

Intention VII

The goal is to cultivate wakefulness constantly, in every moment of life. However, the forces of every day life often conspire against our wakefulness, relentlessly triggering our egoic qualities. The more we get drawn into an egoic state, the more difficult it becomes to return to right intention and to wakefulness. It takes a special effort to bring ourselves back and return to consciousness. This is why it is essential for most people to utilize the many tools of spiritual practice. The traditional practices of Judaism are called *mitzvot*.

“*Mitzvot*” (plural; singular- *mitzvah*) literally means “commandments”. According to the Torah, Moses received 613 commandments on Mount Sinai and transmitted them to the Israelites over thirty-five hundred years ago. Over the next two thousand years, various sages derived seven more *mitzvot* that are not included in the Torah, along with thousands of details concerning how they are practiced. The *mitzvot* are first enumerated and described in the early rabbinic writings of the *Mishna* and later the *Talmud*, and the *halakhah* (Jewish law) continues to be developed today, as changes in our world necessitate changes in the practice. The *mitzvot* form the practical side of Judaism.

Although “*mitzvah*” means “commandment”, and according to tradition they were given as commandments by God to the Jewish people, there is a deeper level of meaning to the word. The root of the word also means “connection”. In this sense, a *mitzvah* is an action that helps you to connect all four levels of your being- your deepest consciousness with your mind, heart and body. As we have said, in order for your awareness to connect with the rest of your being and “unify the Name” within you, it also must be liberated. So the intention of the *mitzvot* is to be both liberating and unifying.

This gives us a hint about the literal meaning of the word- “commandment”. Think about the above example of the baby in the middle of the road: in such a situation, there is no consideration of choice. There is no sense of making a decision, because the right choice is so obvious. In this sense, the situation itself “commands” the response. This is exactly the consciousness that the *mitzvot* are aimed at. When it comes to waking up, being liberated from ego and being fully present in service of this moment, there is no choice- it is simply always the right thing. But we can’t know it is the right thing if we are asleep! So the aim of the *mitzvot* is to help wake us up, to make the right choice obvious and reveal the “commandment” of this moment.

At first, doing *mitzvot* is like the above example of digging a well; you may practice for some time without noticing much of a result. At some point, however, you hit the water. After that, *mitzvot* are like drawing water from the well. The pressures of life can often separate you from the “well”. But through practicing *mitzvot*, you can reconnect again

and again, each time strengthening your ability to stay present through the rest of life's challenges. The act of returning yourself to consciousness from unconsciousness, from ego to soul, is called *t'shuvah* in Hebrew (literally- "return"). Each *mitzvah* is an opportunity to do *t'shuvah* and return to the path.

The spiritual path, however, is not simply a big pile of *mitzvot*; it has an elegant form: In the second *mishna* of *Pirkei Avot*, Shimon the Righteous says, "The world stands on three things: *Torah*, *Avodah* (spiritual practice) and *Gemilut Hasadim* (Acts of Kindness)". This three-fold formula gives us a concise map for understanding the path- the *derekh* in Hebrew. The first, "*Torah*", refers not only to the ancient text of the Torah, but also to spiritual learning in general. It is the cultivation of intellectual understanding about spirituality. If the mind is not intentionally directed, it tends to be taken over by the egoic qualities we've talked about. To counter this and strengthen one's awareness, spiritual learning helps our thoughts to be directed in spiritually useful ways. An example of *Torah* is what you are doing at this moment- reading this text. As you read this book, attempt to grasp its meaning and relate it to your own experience, you are engaging in this first aspect called *Torah*.

The second part, *Avodah*, literally means "work" or "service", and is sometimes translated as "prayer". It really means spiritual practice- prayer, meditation, ritual, chanting, visualizations, and other disciplines. In Judaism, various forms of *Avodah* are part of the daily routine.

The third, *Gemilut Hasadim*, refers to expressing spirituality in relation to others. The most obvious practice of this is the giving of *tzeddakah*- charity- to those in need, and doing voluntary service. However, *gemilut hasadim* is really a way of being with other people. It is relating to others with an attitude of open-heartedness and service.

In this book, we will explore each of these three aspects of the *derekh* in more depth, as they are the key to "digging the well" in a practical way. As you explore these practices, I recommend that you take them on one by one, allowing each one to become part of your routine before taking on another. If you take on too much at once, it could become overwhelming and you may feel like giving it up altogether. On the other hand, if you don't push yourself somewhat to continually grow in your practice, it is unlikely that you will get the transformational results we are talking about. So, the key is to commit yourself to practicing *something*. Once it has become part of you, move on to the next practice.

Almost all of the practices I am giving in this book are not logistically difficult to incorporate into your life. There are some things in Judaism that are very challenging

logistically if you are not used to them; I am not offering those because there are many more essential and powerful practices which entail little inconvenience. Since most people find commitment to daily practice psychologically challenging anyway, there is no need to add the barrier of inconvenience. If you fully incorporate the practices in this book, you may then want to tackle some of the other practices that require more fundamental reordering of your life. Most of the practices in this book, however, are easily accessible for everyone.

Beyond Belief

Many of these practices contain words of prayer- expressions of awe, gratitude and desire, addressed to God. So before we jump into these prayers, let's first explore what we mean by "God" and how it relates to awakening.

We have seen that the inner meaning of God's Name is "being" or "existence". In this understanding, God does not really "exist" in the ordinary sense; God *is* Existence. God is Reality; God is the Whole. God is all that is, was and ever will be. When we understand the meaning of "God" this way, the issue of belief is not really relevant; "God" is simply that which is. "That which is", of course, does not require any belief. It just is whatever it is; we are not even saying anything about *what it is*. We are simply naming It.

One may ask, then, why use the word "God" at all? Why not just say "Existence"? Why confuse the issue with a word that implies the belief in some kind of divine person?

The answer is that "God" is a *relational* word. When we call someone a friend, or a mother, or a daughter, we are describing a relationship; a person is a "friend" only in relation to another person. It is the same with "God". In saying "God", we are placing ourselves in a surrendered and reverent relationship. We are relating to "God" as sacred, or "higher"- as something we bow to. So, by calling reality "God", we are expressing the intention to let go of ego; we are bowing to that which is, rather than allowing our ego to make conflict with that which is. In other words, to speak the word "God" with sincerity is to awaken; it is to recognize Reality as supreme, and make our *ideas* about reality subordinate.

This is the inner meaning of prayer. When we call God "King" or "Father" or "Mother" or "Creator" or any other relational term, we are using metaphors that are aimed at the heart's mode of relating. There is no need to take any of it literally and make a theology out of it. Reality is, after all, a mystery! Awakening is the acknowledgement of mystery, of recognizing that we cannot grasp Reality with the intellect. We cannot grasp It, but we

can meet it; we cannot understand It, but we can know It, through awareness and presence, in this moment.

Questions

1. What is the singular and plural form of the Hebrew word for “Commandment”? According to the story in the Torah, how many commandments did Mosse receive on Mount Sinai? How many more did the rabbis create? Please search the internet on “Seven Rabbinic Commandments” and write down what the seven are.
2. What is the deeper meaning of “commandment” in Hebrew? According to this meaning, what is the purpose of the “commandments”?
3. What does the “Commandment of the moment” mean? Try to come up with your own example from your own life of a time you experienced the “commandment of the moment”.
4. What does *t’shuvah* mean?
5. What are the three parts of the spiritual path according to Shimon the Righteous? Write the Hebrew names of the three parts and explain the meaning please.
6. What is the Hebrew word for the “path”?
7. According to this text, God is existence. If so, why use the word “God” at all? Why not just say “Existence” or “Being”? Explain the answer to this question as it is written in this text, and then say whether this makes sense to you or not. Add any of your own thoughts you might have about this.