pleasure compares. And yet, as soon as the visitors appeared, Abraham knew that he needed to turn his attention in their direction. The presentation of the *mitzvah* commanded him to action.

While Menahem Nahum refers specifically to the act of fulfilling a *mitzvah*, hoping to inspire his people through this midrashic polemic to engage in *mitzvah* observance with both body and soul, we can understand his teaching as an ideal to be realized in all our actions. This, we learn, is a high level of worship: to be actively engaged in the world through *mitzvoth* or other acts of *hesed* (loving-kindness), *tzedek* (righteousness), and *emet* (truth) and, in the midst of these very actions, to experience our inner divine substance (“the divine part within,” our soul) to be in connection with God, the soul of the universe.

The articulation of such an ideal was one of early Hasidism’s greatest contributions to Jewish religious thought: *Bekhol derakhakha da’ehu*, “Know God in all your ways” (Proverbs 3:6). In the Hasidic worldview, *avodah* is no longer confined to the activities of Torah study and prayer:

The Blessed One desires that we serve Him in every possible manner. How so? Sometimes a person might be walking and speaking with another person, and at that time he cannot

study [Torah]. Nevertheless, he must still cleave to the Blessed One and bring about unifications. And so it is when a person is walking along the road and is not able to pray or study as he is accustomed; he must nevertheless serve God in the other manners. And one should not be pained by this, because the Blessed One wants us to serve Him in all these different ways, sometimes in this one manner, sometimes in a different manner.<sup>3</sup>

The ideal of “serving God in all our ways” means that *avodah* must be connected to an act of consciousness. The question as to whether or not we are engaged in *avodah* is linked to the condition of our mind, our focus, our awareness (*da’at*). So long as we “still cleave to the Blessed One,” any or all of our actions might be understood as *avodah*. In the Menahem Nahum text, Abraham clearly wanted not only to fulfill the *mitzvah* of greeting visitors with physical acts, but he wanted to do so “with absolute wholeness,” as an act of *avodah*, connected to a sense of God’s presence every step of the way. He wanted to stay connected (*zavta*), “cleaving” unto God, “greeting the *Shekhinah*,” as he switched from one form of worship to another.

The cultivation of such an awareness seems similar to what Michael Fishbane calls the “praxis of theology” or “theology as a spiritual practice.” In this sense, Fishbane speaks of theology not as an abstract or academic pursuit, but more as a form of contemplation:

As the exercise of theological thinking unfolds, it directs the human spirit toward an increasingly focused awareness of God as the heart and breath of all existence, and tries to sustain that focus throughout the course of life. Put differently, theology seeks to cultivate an abiding consciousness of God’s informing presence in all the realities of existence, the infinite modalities of divine effectivity. Hence the world is both what we ‘take’ it to be, in all the moments of ordinary experience, and what we must ‘untake’ it to be, when we relate all things back to their ontological and primordial ground in God.... Spiritual attunement to this divine domain is an attentive God-mindedness in the course of life; and it is a task of theology to cultivate this



attunement so that one may live in the everyday with God in mind.<sup>4</sup>

There are many ways to articulate this work of staying present to an awareness of God while engaged in the particularities of a life: maintaining *devekut* (cleaving to God),<sup>5</sup> doing everything with awareness (*beda'at*),<sup>6</sup> not turning to idols,<sup>7</sup> effecting “spiritual attunement . . . , God-mindedness in the course of life.” An important question presents itself to us in this exploration: what might this mean in practice for us Jewish spiritual seekers of the twenty-first century? Or, put slightly differently: how might we train ourselves to embody this awareness?

In Jewish tradition, there seem to be both exoteric and esoteric routes to such awareness. As Max Kadushin, scholar of Rabbinic theology, explains, Rabbinic Judaism encodes a densely articulated practice of “normal mysticism,”<sup>8</sup> accessible to all. For instance, the Rabbinic practice of offering *berakhot* (blessings) upon eating and afterwards, upon experiencing various ordinary and extraordinary pleasures of sight and sound, upon seeing someone we have not seen for a whole month, and so on for various occasions in the midst of a life, as well as upon occasions of performing *mitzvot* (such as studying Torah or lighting Shabbat candles) are all ways to link our specific sense experience in time to an awareness of the Creator of the world, a moment in which “we relate all things back to their ontological and primordial ground in God.”<sup>9</sup>

But there are more subtle methods of cultivating such consciousness, as well—strategies of consciousness that depend more upon purely contemplative practice than upon the recitation of a *berakhdh*. For instance, an early Hasidic teaching states that we might train ourselves to see God everywhere by constantly contemplating God as the place of the world (although this is certainly understood to be a “high level” and therefore not likely to be attained by many people). It is a matter of training our vision to see with the eyes of the mind. Rabbi Meshullam Feibush of Zbarazh transmits the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid of Mezritch:

It is a high level of spiritual attainment when someone is always aware of God's presence—that He surrounds him on all sides—

and his *devekut* with God is so great that he does not need to remind himself again and again that God, blessed be He, is there and present with him, but he sees God with the eyes of the mind, for He is the place of the world. What this means is that He was before He created the world, and the world exists within the Creator, blessed be He. A person's *devekut* with God should be so great that the essence of what he sees is God, blessed be He. It should not be that his vision is primarily of the world and then, by the way, of God. No, his sight should be essentially of God.<sup>10</sup>

Here we understand there to be a training of the sense of sight. As Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (d. 1943) notes:

We can feel ourselves growing closer to God—enjoying His radiance, sensing His presence—but not only when we pray and do *mitzvot*. If we focus on holiness with clarity and strength for each and every moment, we can gradually take control of our sense perceptions. Commonly, our perceptions distract us: “You see the world, you observe materiality.” Not only do we want to resist distraction; we want our sensual perceptions to come around to the perspective of the heart. We can actually see the presence of God, which infuses all creation. Each of us can see with our own eyes that we stand in paradise, in the palpable presence of God.<sup>11</sup>

Whatever the specifics of the practice of attaching oneself to God, Menahem Nahum's teaching suggests to me that we might learn how to do it in periods of personal practice and that we might then bring such awareness into our worldly interactions. Such a message is also clearly sounded in contemporary teaching of mindfulness meditation and yoga. For instance, we practice awareness of our mind's response to desire or aversion on the meditation cushion so that we might be more aware and skillful with these dynamics when they arise as we interact with our families, communities, and work partners. We practice moment-to-moment awareness of our minds and bodies in different positions on the yoga mat so that we might bring such awakened

attention to any “position” we might find ourselves in during our lives, whether that be a position of ease or discomfort, freedom or restriction, familiarity or surprise. Similarly, we might say that in our prayer we practice greeting the face of the *Shekhinah* so that we might see Her light in every subsequent human encounter that day. We intentionally practice awareness of God in one form so that we might be able to be aware of God in all forms.<sup>12</sup>

For those who claim that people devoted to deepening their own spiritual lives are self-absorbed and solipsistic, this teaching provides a strong response. Fulfilling a *mitzvah*, responding to the real-life needs of others, engaging with the world with kindness and with justice, actually trumps a particular moment of engagement with individual spiritual practice. Rav’s position is justified. If this weren’t so, Abraham would not have broken off his conversation with God to respond to the needs of the visitors. Even if we are not capable of staying connected in our consciousness to God as we act in the world, we must act nonetheless. There are, in fact, no guarantees that one will stay connected, which is precisely why Abraham must make his plea.

Abraham asks God “not to pass away” from him. Toward the end of Menahem Nahum’s teaching, we read that Abraham asks that when he turns to interact with other persons, that there, too, he “remain attached.” Who, in the end, is responsible for the connection? Is the critical action God’s “not passing” or Abraham’s “remaining attached”? The two expressions provide insight into a central dialectic in the spiritual life. On the one hand, it is but folly to pray for God not to pass if we are not engaged in our own spiritual practice. We could only be understood to be naive or lazy to ask God to do all the work of the relationship. We must do the work of “letting God in,” as in the famous Hasidic teaching of the Kotzker Rebbe: “Where may God be found? Wherever we let God in.”<sup>13</sup> At the same time, even if we lead a life of dedicated spiritual practice, a life of regular prayer and contemplation, practicing receiving the face of the *Shekhinah*, there is no guarantee that our efforts will provide results, even in the relatively simple context of private devotion. Ultimately, we are not in control of our experience of God’s presence to us. In truth, we must both acknowledge not being in control—our dependence upon God’s

grace—and engage in regular, dedicated practice in an effort to experience the connection.

This teaching, recorded over two hundred years ago, transmits a surprisingly powerful message to our contemporary hearts and minds. Like spiritually serious Jews of all eras, we seek to deepen our sense of God’s presence in our awareness, moment to moment, while at the same time staying connected to a life of obligation, relationship, and celebration in the world. Jewish tradition, after all, never created a system of monasteries and ashrams, unlike other religious traditions. The test of our spiritual practice is found in how we live in the world. Amid the many challenges of everyday life, we seek wholeness, the “complete wholeness” of Abraham, where every act and every moment of consciousness, no matter what the form, is filled with a sense of connection and presence. Perhaps we might make it a practice, as we conclude our final prayers of the morning, to call out the words “Pass not away!” as we turn ourselves to engage in the sacred work of worldly obligation.

## Notes

1. Translation by Arthur Green, *Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl: Upright Practices, The Light of the Eyes* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), pp. 135–37.
2. On the simple, narrative, *peshat* level, it would seem as if, read in context, Abraham addressed his words, “Please do not pass by” to the visitors who appeared at his tent. However, there is an ambiguity in the text. The verbs in this verse are all in the singular, making it appear as though Abraham is talking to only one person/being. In *Bereshit Rabbah* (48:9), Rashi and Ramban resolve this by understanding Abraham to be addressing the leader of the group, with the invitation extending to all three visitors. In addition, there is ambiguity with reference to the word *Adonai*, which may be translated either as “my lords” (referring to the guests) or as “my Lord” (referring to God). There is a difference of opinion among Rabbinic commentators, with Rashi and Ibn Ezra agreeing with the reading of *Adonai*, as plural, referring to the guests, and Maimonides understanding *Adonai* to be singular, referring to God. (See *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, ed. Nahum M. Sarna [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989], p. 129.)
3. *Tzava’at HaRivash* 3, English translation: *Tzava’at Harivash: The Testament of R. Israel Baal Shem Tov*, trans. Jacob Immanuel Schochet (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1998).
4. Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 35. Similarly, he writes: “A primary task of theology is