

Put On Your Veil And Join Them In Their Troubles: Spiritual Journeys in Hassidic Texts



The Snail and the Shell will be available in 2026. To stay up to date on news regarding this book and be among the first to order, visit www.izzunbooks.com.

Only At the Gateway: Lekh Lekha (Ma'or Va-Shemesh)

“Luminary and Sun” (Psalms 74:16)

Kalonymus Kalman Epstein (1753-1825, Poland)

Student of Elimelekh of Lizhensk (*Noam Elimelekh*) and of his student Ya'akov Yitzhak HaLevi Horowitz (the Seer of Lublin, *Divrei Emet*). A deeply original thinker, Epstein argued for an increasingly pluralistic view of Jewish law acknowledging each *Tzaddik's* [“Righteous One,” usually referring to a Hasidic leader] ability to follow their own path in the service of God

P'shat

Why is Abraham chosen by God? The Torah gives us no direct answers, but the ancient Rabbis imagined him as a pioneering spiritual seeker or early philosopher, the first to reach the insight that there is one God. This text embraces that image, and then turns it on its head: Abraham's greatness comes not from his intellectual or spiritual achievements, but rather from the moment when he realized that he was – and would always remain – only at the gateway of spiritual knowledge. Paradoxically, having the humility to recognize his lack of progress is what would allow him to advance spiritually. The image of Abraham bravely setting forth on a journey for the Promised Land is contrasted with the image of Abraham standing stationary and in awe, still eternally at the doorway of his spiritual journey.

“The Eternal said to Abram, “Go-you-forth [*lekh lekha*] from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. [...] Abram went forth as the Eternal had commanded him” (Genesis 12:1, 4).

All the commentators have already stood up to answer what this phrase **“Go-you-forth [*lekh lekha*]”** means,¹ but based on what is known from the holy books, it seems to me that Abraham our father (peace be upon him) sought and searched for the Divine so that he might serve God. At first, he sought and searched via astronomy, studying the sun and the moon and the stars. Once he had finished, he again sought and searched the realm of the angels, grasping the songs of each and every angel appointed to each and every thing, until he finished and understood that these were not divine. Finally, he arrived in the Land of Israel, where he sought and searched and grasped that there was a Guide which could not itself be grasped.

In truth, God's watchful care (may God be blessed) is over the Land of Israel itself, as it is written: **“It is a land which the Eternal your God looks after, on which the Eternal your God always keeps an eye, from year's beginning to year's end”** (Deuteronomy 11:12). Abraham understood that this One who directed it all was above all others, and therefore was the only true divinity fitting of service. He then served God with all his heart.

ויאמר ה' אל אברם לך לך וילך
אברם כאשר דבר אליו ה' כו'.

וכבר עמדו בזה כל המפורשי'
מה זה הלשון לך לך ונ"ל דהנה
ידוע מספרי קודש כי אברהם
אבינו ע"ה חקר ודרש למצוא
אלקי שיעבוד אותו ובתחלה
חקר ודרש באצטגנונו את
החמה ואת הלבנה והכוכבים
ועמד על תכליתם שוב חקר
ודרש בעולם המלאכים והשיג
כל השרים לכל שר ושר הממונה
על כל דבר עד תכליתם והבין
שאין אלו אלקות עד שהגיע לא"י
וחקר ודרש והשיג שיש מנהיג
שאי אפשר להשיגו

שבאמת בארץ ישראל שם
השגחות השי"ת בעצמו כדכתיב
עיני ה' אלקיך בה כו' והבין שזה
המנהיג הוא למעלה מכולם וכי
הוא לבדו הוא האלקי האמיתי
אשר לו יאתה העבדות ועבד ה'
בכל לבו.

¹ **Go-you-forth [*lekh lekha*]** | To say “go” would have only required the word “*lekh*.” The phrase “*lekh lekha*” is probably meant to be emphatic, but can be translated hyper-literally as “go for yourself,” or “go to yourself,” which is the direction our text takes.

Therefore, he reasoned that he had grasped all that it would be possible to grasp, beyond which there would be nothing more to grasp. He also realized that he had already reached the pinnacle of serving God, and that he didn't need to struggle to rise up to higher levels, since there would be nothing more to grasp.

But in truth, he was only at the gateway, about which the true *Tzaddikim* ["Righteous Ones," usually referring to Hasidic leaders] always ask of the Blessed God: **"Open for me the gates of righteousness!" (Psalms 118:19)**. See the holy book *Noam Elimelekh* on this verse.² It is the way of the true *Tzaddikim* to constantly be examining their deeds with exceeding humility, more and more each and every day, since they see themselves as never having fulfilled their obligation of service to God. In this way, they manage to understand where their Root is, the Source from which their souls were hewn.³

For this reason, the Blessed God came and said: **"Go-you-forth [LeKH LeLHa]..."** — meaning, you need to go to yourself [*lei'LeKH ei'LeKH*], since you still have not arrived at an understanding of your soul's Root; you need to humble yourself like the true *Tzaddikim* mentioned above, so that you understand that you are still at the gateway, as mentioned above. You have not yet grasped all there is to grasp; you still need to strengthen yourself in the work of going to yourself — that being, your soul's Root. [...]

אמנם הי' סבור שכבר השיג כל אשר אפשר להשיג ויותר מזה אין להשיג ושכבר הגיע לתכלית העבודה ושאינו צריך להשתדל לעלות במדריגה יותר. מחמת שאין להשיג יותר.

ובאמת הי' עדיין בפתח השער אשר הצדיק' אמיתים מבקשים תמיד מאת השי"ת פתחו לי שערי צדק יעויין בס' הקדוש נועם אלימלך על פסוק זה. ומדרך הצדיק' האמיתים לפשפש תמיד במעשיהם בהכנעה יתירה בכל יום ויום יותר ויותר ועי"ז הם משיגים בכל יום השגה יתירה כי תמיד הוא בעיניהם שלא יצאו עדיין חובתם בהעבודה ועי"ז הם זוכים להשיג עד מקום שורשם מקור מתצב נשמתם

ולזה בא השי"י ואמר לו לך לך ר"ל שצריך אתה לילך אליך כי עדיין לא הגעת עד שורש נשמתך וצריך אתה להכניע כדרך הצדיקים האמיתים הנ"ל שתדע שעדיין אתה בפתח השער כנ"ל ולא השגת כל אשר יש להשיג עדיין וצריך אתה להתאמץ בעבודה שתלך אליך היינו שורש נשמתך [...]

² Noam Elimelekh | See *Noam Elimelekh, Likutei Shoshanah 2:1*:

The essential quality of the righteous is this: the more they serve the Blessed Creator, the more they understand that they cannot arrive at the pinnacle of Divine service, since there is no end to that matter. This is the essence of a Tzaddik's understanding — they understand that they can never arrive at the true pinnacle, and this itself is the Divine service. This is the meaning of the verse: "Open for me..." (Psalm 118:19) — meaning, the Tzaddik says that the gates of Divine service should be opened so that they may go through them to serve the Creator, understanding that they have not yet really done or accomplished anything yet through their Divine service at all. Then they understand that "This is the gate to the Eternal," (Psalm 118:20) — meaning, that this itself is the essence of Divine service: knowing that one can never finish one's Divine service, since there is no ultimate end to the matter. Understand.

³ the Source from which their souls were hewn | For the idea that souls are hewn from a divine quarry or source, see Hayyim Vital's *Sha'arei Kedusha 3:2*, likely influenced by the verse: **"Listen to Me, you who pursue justice, you who seek the Eternal: Look to the rock you were hewn from, to the quarry you were dug from"** (Isaiah 51:1).

Drash

“One thing I learned along the way, and most painfully and disappointingly so,” writes Rabbi Benay Lappe in her chapter of *Lesbian Rabbis*, “[...] was that rabbis, as a whole, are no wiser than the rest of us — they just know more Jewish stuff, because that’s what a rabbinic education is mostly about. And some rabbis turn that Jewish stuff into wisdom and some don’t.”

That might be a little cynical, but it’s not wrong. Even assuming that we’ve mastered the “Jewish stuff” — and “Jewish stuff” is a vast ocean of material of which most rabbis (myself included) only sit at the shore — there is an immense difference between content-knowledge and true wisdom. That’s why this reminder that we are eternally standing at the gateway, never fully making it through to the other side, is such an apt metaphor — both because it keeps us humble, and because it’s true. I’ve spent years learning, praying, meditating, teaching, practicing, trying, and failing. I’ve arrived at places in my personal, professional, and spiritual lives that seemed very much out of reach ten years ago. And, at the same time, I am still only at the gateway. Maybe, like Abraham, I’ve recognized that there is only one divine authority in the universe, a single unity within and beyond all things. OK, great. Now what? Have I truly reached the Root of my soul? Have I filled my obligation to the Source of all things? Have I turned that knowledge into wisdom, each and every day?

This text imagines Abraham as a brilliant seeker and philosopher, discovering metaphysical truths no one else in his world could have imagined, arriving finally at the idea of monotheism. The picture of him in that moment, confident at his achievement, believing he’s arrived at the pinnacle of his spiritual and intellectual life, is a familiar one. I’ve had plenty of moments where I’ve felt like I finally “got it,” whether it was a sermon or piece of writing I thought I’d nailed, a pastoral interaction I was proud of navigating with compassion, or a successful event I managed to pull off. The idea isn’t to negate any of that — I have in fact written good material, helped people in difficult moments, and planned great programs. Instead, it’s a reminder that everything in life that matters to me — my career, my relationships, my parenting, my spiritual life — are each part of larger journeys. In parenting especially, this feels especially apt: OK, I’ve managed to potty train my kid! It turns out, though, that I’m just at the gateway of the next step ... and the next ... and the next ... of raising this kid into the person they’re meant to become. All the parenting skills I needed to make it to this moment have only brought me to this gateway. As soon as I walk through it, I’ll arrive at the gateway again.

There’s another spiritual benefit to always standing at the gateway, beyond keeping our ego in check. Buddhist mindfulness practitioners speak about “beginner’s mind,” the special eagerness and fresh openness that comes from being new to a particular spiritual practice. My own attention and focus to Jewish prayer was never sharper and more engaged than my year studying as a fellow at Hadar, the egalitarian yeshiva in New York where I first began to take on observant Jewish life. The prayer book was somewhat familiar to me from my childhood, but took on entirely new meaning as I engaged in a daily recitation of the set liturgy for the first time in my life. The language and poetry of the text, the grammar and pronunciation, the hidden references and allusions, the choreography, the flow of the service, the practice of mindful attention, all felt alive and exciting, like an atlas was opened in front of me with an entire new continent to explore. Years later, my regular prayer practice can often feel rote. My best moments are when I can access that “beginner’s mind” again, recognizing that I still am just barely standing at the gateway of this practice I’ve done for years. Much of the liturgy may be

familiar now, but so much remains unexplored in the space between myself and the prayerbook's words.

Sod

- When have you felt like you'd mastered something, only to later discover that you were only at the gateway?
- When have you experienced "beginner's mind" with some practice or habit? Have you been able to maintain that type of awareness?
- How do you balance humility with a realistic acknowledgement of your accomplishments and abilities?

Put On Your Veil And Join Them In Their Troubles: Ḥayyei Sarah (Ohev Yisrael)

“Lover of Israel”

Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt / The Apter Rebbe (1748-1825, Poland and Ukraine)

Student of Eliemelkh of Lizhensk (*Noam Elimelekh*) and founder of the Apt-Zinkov-Kopishnitz Ḥasidic dynasty, Heschel was known for his great love of the Jewish people, earning him the name “*Ohev Yisrael* [Lover of Israel].” Heschel was born into a rabbinic family and himself became a community rabbi in Kolbuszowa, Poland, where he first became familiar with Ḥasidism. In 1800, he moved to Apt, where he served as rabbi. Though known as the “Apter Rebbe,” he later served other communities in Romania and Ukraine. Heschel served to mediate disputes among the Ḥasidic community and collected *tzedakah* to send to the Land of Israel. His teachings focus on the role of the *Tzaddik* [“Righteous One,” usually referring to a Ḥasidic leader] and the spiritual meaning of exile, and include numerous Kabbalistic references and ideas. His sons took over leadership of his movement, which in the following generations split into three branches. Heschel’s great-great-grandson was the renowned theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, known for his books *The Sabbath* and *God In Search of Man*, and for marching with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma, Alabama.

P’shat

Rebekah, upon her camel, emerges from the desert with the returning caravan of Abraham’s servant. Isaac, quietly meditating in the fields at dusk, lifts his eyes and sees his future wife approaching. Rebekah, seeing Isaac, alights from the camel and, veiling herself, approaches him. Each of these moments becomes something more than an encounter between two people; each is symbolic of the encounter between two different competing aspects within divinity. Isaac, representing the divine aspects of strength and judgment, foresees the suffering of the Jewish people as a necessary evil for the fulfillment of their destiny. Rebekah, representing the imminent and indwelling presence of God, refuses to accept this from a distance — she gets down, garbs herself, and prepares to join her people in their suffering. These images depict an ambivalence within divinity itself about the meaning and nature of suffering.

“And Isaac went out praying in the field toward [if not] evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching” (Genesis 24:63). It is said and known that “Isaac” represents the quality of “<i>Paḥad</i> [Terror]” and “<i>Gevurah</i> [Strength],”⁴ and “evening” also represents the	ויצא יצחק לשוח בשדה וגו' [כד, סד]. י"ל דזה ידוע שמדתו של יצחק הוא מדת הפחד והגבורה, וערב הוא גם כן מדת הדינין. ויצחק הצדיק רצה לתקן בחינתו ולסלק ולפנות הדינים הקשים מעל ישראל בניו.
---	--

⁴ “*Paḥad* [terror]” and “*Gevurah* [Strength]” | Isaac in the Kabbalistic system represents a broad cluster of related qualities: “*Gevurah* [Strength]” and “*Paḥad* [Terror],” along with *Din* [Judgment] and *Yir’ah* [Awe/Fear]; for the Kabbalists, Isaac’s intense moment of near-sacrifice comes to define his relationship with God. These qualities may feel negative, but are positive when held in the right proportions, and especially when balanced with its opposite quality of *Ḥesed* [Lovingkindness].

quality Judgments [<i>Dinin</i>].⁵ Isaac the <i>Tzaddik</i> ["Righteous One," usually referring to a Hasidic leader] wanted to repair his quality, removing and "clearing [<i>lif'not</i>]"⁶ the harsh Judgments away from his children Israel. [...] "...and, looking up, he saw camels [<i>GeMaLim</i>] approaching..." Meaning, he saw the future bestowal [<i>GeMuL</i>] of goodness that would flourish for the Seed of Israel on account of the fact that – despite the size and magnitude of the troubles and pains that they accepted upon themselves and suffered during the exile – they would still worship the Blessed God and observe the Torah and the <i>mitzvot</i>.⁷ When he saw this bestowal of goodness, then his mind was put at ease, and he agreed to the matter. "...Rebekah..." She being the <i>Shekhinah</i> [the feminine, indwelling presence of the divine].⁸ "...raised her eyes and saw Isaac..." Meaning, when she, too, saw the troubles and pains that would pass over Israel during the exile, she was overcome with compassion and her	וזה ויצא יצחק לשוח בשדה. על דרך (פסחים פח א) יצחק קראו שדה וכשהסתכל בחורבן הבית ציון שדה תחרש (ירמיה כ, יח). התפלל על דבר זה. וזה לשוח בשדה להתפלל בחקל תפוחין קדישין. ולפנות הערב ר"ל לסלק כל הדינים מעל הכנסת ישראל לעילא ותתא ובפרט בעת שהם [בגלות המר] מפוזר ומפורד בין העמים. וירא והנה גמלים באים. ר"ל ראה הגמול הטוב שיצמח מזה לזרע ישראל לעתיד לבא עבור גודל ורבות הצרות והיסורין שקבלו על עצמם וסבלו בעת הגלות ואף על פי כן היו עובדים את הש"י ושומרים התורה והמצות וכשראה זה הגמול הטוב אז נח דעתיה בזה והסכים על הדבר. ותשא רבקה היא השכינה את עיניה ותרא את יצחק. ר"ל כשראתה גם כן את הצרות והיסורין שיעברו על ישראל בעת הגלות ונכמרו רחמיה מאוד והמו
--	---

⁵ **Evening** | See, for example, *Pri Etz Hayyim, Sha'ar Ha-Kri'at Shema* 5:4: "For there is greater *Hesed* in the world in the morning than in the evening, since in the evening Judgment [*Dinin*] is mighty." Evening darkness is understandably associated with harsher, difficult qualities.

⁶ **clear [*lif'not*]** | The phrase "**toward [*lif'not*] evening**" is somewhat ambiguous. Here, our text is playing with another meaning of the word "*lif'not*" – to "clear away."

⁷ pains that they accepted upon themselves | The idea of accepting suffering with grace in order to receive reward is classically expressed in *Berakhot* 5a:

And if one accepts [suffering with love], what is their reward? "That one might see their children, and lengthen one's days" ... Moreover, their Torah study will endure, as it is stated: "The purpose of the Eternal might prosper by their hand," (Isaiah 53:10).

This idea is challenged by stories on the following folio of rabbis who reject their reward (and this whole theology, too?) when they themselves are suffering – a story that will be cited below. This same internal Talmudic debate about whether to accept or resist suffering is played out here in our text, between Isaac (who thinks the reward is worth the suffering) and Rebekah (who does not).

⁸ She being the *Shekhinah* | See, for example, *Zohar* 1:133a, 140b, and 150a-b, which associate episodes in Rebekah's life with the *Shekhinah*: Rebekah brought the *Shekhinah*'s presence back into Sarah's tent when she married Isaac, the *Shekhinah* was with them during their sojourn in Gerar, and the *Shekhinah* was with Rebekah when she struggled in her pregnancy with Esau and Jacob.

insides churned for her children. "...She got down from the camel [GaMaL]." Meaning, her mind was not calmed by the bestowal [GeMuL] of goodness that would flourish for the Seed of Israel in the future, and so she "got down from" it – meaning, she did not want to agree to them having so much immeasurable trouble and pain, even though afterwards the reward for their goodness would be doubled. This is like what is taught in the Talmud: <i>"neither this nor its reward,"</i> (Berakhot 5b).⁹ [...] "...so she took her veil and covered herself." Meaning, when the <i>Shekhinah</i> saw (so to speak) that the Community of Israel was in trouble and in exile, then she, too, dressed herself in many garments and joined with them in their troubles.¹⁰ And if God so wills it, then at the exact moment of redemption, the Glory of God will be revealed, and She will remove her garments from herself, and God's sovereignty [<i>malkhuto</i>] will be revealed to us, as it is written: "And your eyes will see your Teacher," (Isaiah 30:20).¹¹	מעיה על בניה. ותפול מעל הגמל ר"ל שנפלה מעל הגמול הטוב שיצמח לזרע ישראל מזה לעתיד לבוא ולא נתקררה דעתה זאת. ולזה לא רצתה להסכים על זה היינו שיהיה להם צרות ויסורין כל כך אין לשער. הגם שאחר כך יוכפל שכרן טובתם והצלחתם בלי שיעור וגבול. על דרך לא הן ולא שכרן (ברכות ה ב). ותאמר אל העבד מי האיש הלזה כו', שיצחק מורה על מדתו מדת הדין וזהו לקראתינו היינו שהוא התנגדות לנו שהיא לא רצתה להסכים בדבר זה. ויאמר העבד הוא אדוני, זהו מדת יצחק שהוא מדת גבורה. ותקח הצעיף ותתכס, היינו כשהשכינה רואה כביכול שהכנסת ישראל הם בצרה וגלות אז היא מתלבשת גם כן בכמה לבושים ומשתתפת עמם בצרתם. ואם ירצה ה' בעת זמן הגאולה אז יגלה כבוד ה' ותפשוט עצמה מהלבושין ויתגלה מלכותו עלינו. כמו שכתוב (ישעיהו ל, כ) והיו עיניך רואות את מוריך.
--	---

⁹ *neither this nor its reward* | See the note above on "pains that they accept upon themselves." The Talmud tells the story of Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba, who rejects the potential future reward for his suffering, in order to be speedily healed:

Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba, fell ill. [Rabbi Yoḥanan] entered to visit him, and said to him, "Is your suffering dear to you?" He said to him, "Neither this [suffering] nor its reward." He said to him, "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand, and he stood him up [and healed him]. (Berakhot 5b)

¹⁰ joined with them in their troubles | When the *Shekhinah*/Rebekah realizes that Isaac's quality of *Gevurah* and Judgment – and his theology of suffering now for reward later – will eventually triumph, she decides to join her people in their suffering rather than watch it from afar. This is the Kabbalistic idea of the *Shekhinah* in exile – that a part of God travels with the Jewish people in exile, suffering along with us, until she can be reunited with the more transcendent parts of the divine. Eventually, the Jewish people will reach the end of their physical and spiritual exile along with her, reuniting her with the masculine element of divinity.

¹¹ she will remove her garments from herself, and God's sovereignty [*malkhuto*] will be revealed to us | While the *Shekhinah* (also known as the *Sefirah* of *Malkhut* [Sovereignty]) is in exile with the Jewish people, she is covered up and concealed; divinity and holiness are not always readily apparent in our lowly world. But one day, in the messianic era, her coverings and garments will be removed and she – i.e. the holiness and divinity underlying all mundane reality – will be visible to all. So, too, will we be able to see God, our **"Teacher,"** directly with our eyes.

Drash

While I was doing my chaplaincy training in a summer Clinical Pastoral Education course, learning how to be present with people in some of the most challenging moments, my class attended a conference for Jewish chaplains, therapists, and social workers. One of the exercises we had was to meet in small groups and discuss difficult cases we'd encountered, bringing our different perspectives to bear. In my group, a social worker shared a story about a hospice patient she was working with. Like everyone on hospice, she had a terminal diagnosis. She also had a strained relationship with her partner, though she still wanted to see him. The problem was that he was in active addiction and would show up under the influence or with drugs on his person, which led to the staff banning him from the premises. The social worker was racing against time to meet her client's dying wish to have her partner there with her. Could she get this man into a treatment plan? Could she convince the hospital bureaucracy to let him in, or to let the patient out?

We sat around the table sharing thoughts and suggestions. Social workers shared resources, therapists shared psychological issues that might be at play. But I was in the midst of chaplaincy training, and so I had a very different reaction. I said, "You know, I'm glad you're working on solving her problem, and I know you'll do everything you can. But from my perspective as a chaplain, I would be asking myself different questions: What if doing everything isn't enough, and this woman won't get the good death she deserves? Can we help her through that most painful experience by sitting in it with her, not being afraid to face the terrible sadness of it? Can we join her in her suffering?"

These two tendencies — to solve the problem, or to join in empathy with the suffering — are both part of God, and they are "split" in this text, as they are in much of Jewish mysticism, into the masculine and feminine elements of the divine. The masculine — represented here by Isaac — is transcendent, far up above and beyond the fray. The feminine — represented by Rebekah — is immanent, dwelling in and among us even in our suffering. The masculine part of the divine sees that Israel is going to suffer tremendously, but will be rewarded in the long run for their obedience. From the transcendent, masculine part of God, the suffering will be worth it; the solution is to stay strong through the worst of it and emerge on the other side with a reward.

For the immanent, feminine *Shekhinah*, the only thing to do is to go down among the people and dwell with them in their pain. The Jewish people's exile, and the broader brokenness and suffering of the world, is mirrored by a rupture within the divine between these two perspectives, which we hope can one day be made whole again. Here, when the problem of the Jewish people's suffering seems unavoidable, the transcendent perspective backs away, no immediate solution in sight. But the *Shekhinah*, in the person of Rebekah, puts on her veil and joins the people in their suffering.

This dichotomy has almost become a trope in the realm of human relationships: One partner brings up a challenge they're facing, looking to be heard and understood, while their spouse jumps into problem-solving mode instead. I've had this exact same fight many times in my own marriage and have found myself on both sides of the divide. Is it better to sit with one another in our pain, or to jump ahead to fixing the problem? Of course, the answer is ... yes. But this text celebrates the strength of the *Shekhinah*, and her ability to be present with us through our worst moments.

Sod

- Is your instinct to problem-solve or to empathize? When have you chosen the wrong strategy?
- When have you managed to fully empathize and join someone in their suffering? What types of resistance within yourself did you encounter?
- Have you ever felt the divine presence supporting you in your own challenging moments?

Falling Down and Getting Up: Vayeilekh / Shabbat Shuvah (Pri Tzaddik)

“Righteous Fruit” (Proverbs 11:30)

Tzadok HaKohen Rabinowitz of Lublin (1823-1900, Lithuania and Poland)

Born into a rabbinic family of *Misnagdim* [opponents of Ḥasidism], Rabinowitz became a disciple of Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbits (The Izhbitzer Rebbe, *Mei HaShiloah*). Though he had no children and did not found a dynasty, he was a prolific author and thinker. Rabinowitz — like his teacher — wrote about conflicts between repentance, sin, and free will, imagining that even our sins were willed by God. He was also interested in mysticism and dreams; his work *Divrei Ḥalomot* recounts insights he received in his own dreams.

P’shat

This text brings us a poignant image of Moses’ final steps, based on this Torah portion’s unique description of Moses walking and talking at the same time. Moses’ leadership journey is understood as ending because he was unable to engage in the process of going out, falling, and rising again — of making mistakes, learning from those mistakes, and growing as a person and a leader. It is this quality of “walking” — moving forward and backward and forward again in our spiritual lives — that distinguishes us from the static, “standing” angels; what we learn from our failures allows us to rise to even greater heights than angels could ever imagine.

“Moses walked and spoke these things to all Israel,” (Deuteronomy 31:1). We never find this exact phrase anywhere else in the Torah. Even the <i>Zohar</i> (3:283b) asks: Where was he walking to?¹² [...] All a person’s days in This World are called “walking.” This is the difference between angels and human beings, as it is written: “And I will permit you to walk about among these that stand by,” (Zechariah 3:7).¹³ Angels are called “standing,” for they are always at one level. This is not the case for human beings, who need to be always “walking” upward from one level to the next, until they find fulfillment and arrive at “their eternal abode.” This is the meaning of “Moses walked” — Moses our teacher (peace be upon him) was always walking upward	וילך משה וידבר וגו' הנה לא מצינו לשון כזה בכל התורה. וגם בזוה"ק הקשה לאן הלך. אך הענין ע"פ שא' (שבת קנ"ב.) ע"פ כי הולך האדם אל בית עולמו מלמד שכל צדיק וצדיק נותנין לו מדור וכו'. והיינו שכל צדיק יש לו עולם בפ"ע (וכ"כ במ"ר פקודי פ' נ"ב עולם בעצמו) וזה תכליתו בעוה"ז וכל ימי האדם בעוה"ז נקרא הולך. וזה ההבדל בין מלאך לאדם כמו שנא' ונתתי לך מהלכים בין העומדים האלה דמלאך נקרא עומד שעומד תמיד
--	---

¹² To where did he walk? | The *Zohar* (trans. Daniel Matt, adapted) reads:

“Moses walked.” What is meant by **“walked?”** Where did he go? Well, he **“walked”** like a body without an arm, as it is said: **“They walked feebly,” (Lamentations 1:6);** for Aaron, the right arm, had died, and the body wanted to leave.

¹³ **Zechariah 3:7** | In context, the verse is about an angelic vision received by the high priest Joshua. The phrase **“these that stand by”** (translated as **“attendants”** in NJPS) are traditionally understood to refer to angelic beings in God’s heavenly court. Our text plays off both this traditional understanding, and a hyper-literal reading of the phrase **“these that stand by,”** to contrast the spiritually “stationary” angels with the dynamic, “walking” human beings, who have the power to ascend (or descend) from level to level.

from one level to the next. His final walk, described in this verse, continued until he arrived at the level he spoke of in the next verse: **"I can no more go out and come in,"** (Deuteronomy 31:2). Since he could no longer **"go out"** and fall from his level, he could no longer **"come in"** and rise up, after falling, to a higher level than them, either. It is like that which is written: **"Seven times the righteous falls and gets up,"** (Proverbs 24:16), and like what is said: *"a descent for the sake of ascent,"* (Makkot 7b).¹⁴ It is by means of descent (heaven forbid!) that one may prevail with even *"greater strength,"* (Zohar 1:129b).¹⁵ This is the meaning of the verse: **"Seven times the righteous falls and ..."** – through the falling itself – **"... gets up."** Even then, they are still called a **"walker,"** since it was for the sake of ascent.

However, anyone who cannot **"go out"** [and down] anymore also cannot **"come in,"** [and rise up afterwards] – this is the final level. This is why it says here: **"Moses walked."** Written here is his final **"walk."** All the rest of the sections of the Torah, from here to the end, were on this same day, as part of his final **"walk."** So, every person must always be a **"walker,"** as described above.

במדרגה אחת משא"כ האדם צריך להיות הולך במעלה תמיד ממדרגה למדרגה עד שמשלים עצמו ומגיע אל בית עולמו.

זה שא' וילך משה דמשה רבינו ע"ה הי' הולך תמיד במעלה ממדרגה למדרגה וההליכה אחרונה שנא' בפ' זו הי' עד שבא אל מדרגה זו שאמר לא אוכל עוד לצאת ולבא היינו דכל שלא יוכל עוד לצאת לנפול ממדרגתו ע"ז לא יוכל לבוא עוד למדרגה למעלה הימנו ג"כ. וכמו שנא' כי שבע יפול צדיק וקם היינו ע"ד שא' (מכות ז'): בירידה שהוא צורך עלי' והיינו שע"י הירידה ח"ו ע"ז מתגבר עוד בחילא יתיר. וזהו כי שבע יפול צדיק ע"ז וקם ואף אז הוא ג"כ נקרא הולך כיון שהוא צורך עלי'.

אבל כל שלא יוכל לצאת עוד לא יוכל לבוא ג"כ זה מדרגה האחרונה. וזה שאמר כאן וילך משה שכאן נכתב ההליכה האחרונה וכל הפרשיות מכאן עד סוף התורה שנאמרו הי' ביום זה ע"י ההליכה האחרונה. וכן צריך כל אדם להיות הולך תמיד כנ"ל:

Drash

On my 2024 sabbatical in Israel, I attended a beautiful Rosh Hodesh evening song circle led by Minyan Tel Aviv. My husband and I walked down what seemed like an abandoned street in Jaffa,

¹⁴ *Makkot 7b* | In its context in the Talmud, this phrase is part of a technical discussion about what types of actions make one liable for being exiled for accidental manslaughter. Objects that kill someone as part of a downward motion make one liable, whereas objects that kill someone as part of an upward motion make one exempt. This phrase describes more complicated actions with upwards and downwards elements, such as the rung of a ladder breaking and falling downward while one is going up a ladder. The phrase is taken entirely out of its context and spiritualized by the Hasidic masters, to describe how one might fall to a lower spiritual level, make an error, or even just spend time among less spiritually elevated people – all for the sake of eventually elevating oneself and one's community.

¹⁵ *Zohar 1:129b* | This phrase seems to be a snippet drawn from a discussion about the same idea discussed in this text – how becoming penitent after failure and "descent" can help a person rise to even greater levels.

Rabbi Yosi said: We learned that even the fully righteous don't have permission to stand in the place where the penitent stands in This World, since they are closer to the Sovereign than anyone else. They draw down more upon themselves, with will of heart and with greater strength, to approach the Sovereign.

See also *Berakhot 34b*: "In the place where penitents stand, even the full-fledged righteous do not stand."

until we found the small storefront space that held the gathering — an ornately decorated room with carvings, candles, rugs, cushions, and more. There, a group of about a dozen young, hip Tel Avivians — and us two (definitely less hip) Americans — spoke on the theme of brokenness, discussed a few short texts and poems, and sang a few looping melodies over and over again, like a chant or mantra. Members of the group shared about brokenness in their personal lives, the fractures of wartime Israel, and their own struggles to find meaning and hope within all of this rupture, rather than just getting past or through it. Toward the end, the facilitators brought out a beautiful bowl, wrapped it in a cloth, and invited the participants to take a hammer and smash it as we sang together, physically embracing brokenness and offering an invitation to engage with its inevitability on our own terms. My more adventurous husband did some smashing. I did not.

Smashing aside, the most moving part of the experience for me was the setting of the “Berditcher Niggun” melody to the verse cited in this text: **“Seven times the righteous falls and gets up” (Proverbs 24:16)**. The first part of the verse — **“Seven times the righteous falls [sheva yipol tzaddik]”** was sung to the lower, more minor, mournful part of the melody, over and over again. And then, each round of the melody would magically rise up above the gloom with the word **“and gets up [ve-kam],”** the two Hebrew syllables stretched out, reaching beyond themselves, until finally finally running out of steam, returning to the beginning of the melody again, the low, slow, sad **“fall.”**

For me, that melody captured the deepest meaning of this text. The falling and the rising are the essence of the journey — not something that pulls us away from our spiritual lives, but the entire context in which we live them. The brokenness these souls brought to the circle that night in Jaffa was a holy vulnerability — yes, there are challenges, but by bringing them into a sacred space, engaging with them not purely in hopes of leaving them behind, there is a possibility to use this pain to “get up” once again.

Moses reached a point where the ups and downs just weren’t accessible anymore. Maybe he was tired after 40 years of wandering in the desert, and he didn’t have it in him to “go out” and risk the “fall,” to need to find the strength to “get up” again. Perhaps he’d reached such a high spiritual level that he was beyond the ups and downs ... but if that were the case, it would also mean he was beyond the ability to learn and grow, and therefore beyond being human. It would certainly mean he was beyond being able to connect with his followers, who needed to see a *Tzaddik* still engaged in the ebbs and flows of human life and spiritual leadership. Whatever it was, it meant that it was time for him to go.

As I approach a decade in the rabbinate, I can feel within myself competing tendencies — a push forward to take risks try new things, to “go out” and be willing to “fall” — and also the tendency to stay put, to not risk “going out” on a limb, to enjoy the safety and security of where I’m at in my work. Thinking about Moses’ “last walk” is a helpful reminder for me that when we entirely give up on risking the “fall,” we also entirely lose the possibility of growth. The “fall” itself can be what enables us to rise up stronger.

Sod

- When have you “fallen” and “gotten back up” in your life? Did “getting up” help you grow in your spiritual life? Did it set you back?

- How do you look for and find meaning in brokenness? Are there “falls” that are beyond the capacity to “get up” from, to learn and grow from?
- Have you ever felt you couldn’t take the risk of “going out” in some aspect of your life? Did that feel safe, stagnant, or somewhere in between? Did that feeling last?