

CHAPTER ONE



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“A Series of Small Turnings” (1986)

*Since all of life is permeated with Torah,
the sages are not merely teachers. Their very lives
constitute Torah, and everything pertaining to
them is worthy of perusal.*

—Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz,
The Essential Talmud, p. 96

I first met Rabbi Steinsaltz in 1982, two years after *The Thirteen Petalled Rose* was published. Its title is a phrase found in the opening lines of the Kabbalistic text *The Zohar*, in which the House of Israel is compared to a rose in a garden. The number 13 is significant in several ways, one being the ancient tradition of thirteen attributes of God. So the title is a reference to Kabbalah, signaling to the reader that the book is based on Kabbalistic notions of existence.

In 1980, the year of its publication, *Newsweek* magazine devoted a full page to Rabbi Steinsaltz and his new book. “Jewish lore is filled with tales of formidable rabbis,” *Newsweek* wrote. “Probably none alive today can compare in genius and influence to Adin Steinsaltz, whose extraordinary gifts as a scholar, teacher, scientist, writer, mystic and social critic have attracted disciples from all factions of Israeli society.”¹

When I located a copy of *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, I couldn’t put it down. Not that the writing captivated me. On the contrary, when I read the first three lines of the first chapter, I was confused and dumbfounded.

The book begins, “The physical world in which we live, the objectively observed universe around us, is only a part of an inconceivably vast system of worlds. Most of these worlds are spiritual in their essence; they are of a different order from our known world. Which does not necessarily mean that they exist somewhere else, but means rather that they exist in different dimensions of being.”²

What did this mean? What was this about? How could I read the book when I could hardly grasp the first few lines?

I confess that sometimes I am a demanding or perhaps a lazy reader. Often unless a book speaks to me and delights me from the very first sentences, I put it aside. I often feel, however foolishly, that there is just too much to read to have to work my way through something dense and obscure.



It takes both time and considerable introspection to get beyond the elaborate mental constructions, the words and ideas, devised by everyone.

—Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*,
p. 140

When I finished the book, I started it again, from the beginning, and found, of course, that I had picked up enough insight as I chiseled my way through the chapters to gain a little more understanding from my second reading.

But when I first read those confusing, almost unintelligible sentences in *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, rather than toss the book aside, I reread the lines and reread them again, working my way, phrase by phrase, sentence by sentence, through the entire book.

Then I read the book a third time, and then a fourth, and a fifth. Today, twenty-five years later, I have read the book surely more than a hundred times; I consider it my favorite work and the most important of all the books I have ever read.

It was sometime during the year after I discovered *The Thirteen Petalled Rose* that I realized the book was having a deep and life-changing impact on me.

So I wrote Rabbi Steinsaltz what can only be characterized as a fan letter bordering on a love letter. Not a romantic love letter, of course, but a love letter written by a disciple to his Teacher. In it, I told Rabbi Steinsaltz about my upbringing and lack of much Jewish education. I told him of my attraction to Eastern religions and my alienation from Judaism. I described

my unhappiness with the afternoon Hebrew school I attended before my bar mitzvah and how it was such a turnoff. But I also told him about my genealogical research and the powerful way in which I was drawn to the religion of my ancestors. I told Rabbi Steinsaltz I was reading *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, that it was blowing my mind, and that I had some questions I wanted to ask him.

I added a line saying that if the Rabbi were ever in New York, I'd love to meet with him, and mailed it off to his address in Jerusalem.

Becoming *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*

Writing to famous people and expecting responses was not new to me.

One such effort was inspired by Ray Bradbury's science fiction novel *Fahrenheit 451*. I had been moved by the film version of the novel, directed by François Truffaut.

Fahrenheit 451 is about a society in the near future where books are banned. The last scene of the film shows the organized underground trying to save books. The underground does not hide books to save them from the antibook regime. Rather, people memorize books and "become" them. A person who memorized a book might say, "Hello, I'm *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*" and would be able to recite it in its entirety from memory.

I wrote to lots of famous people, including some of my favorite authors, asking them which book they would "become."

Amazingly, I did get responses, and many of them were fascinating: Bernard Malamud wrote that he would become Shakespeare's sonnets, John Fowles told me he would become the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and Allen Ginsberg said he would become *Songs of Innocence* by William Blake. In fact, the most

interesting part of the project was my discovery that famous people often *do* write back.

At one time in my life, I would have become *Franny and Zooey* by J. D. Salinger.

Today, of course, I would become *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*.

So when I wrote to Rabbi Steinsaltz asking for a meeting when he came to New York, I actually expected a prompt reply. Instead, a year went by with no response.

My Teacher, Ram Dass

Allow me explain my situation when the phone call finally occurred.

For many years, I was a serious student of the teachings of Ram Dass, formerly known as college professor Richard Alpert. Ram Dass was known, among other things, for his being fired from Harvard University on the same day and for the same reason as Professor Timothy Leary. Both men were engaged in LSD research at the university.

Much of their research, as Ram Dass tells it, consisted of ingesting the psychoactive (they called it “psychedelic”) drug and noticing its effects on themselves. Harvard would have none of it and threw them out.

Leary went on to lead a colorful public life. Alpert, a Jewish boy from New England, went to India, found his spiritual teacher rooted in the Hindu tradition, changed his name to Ram Dass, and then returned to the United States, developing a huge following of students and admirers. I was and still am one of them.

Ram Dass is probably best known today as the author of *Be Here Now*, an influential and classic best-seller that is still being read more than thirty-five years after publication. He’s been on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* twice. He is an amazing teacher and a gifted storyteller, writer, and public speaker.

I was not interested in psychedelics. I was interested in the spiritual ideas Ram Dass discovered in India and elsewhere and how marvelously he expressed those ideas.

I would say that Ram Dass helped me see that I am not simply my rational mind. I *have* a rational mind; it is a wonderful and useful tool. But it is not who I am. It is just one aspect of me. I also learned that we all experience various levels of consciousness and that we all have souls that are eternal.

I am one of many serious Jewish seekers who have Ram Dass to thank for what he has taught us.

One day in 1982, I attended an event held at Columbia University. It was recommended by Ram Dass. A woman named Pat Rodegast claimed to be able to “channel” a being named Emmanuel. She went into a trance, and Emmanuel spoke through her. What ensued was a very powerful discussion about death, the afterlife, and the meaning of it all. I went home, had dinner, and went to sleep.



In Judaism there is nothing extraordinary or unacceptable about extrasensory experience. It is quite natural for people to have the capacity to rise above the usual human level of functioning and to reach a higher spiritual consciousness. Judaism even recognizes different forms and levels of this capacity, such as prophecy, magic, and mystical powers.

—Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *The Strife of the Spirit*, p. 177



The secret of the positive *mitzvot*, the commandments to perform certain actions, lies, in a manner of speaking, in the activization of the limbs of the body, in certain movements and certain ways of doing things which are congruous with higher realities and higher relationships in other worlds. In fact, every movement, every gesture, every habitual pattern and every isolated act that man does with his body has an effect in whole systems of essences in other dimensions with and against one another. Clearly, an ordinary person does not know anything of this; at best he is conscious only to a very small degree of the things he does and of their higher significance.

—Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*,
p. 118

The next morning, I woke up and went into the living room, where I was in the habit of studying some Jewish text or other for a while at the start of each day. On the way to the living room, I collapsed, managed to crawl back into bed, and was literally unable to get out of the bed or move at all for ten days. My doctor never figured it out. And it never happened again.

It was during those ten days in bed, almost paralyzed on my back, when a woman called on the phone and said, “Rabbi Steinsaltz will be arriving in New York this week. He can talk to you just for a few minutes while he’s here, so how’s a week from Wednesday at ten A.M.?”



This is not to say that there is no use for these powers, or that mystical manifestations have no value. They are only worthless in themselves, when they are isolated from all else; but when they are properly understood, they can guide the soul better than any other forces in life. Here too, as with all else, it is the use and the direction of a faculty that determines its value: It may be turned one way to fantasy and empty vision or another way toward God.

—Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *The Strife of the Spirit*, p. 181

I quickly accepted the invitation, even though at that moment I was unable to get down the hall to the bathroom, let alone to the address in midtown Manhattan where I was asked to meet with Rabbi Steinsaltz.

And it was on the morning of that Wednesday when I successfully managed, for the first time in ten days, to get out of my bed, out of my apartment, and down the stairs.

“The Rashi of Our Times”

The phone call actually came from the offices of Rabbi Steve Shaw, who is a friend, student, and adviser to Rabbi Steinsaltz and was instrumental in helping the Rabbi launch his publishing and teaching activities in the United States. “I don’t think it’s exaggerating to say that Rabbi Steinsaltz may come to be known as the Rashi of our times,” Rabbi Shaw has suggested.

From the time I received the phone call until the morning of the appointment, I spent my time in bed thinking about the meeting I would have with Rabbi Steinsaltz.

I tried to think about why I had originally asked to see him, but even more important, I was going to take the opportunity to ask the Rabbi the most profound questions in my life. As the days passed, I composed my list of questions.

In the end, I had eleven questions to pose to Rabbi Steinsaltz. Some were large, abstract questions; others were far more specific or personal. But all were, at that time, of great importance to me.

After all, I thought, if Rabbi Steinsaltz is who they say he is, if he is indeed one the greatest rabbis of the century, if he really is a genius and a mystic and a scientist and a profound thinker, if he is in fact a “once in a millennium scholar,” as *Time* magazine described him, if he really is a unique, brilliant, and holy man, I have to seize the moment, grab the opportunity, ask the most important questions of my whole life. I’d have to go for broke.

I called a car service and traveled from my apartment in Brooklyn to an office building on Forty-Second Street, across from the world-famous New York Public Library. My back was still quite sensitive and sore, but I managed to slowly walk to the elevator and up to the office number I was given.

I was nervous. The last thing I wanted to do was to say something to Rabbi Steinsaltz that I would later regret—some foolish comment or inarticulate question. I approached the receptionist, but suddenly the Rabbi himself appeared, reached out his hand, and said, “Hello.” I had the impression that he had already been meeting with other people, as he suggested we take the elevator to another floor where there was a place for us to sit and chat.

His hair and beard were red, with hints of whitish gray. His hands did not look like the hands of a scholar but rather like those of a worker, a man who uses his hands to build and repair and tinker. I am five feet seven inches tall, and Rabbi Steinsaltz

was shorter than me. His eyes were bright, almost twinkly. His beard was long and wild, his hair slightly long in the back. He was wearing what looked like a blue velvet smoking jacket, and he was carrying his pipe and a pouch of tobacco.

We walked together to the elevator. He noticed that I was partly bent over, so I told him that my back had “gone out” and that this was my first time out of bed in ten days. When we reached our destination, we sat on comfortable chairs in a sitting area outside a row of offices.

I began by telling Rabbi Steinsaltz that I had been, for many years, in search of a Teacher. I remember saying, “I am looking for a Teacher with a capital T,” and he smiled for the first time. Rabbi Steinsaltz has a great smile, which you can often barely see behind his mustache and beard, but it is usually accompanied by a smile around his eyes.

In those days, it was permissible to smoke in public spaces in New York City buildings, so Rabbi Steinsaltz was occupied with packing his pipe with tobacco and lighting it several times during our conversation. I had no idea how long I would have with him, but he didn’t seem at all in a rush. He gave me all the time I wanted. We spoke for two and a half hours on that Wednesday morning.

My First Questions

Of the eleven questions I had brought with me, we discussed, to my absolute satisfaction, nine of them. I had written the questions in a little notebook and held it in my lap as I asked them one at a time. Although I had listed the questions in a particular order, when I was with the Rabbi I quickly switched the order around. I don’t know why.

I was nervous. I didn't really want to interview him. I wanted to have a conversation.

But it didn't happen that way. There was no way at that first meeting of ours for me to chat with Rabbi Steinsaltz, to have a back-and-forth conversation.

Some of my questions were straightforward and were answered with a quick yes or no. Others were more detailed, profoundly personal, and needed some air and some light.

I began, “Since high school, I have been reading books that teach the ideas of the Eastern religions. I don't pretend to really know too much about the history, similarities, or differences among the various forms of Buddhism, Hinduism, or other strands of Eastern thought.”

I went on, “But I drifted toward books about these spiritual traditions and have found myself being nourished by them.”

“And then,” I explained to Rabbi Steinsaltz, “I discovered your book, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, and I found that so many basic notions about life as you describe them in your book are similar to or the same as those in the East.

“How could it *be*?” I asked.

Rabbi Steinsaltz, lighting his pipe, took it away from his mouth and with a smile said, “One might say, ‘How could it be *otherwise*?’”

I understood what he meant immediately. But not only did I understand; I also experienced something that happened often when I was with the Rabbi: I would have a question in mind that had attained immense proportion. And then Rabbi Steinsaltz would help me bring it down to the right size.

Why would I be shocked that the various spiritual traditions in the world teach some of the same basic teachings? As Rabbi Steinsaltz suggested, wouldn't it be more of a shock to think that the world's great spiritual traditions *differ* profoundly?

After all, just as one plus one equals two all over the world, there are surely spiritual principles, like “Do unto others,” to use a simple example, that also find expression in the various religious traditions of the world.

Even the notion of reincarnation, which is so central to the theology of the East, has been taught by some of the greatest spiritual masters in Jewish history.

In a way, my question was the wrong question. My shock was really not that the Eastern spiritual masters taught similar ideas to those I found in *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*. My real shock, although I didn’t realize it or express it during my first meeting with Rabbi Steinsaltz, was that after reading hundreds of books about Judaism, I had never encountered a Jewish book as inspiring, as profound, as *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*. There were lots of books on Eastern thought that inspired me, but nothing came close in the world of modern Jewish books.

Rabbi Steinsaltz went on to say, “History is usually taught backward. You will hear historians say, ‘A long time ago there were pagans. And then came Abraham, who invented one God and introduced monotheism to the world.’”

The Rabbi spoke very softly. His pipe was well lit, and its aroma sweetened the air.



I do not mean to imply that holiness is in any way restricted to one people or that the approach to the Divine is not equally available to all of mankind. It is only that the Jews undertake a greater burden.

—Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, p. 97

“But there are still pagans, I would say, all around us right here in New York City. One does not have to go back hundreds or thousands of years to find pagans.”

I understood what Rabbi Steinsaltz was saying: a pagan is a person who does not acknowledge the existence of God. It is not that a long time ago the world was without belief in God and that Abraham introduced the idea of God to the world. Rather, the world was *created* by God, and God’s creations knew Him—but came to forget Him. Then Abraham came along and reminded the world of God.

Today, we are still in great need, I believe, of reminders that this is God’s world that we are in.

Rabbi Steinsaltz added, “Abraham did not introduce God to the world. Abraham was, so to say, a Renaissance man. He reminded the world of God. God created the world, and everything in it stems from the same Source. Everything grows from that Source and in some ways resembles it.”

I was moved and surprised by his response. I suppose I foolishly expected him to quickly point out the differences between Judaism and the Eastern religions. Instead, he established the reasonableness of spiritual traditions’ being similar.

He told me that he was once invited by the BBC to participate in a documentary about the world’s religions and that he was asked to represent Judaism—and they gave him one minute.

He told me that he said, “What can I say? I can say that Jews believe in God. But *other* religions believe in God. I can say that Jews believe in revelation. But *other* religions believe in revelation. I can say all kinds of things that Jews do, but other religions do these things too. I suppose all I can really say is that we Jews do it in a *Jewish* way.”

During the hours that we spoke, I was half bent over. I winced from time to time.

When he said to me, sympathetically, “You know, you didn’t have to come,” I disagreed and said that I certainly *did*.

Another question I asked Rabbi Steinsaltz—not one of the deeply personal ones—had to do with my relationship with family members who were not observers of Shabbos restrictions.

I was celebrating Shabbos each week on Friday night, including a beautiful Shabbos dinner, complete with candle lighting, two challahs, a cup of wine, songs and words of Torah shared at the table, and grace after meals.

My question was this: since it is not permitted to drive an automobile on Shabbos, was it OK for me to invite family members and friends to my Shabbos table who do not observe the laws of Shabbos and who would have to drive a car to visit me? After all, on the one hand, my invitation would prompt them to drive. On the other hand, wouldn’t it be better for them to see our Shabbos celebration and to join in?

This might appear to be a small question, especially since I have described my questions for this first meeting with Rabbi Steinsaltz as being profoundly important ones. This question was really symbolic of a whole series of issues that arise in nonobservant Jewish families when one member, like me, decides to become observant.

We have in our time witnessed a phenomenon unprecedented in Jewish history: the return of Jews to traditional observance. The phenomenon, sometimes known as the *ba’al teshuvah* movement,³ is that of Jews like me, who were brought up in mostly secular homes and who have decided to enter into traditional Jewish life with its values, dedication to Torah study, prayer, customs, restrictions and celebrations but may be the only ones in the family to do so.

“Well,” Rabbi Steinsaltz began, “if your family or guests never go out on Friday night, even if not for religious reasons but just that this was their habit, then I would not invite them. By

staying home, they are doing the right thing as far as the laws of Shabbos are concerned. However, if they would just as quickly drive to the theater on a Friday night, you might as well invite them to your Shabbos dinner.”

Rabbi Steinsaltz also referred to a category that is described in discussions among the Jewish sages in the Talmud, and that is the case of Jewish infants being kidnapped by Gentiles. Clearly, such an infant is not obligated to observe the laws of Shabbos. Rabbi Steinsaltz explained that this kind of Talmudic case is similar in many ways to the *ba'al teshuvah* today.

During that first meeting, I asked some questions about Jewish practice, about reincarnation, and about several other topics, much of which was personal and pressing for me. I had no hesitation sharing some deeply private psychological stuff with him, and I reaped great benefit from doing so.

But eventually my first conversation with Rabbi Steinsaltz was over. My mind was spinning.

There was no arrogance. No smugness. No air of superiority. No overwhelming force of authority.

Instead, Rabbi Steinsaltz was like a wise, experienced fellow seeker who was farther along the trail and had the generosity to turn back and call back to me, describing the terrain that I was approaching.



The ordinary man who has been granted contact with the holy person is thereby brought into a certain contact with true holiness.

—Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, p. 83

I left my first encounter with Rabbi Steinsaltz deeply satisfied, spiritually nourished, and greatly uplifted. In fact, I was blown away.

“Some People Have More Than Twenty-Four Hours in Each Day”

A year passed after that first conversation. It was the spring of 1985. I felt that I needed to arrange a second meeting with Rabbi Steinsaltz. But I was a little hesitant about bringing him more of my questions. I felt that I would be wasting his time. I had not yet had my brilliant idea to become Rabbi Steinsaltz's driver.

So I asked Marc Silver, who is now an editor at *U.S. News and World Report* but was then the editor in chief of the *National Jewish Monthly*, the official monthly magazine of B'nai Brith International, if he would give me an assignment to interview Rabbi Steinsaltz for the magazine. In this way, I would get to meet with Rabbi Steinsaltz under the pretense that it wasn't personal.

Marc assigned me the task of writing an article on “a day in the life of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz”—the perfect excuse for spending more time with him. I wasn't able to arrange to follow him around for a day. But I was able to talk with him about his life.

Rabbi Steinsaltz was known for both the large quantity and the high quality of his work, so I asked him, “How do you get so much done?”

When not traveling, he explained, “I go to my office very early and leave sometime in the early afternoon. I go home for lunch. And then I go back to the office and stay there until sometime in the evening. So you might say that I have two working days each day.”

He then added, “Most people think that everybody has twenty-four hours in a day, but that it might not be true. Some

people, like the Rambam [the great Jewish thinker Maimonides], seemed to have more than twenty-four hours in a day.

“I wake up in the morning, and in what seems like a very short time, I discover that it is midnight or two A.M. And I wonder, What has happened to this day? Where did it go?”

I didn’t stay on the subject of his day. It wasn’t really of interest to me. Instead, I was eager to ask him a question that was often on my mind, a question about marijuana.

Marijuana: Who Is the Master and Who Is the Slave?

I knew people who smoked marijuana, and had one friend in particular who smoked it at least twice a day, in the morning and at night. My friend once said to me, “Why don’t you ask Rabbi Steinsaltz what he thinks of marijuana?” I said I would and so I did.

Rabbi Steinsaltz said to me, “First of all, I never tried it. There are two issues with marijuana. One is small, and the other is big. The small issue is the idea in Jewish law of *dina d’malchuta dina*, ‘the law of the land is the law.’ Generally speaking, we’re supposed to follow the law of the land where we live. So if marijuana is illegal, you have an illegal situation there. So perhaps you need to follow the law.”

That was the small issue. The big issue, he said, has nothing to do with marijuana; it has to do with anything in life.

“The issue is who is the master and who is the slave. If you are the master, fine. If you are the slave, then you are in trouble no matter what you’re the slave of, whether it be coffee, exercise, or Torah study.

“So you have to ask yourself, ‘Who is the master and who is the slave?’”

Rabbi Steinsaltz was, as usual, smoking his pipe. He was smoking pipe tobacco. He told me that he stops smoking every

year on Pesach. One of the reasons he does it is to see what his reaction might be, and he is convinced that he is not addicted to tobacco. Smoking his pipe is a habit, but he is not its slave.

More Meetings

After my second meeting with Rabbi Steinsaltz, I felt that I had found my Teacher. There was something about the way he listened to me, the way he sometimes went to the heart of the matter and also circled around a question, making sure it was well defined and explored from various angles; and the way he always spoke to the heart of the matter.

Fortunately, any further hesitation about pursuing Rabbi Steinsaltz a third time, and a fourth and then a fifth, was reduced by a conversation I had with Rabbi Jonathan Omer-Man.

Jonathan used to work with Rabbi Steinsaltz in Jerusalem. He was editor in chief of a magazine called the *Shefa Quarterly*, which came out of Rabbi Steinsaltz's offices under Jonathan's direction.⁴

During the summer of 1985, I taught a class introducing people to *The Thirteen Petalled Rose* at the wonderful annual Jew-



The Jewish approach to life considers the man who has stopped going—he who has a feeling of completion, of peace, of a great light from above that has brought him to rest—to be someone who has lost his way.

—Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*,
p. 132

ish educator’s conference sponsored by the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE). Jonathan attended the conference and joined my class.

That day, I said to him, “You know, I’ve been inventing reasons to get the chance to see Rabbi Steinsaltz again. But I don’t want to waste his time. I’m afraid that I’m asking him for too much and taking up too much of his time.”

And Jonathan said to me, “Rabbi Steinsaltz is a big boy. He can take care of himself. Believe me, if he didn’t want to see you, he wouldn’t be seeing you. Don’t worry about it.” From that point on, I stopped hanging back.

That same summer, I moved to an apartment located just a few streets away from the neighborhood known as Boro Park, in Brooklyn, New York. Boro Park was once described in the media as “the largest ultra-Orthodox neighborhood in America.” It occupies dozens of city blocks. The neighborhood has a few hundred synagogues, many groups of Hasidim, and is possibly the most Jewishly religious place in the United States.

My first child, Malya, was a year old and during that time I was interested in intensifying my Jewish life. I was beginning to love Torah study more than anything else in the world. One of the attractions was the opportunity I had to spend much of my time praying and studying Torah and celebrating Jewish holy days at the world headquarters of an amazing Hasidic group called Bobov.⁵

My friend Tovia, a Bobover Hasid whom I had met a few years earlier through our mutual interest in genealogy, urged me to come to Bobov, in particular to see the Bobover Rebbe, the spiritual rabbi of rabbis in the Bobov world, and he intensified his efforts to get me to visit the community when he learned that I lived just a short walk from Bobov’s world headquarters in Boro Park. Tovia invited me to sample Bobov at the



He whose search has reached a certain level feels that he is in the palace of the King. He goes from room to room, from hall to hall, seeking Him out. However, the king's palace is an endless series of worlds, and as a man proceeds in his search from room to room, he holds only the end of the string. It is, nevertheless, a continuous going, a going after God, a going to God, day after day, year after year.

—Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*,
p. 133

Rebbe's tisch ("the Rebbe's table") on a Friday night in the fall of 1985.

I walked into the synagogue's large room, which was used as a study hall. There were hundreds of bearded Hasidic men, all in black hats or round fur hats called *streimels* and dressed in black suits. They were all gathered around their rebbe. I felt as if I had walked into a different century.

Roman Vishniak is famous for his photographs of the Hasidic world in Eastern Europe before the Second World War. What I see in Bobov today is exactly the same as what I see in those photos: the same faces, the same garb, the same traditions, the same books, the same relationships.

I must confess, however, that the first time I walked in there, I felt that I had been there before; deep inside, I felt that this was not the first time my soul had been in such an environment.

“When It Comes to Your Soul, There Are No Gentlemen”

The evening was filled with eating, drinking, and singing. The Bobover Rebbe sat in the center of a dais, his Shabbos dinner before him. Hundreds of Hasidim, plus me, sat or stood around the table. We were all guests at the Shabbos table of the Rebbe.

At a certain point, the Bobover Rebbe spoke. He told stories from the Talmud about Rabbi Akiva. He reminded us that Rabbi Akiva, known as one of the greatest sages of all times, did not even begin to study Torah until he was forty years old. I was familiar with Rabbi Akiva and about the fact that, as the Talmud says, he didn't know an *aleph* from a *beit* until he was an adult. Every person like me who returns to Judaism as an adult loves Rabbi Akiva.

The evening, which ended around two o'clock early Saturday morning, culminated with the Hasidim going before their Rebbe and receiving a *l'chaim* (a toast “to life”) with a raised cup of wine or a blessing from the Rebbe up close and personal, with touches and embraces. Often the Bobover Rebbe would put his arm around a person's shoulder and speak intimately.

All of a sudden, I found myself in the midst of a pushing and shoving and elbowing crowd of Hasidim surging toward the Rebbe with great hunger and what I felt was rude selfishness. It was horrible, a mob, with people cutting ahead and pushing others aside. I said to myself, “This is not for me. I'm not coming back here.”

Nevertheless, the following week I returned. There was something so wondrous, so magnetic, so spiritually uplifting for me there that I couldn't resist a second session at the Rebbe's tisch.

Once again the evening was glorious, with eating and drinking and singing and listening to profound teachings from the Bobover Rebbe.

And once again the evening ended with the chance to get a blessing from the Rebbe, and once again I found myself in the middle of a pushing, shoving mob. I said to myself, "Didn't I learn my lesson last week? This is horrible! Everybody is so inconsiderate! I hate this. I'm not coming back."

And I left that evening once again at 2:30 in the morning, and I promised myself I would not return.

Nevertheless, the third week, there I was again, walking to Bobov looking forward to the uplifting atmosphere, the warmth of the Hasidim, the shining face of the Rebbe and his profound teachings.

The evening progressed as usual, again ending with the crush of Hasidim surging toward the Rebbe. I couldn't take it, and I said to the guy who was elbowing me to my right, "Why is everybody doing this? Pushing and shoving like animals! What is going on here?"

The Hasid looked at me in the midst of the tumult and said, "We have a rule around here. When it comes to your *neshama* (your soul), there are no gentlemen."

All of a sudden, the whole scene flipped for me: my body was being jostled, but my soul, my *neshama*, had one direction and one aim, and that was to receive a blessing from the Bobover Rebbe; like whipped cream on a cake, it was the culmination of the joyful evening at the Rebbe's Shabbos table.

Years later, I was told by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi that a Rebbe is not someone who acts as an intermediary between the Hasid and God. The Rebbe is not the person who makes the connection between the individual and the Almighty. The Rebbe is the one who goes underneath the student and pushes him up.

And certainly the Bobover Rebbe was somebody who lifted me up.



Most souls are not new; they are not in the world for the first time. Almost every person bears the legacy of previous existences. Therefore the destiny of a person is connected not only with those things he himself creates and does, but also with what happens to the soul in its previous incarnations.

—Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, p. 64

All of a sudden, I wasn't being pushed around. Rather, I was a salmon swimming upstream.

“When it comes to your *neshama*, there are no gentlemen.” That advice has ever since meant to me that my body is temporary but my soul is eternal. And when one's focus is on one's soul, one doesn't mind a little tumult.

🌀 Getting Acquainted 🌀

January 1986. The phone rang.

“Rabbi Steinsaltz is arriving at JFK one morning next week.” Could I pick him up and bring him to Manhattan?

I said yes immediately.

It was my first assignment. I would be Rabbi Steinsaltz's driver. I imagined what it must have felt like to be the wagon driver of Rashi, the great Talmudic commentator of a thousand years ago.

But this was the twentieth century, so I brought my car to the car wash, I vacuumed the inside several times, I cleaned out all of the accumulated junk on the floor of the back seat and the trunk, and I prepared to fulfill my obligation. The flight was scheduled to land at 5:00 A.M. I got up at 3:00, showered, dressed, and arrived at the airport about an hour early.

By the time the aircraft had landed and Rabbi Steinsaltz had cleared customs, it was another hour and a half before we met. While waiting, a flood of thoughts danced in my head: “I can’t believe I have this job. What should I say to him? How can I help him? Do I take his luggage and carry everything for him? Do I make small talk and ask him how his flight was? Do I open doors for him? Do I dare ask him my own questions again? Should I ask him if he wants to listen to music when we’re in the car? Does he want to sleep in the car at this hour while I get him to his first appointment? Do I wait in the car while he has his breakfast? Do I tell him when his first appointment must end to allow enough time for me to get him to his next appointment? Can I speak with him about God?”

Rabbi Steinsaltz finally came out into the hall of the International Arrivals Building. He was rolling his suitcase and carrying a small case. I said hello and asked him if I could carry his suitcase. He gave me the lighter one. It was a little awkward for me. After all, I wanted to help him, but I have also been in his position, where I am picked up at an airport for a lecture and the person wants to carry my suitcase and carry-on case.

Rabbi Steinsaltz did the same thing I do: I give the person one thing to carry and I carry the other.

I don’t like small talk, and the last thing I wanted to do was make small talk with him. I wanted to avoid clichés like “How was your flight?” and “How are you?” Frankly, I wish I could have said, “Hello, can we talk theology for a few hours?”

Instead, I asked him how his flight was, and I inquired as to whether he is able to sleep on a plane. I have no recollection of what he said; I was too preoccupied with making sure everything went smoothly.

A Shared Interest in Genealogy

At the time of my first car trip on the road with Rabbi Steinsaltz in 1986, I was in the middle of my own book tour.

In some ways, that book tour has never ended because it is now twenty-five years since my first book, *From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Family History*, was published, and I am still speaking around the country on the subject of how and why to climb one's Jewish family tree.

But for the first six years of the book's life, I lectured in forty cities a year. And I was exhausted. The Jewish Lecture Bureau told me that for four years in a row, I was their most frequently booked speaker.

The book tour was grueling. Night after night, city after city; there were actually some nights that I looked out at the audience and did not know which city I was in. One night, I remember thinking, “I know I'm in Wisconsin, and I know the place starts with an *M*, but I don't know if it's Madison or Milwaukee.”

When Rabbi Steinsaltz and I got to my car, I opened the trunk and put his things in. I opened the passenger door for him but let him close the door himself. I can understand opening a door for someone, but it has always felt more awkward to have someone close a car door for me, so I treated Rabbi Steinsaltz the way I want to be treated. Good principle, that Golden Rule.

When we were both in the car, he asked, “Do you mind if I smoke my pipe?” I gave him instructions on the use of the lighter and the ashtray, the electric window openers, and the car

seat adjustment so that he could make himself as comfortable as possible.

He then asked me if I flew much.

I mentioned my book and the book tour, and he started discussing his own interest in genealogy and his own genealogical research and discoveries and then asked me about some of mine.

Kurzweil the Entertainer

Rabbi Steinsaltz also brought up the subject of surnames and their meanings. I knew from my genealogical research that there is a name for the study of surnames and that word is *onomastics*.

I told Rabbi Steinsaltz, “*Kurzweil* means an amusement or diversion, something you do for fun. *Kurz* means “short” in German, and *Weil* means “time,” so the compound “short time” means “someone or something that entertains and makes the time seem short.”

Kurzweil is thus fun, the opposite of boring. The original Kurzweil must have been quite entertaining.

“And I think the name fits me. I have been a successful lecturer and performer in synagogues and for other Jewish organizations for years. Kurzweils in our family are often great storytellers.”

Rabbi Steinsaltz said, “There have been great rabbis who always began their studies or lectures with a joke, wishing to put their audience and themselves into the proper frame of mind, to prepare them for awesome truths.”

I said, “Isn’t there a story about the prophet Elijah?”

“Yes, there are many stories of Elijah in the world. One has Elijah in a marketplace filled with people. One of the elders in the community comes over to him and asks, ‘Who, of all those here in the marketplace, belongs to Heaven?’ Elijah looks

around and says, ‘I don’t see anyone here who belongs to Heaven.’ Then two strangers enter the marketplace. Elijah points to them and says, ‘These two are among those that belong to Heaven.’

“The elder asks who they are.

“‘They are clowns. Jesters. They earn their living by making people laugh.’”

Rabbi Steinsaltz told me that in Kabbalistic writings, there are discussions of how to transform the hard, outer “shell” of the soul into holiness through humor.

As our talk of family trees went on, I was keenly aware of two things: that the time was rolling by and that I still had many questions to ask about *The Thirteen Petalled Rose* related to issues that were stirring in my soul, and here I was, talking about genealogy, the very subject that had me on this book tour and that I wanted to get away from for a while.

Genealogy was the last topic I wanted to speak about with Rabbi Steinsaltz. Or anyone else.

But as I drove to the Rabbi’s destination in Manhattan, our discussion of genealogy continued. Rabbi Steinsaltz asked me whether I had discovered anything interesting in my genealogical research.

I told him that I discovered that I have illustrious rabbinic ancestors. I assured Rabbi Steinsaltz that I don’t brag about those ancestors. Instead, I am humbled by the knowledge of them.

“When I learned that my great-great-great-grandfather, Rabbi Chaim Yosef Gottlieb, who was born in 1790, was a Hasidic rebbe from a town called Stropkov in Slovakia, I wanted to find out about that town. I wanted to find out about this Hasidic rebbe. I wanted to find out who his teacher was.

“I wanted to find out as much about him as I possibly could.

“When I found out that I was a direct descendant of Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, who was born in 1555 and was known as the Shelah HaKodesh,⁶ I wanted to find out who *he* was.

“I was intrigued to learn that he was a great Kabbalist, a great Jewish mystic, and that the *Encyclopedia Judaica* says that it was Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz who brought Kabbalah to Poland. He is credited with being the primary Kabbalist in Poland, which is an amazing achievement.

“I’m a direct descendant of his. The more I learn about him, the more connected I feel to what he taught and the spiritual world in which he lived.

“When I learned that I was a direct descendant of the *Rama*, Rabbi Moses Isserles of Krakow, who was born in 1530 and who wrote a commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch*, the Code of Jewish Law, it gave me a sense of pride, but it also humbled me and stimulated me to continue my own spiritual work.”

Looking back, I now understand what was going on. I know it to be true that there were many years when I was involved with my family tree research when I had no idea what I was doing.

I thought I knew. Had you asked me, I would have said that I was tracing my family tree. I was interested, I would say, in my Jewish history.

But my genealogical activities were really a spiritual search, not a historical research hobby. From the outside, it looked like I was doing Jewish genealogy, but from the inside, I was really looking for myself and for my relationship to the Absolute, to God.

Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? What is this life all about? These are the questions that the genealogist asks, and these are the same questions at the heart of *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, based on the major structures of Kabbalistic thinking about existence.



The search for roots, even in the simplest genealogical sense, is likely to be a meaningful experience on both the personal and religious levels. Lineage is not just a matter of empty self-congratulation. All lineage, and not just that of nobility, carries with it a certain responsibility.

—Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *Teshuvah*, p. 60

🌀 Different Gates for Different People 🌀

Rabbi Steinsaltz said to me, “I have recommended to many people that they trace their roots. When someone becomes a *ba’al teshuvah*”—a person, like myself, who did not grow up with Jewish observance but has “returned” to it—“he sometimes thinks that he should forsake his own historic roots. I urge people to seek them out.”

I remarked to Rabbi Steinsaltz that I thought that genealogy teaches tolerance. When I traced my family tree, I discovered that my family has everybody in it. We have Hasidim, we have socialists, we have Orthodox Jews and assimilated Jews, we have Israelis and Americans and Australians and Hungarians. We have city people and country people. We have Democrats and Republicans and Communists.

I told Rabbi Steinsaltz that I discovered a second cousin who was almost exactly my age and who grew up under the Communist regime in Hungary. Her grandmother and my grandmother were sisters. My grandmother came to the United States when she was fifteen; her grandmother stayed in Hungary. Things could so easily have turned out so differently.

Rabbi Steinsaltz had written about it. In his book *Teshuvah*, the Rabbi writes, “A family search often becomes an acceptance of diversity in Jewish life.” He remarked that I seem to know some of his books better than he does!

At one point in our conversation, we began to talk about the individual paths that each of us finds ourselves on. He began to tell me about the mystic vision of Ezekiel.

“It is said that there are different gates to the Temple for each of the twelve tribes,” Rabbi Steinsaltz explained to me. “These are different gates for different people.”

The Rabbi quoted from the Torah in Hebrew and then translated: “Each of the Israelites must remain bound to the ancestral portion of his father’s tribe” (Numbers 36:7). He said, “It is not a statement about the inability to unite. Rather, we have to recognize human diversity. Elijah’s role, when the final redemption comes, is to restore the Israelites to their tribes and to their families.”

I once wrote in my notebook that Rabbi Steinsaltz said, “Israel will be united, but only when each can relate to the others on the basis of, confidence in, and open expression of its own distinctiveness.”

When I told Rabbi Steinsaltz about my illustrious ancestors and my mixture of pride and humility at my discovery of them, he said, “Of course, it’s not a matter of self-congratulation. Lineage carries with it responsibility. We don’t brag; we learn from them.

“There are many individuals among the Jewish people who claim that they descend from an illustrious lineage. They must understand, of course, that they ultimately stem from Abraham and, before him, from his father, Terah, which is not exactly a proud lineage.”

The car ride to Manhattan didn’t take long—at least, it wasn’t long enough for me. But I had to admit that it was mean-



A further reason that man was created one is related to genealogy: families should not fight over questions of superiority. Even after knowing that man was created one, families still argue over who is of more venerable descent. . . . What would have happened if there had been several pristine men?

—Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *On Being Free*, p. 74

ingful to talk with Rabbi Steinsaltz about genealogy, a subject that had been an obsession of mine for decades.

I dropped Rabbi Steinsaltz off at the building where he was to have his first appointment; I got his suitcase and carrying case onto the curb for him as he assured me that I didn't need to park and that he could manage with his suitcase by himself. It didn't feel right to drop off Rabbi Steinsaltz at the curb, but that's what he wanted.

“I Read Marx Before I Read the Bible”

Rabbi Steinsaltz doesn't usually like to talk about himself, but the next day, when I once again was asked to drive him to a synagogue in a New Jersey suburb for a lecture he was scheduled to give, I asked him directly about parts of his life and I was able to glean a number of pieces of his biography.

“I read Marx and Lenin before I read the Bible,” he remarked. Thus he shared with me one of the most wonderful pieces of information about his youth: that this supremely outstanding rabbi and Talmud scholar didn't begin studying until

his midteens. An only child, he was introduced to Jewish study by a private tutor his father had hired.

On this second-day drive, Rabbi Steinsaltz told me that his father, a secular man and a leftist, proclaimed at the time, “I don’t care if my child is an *apikores* [heretic], but no child of mine is going to be an ignoramus!”

He told me that he grew up in a nonobservant household, “and I disliked those Orthodox Jews. I used to throw rocks at them.

“Like Kafka’s story, ‘Metamorphosis,’” Rabbi Steinsaltz said. “One day, you look in the mirror, and you see that you’ve become a cockroach.

“My mother and father were skeptics,” Rabbi Steinsaltz said. “They brought me up to be a skeptic. In fact, I became such a skeptic that I became skeptical of skepticism.”

He said that he had no religious epiphany and that Jews generally don’t have them.



The starting point of repentance is precisely this fulcrum point, away from the pursuit of what he craves, and confronts his desire to approach God; this is the moment of conversion, the crucial moment of repentance. It is rare for repentance to take the form of a sudden, dramatic conversion, and it generally takes the forms of a series of small turnings.

—Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*,
p. 129



NOTES FROM THE ROAD: A Heretic Among Heretics

I asked Rabbi Steinsaltz about his own spiritual quest. He said, “It was many years ago. I didn’t want to annoy people, but I began asking questions, many questions, about things that were accepted in Israel, where I was born, and in other places. I was perhaps a better nonbeliever than the rest of my countrymen. They were such great nonbelievers that they didn’t believe in Judaism; I was such a nonbeliever that I didn’t even believe in heresy. So this was the turning point, a very important one. I discovered that one has to believe in many heresies in order to be a heretic. But to accept heresy, one has to be a believer. And if you have to be a believer, it becomes a matter of choice in what to believe in.”

I mentioned that in *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, he speaks about the process of becoming religious as “a series of small turnings.” The Rabbi smiled, perhaps realizing for the first time that I was able to quote from *The Thirteen Petalled Rose* even better than he could. I suspect that like most authors, after he finished writing it, he never looked at it again. I, on the other hand, had read it scores of times.

“To become more religious doesn’t just mean believing or affirming but rather entering a whole culture,” he said. “It was a

very lonely time for me. I had to fight my way into Judaism step by step.”

I told Rabbi Steinsaltz that I had heard that at age fifteen, he left his secular school for a year to attend a yeshiva. This he confirmed and also confirmed that he had studied physics and mathematics at the university level. “I was a slight boy with red hair, blondish red curls,” he said. A few moments later he said, “I came to the point that this world was not enough.”

“I Was Born in Jerusalem— Nothing Else Is Interesting”

At one point Rabbi Steinsaltz said to me, “My biography is simple. I was born in Jerusalem, and I still live there. Nothing else is very interesting.”

(“I *love* Jerusalem,” he has said many times with passion. “I love the light in Jerusalem. And I’m not speaking mystically.”)

“My life has been very undramatic and even boring. I didn’t climb any tall mountains,” he said, “and I didn’t kill any lions.”

“My Only Official Position Was That I Was on the Board of the Jerusalem Zoo”

His parents had come to Palestine in the 1930s, and he was born in 1937. He has memories that go back to when he was about a year old. He told me that he grew up in a household of socialists; his father was “one of the few Palestinian Jews who fought in the Spanish Civil War.” Just as people in the United States formed the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, which went to Spain to fight the Fascists in the 1936–1939 conflict, Rabbi Steinsaltz’s father did the same as a Jew living in pre-statehood Israel.

Rabbi Steinsaltz told me that he himself had gone to Spain a number of years earlier to visit some of the places that his father had told him about.

He described himself as a “nonbelieving teenager.” But by the time he was in his early twenties, he was the youngest principal of a high school in Israel. And he was also teaching adults, including people like the first president of Israel, Zalman Shazar, who was an old man when he was a student in the young man’s class. Rabbi Steinsaltz told me that the way he was able to teach classes to students who were sixty years his senior was to imagine that he himself was three thousand years old and the students were eight-year-old babies.

“I have no official position and am not the rabbi of a synagogue. The only official position that I’ve held is a seat on the board of directors of the Jerusalem Zoo.”

Rabbi Steinsaltz likes zoos. He told me that as a young man, whenever he was feeling blue, he would go to the zoo. Something about the animal world settled his mood. He told me that he loves animals.

Rabbi Steinsaltz is married. His wife, who is from a Lubavitch family, the Asimovs, is related to the famous American scientist and author Isaac Asimov. My understanding is that the Asimovs are a religious family and that Isaac was the exception. Rabbi Steinsaltz has three children. His daughter is the director of a battered women’s shelter in Jerusalem dedicated to helping Orthodox women in need. Rabbi Steinsaltz said to me, “Unfortunately, she’s busy there.” Rabbi Steinsaltz also has two sons, both of whom have been ordained as rabbis.

“Nobody Seemed to Want to Operate on Me”

I told Rabbi Steinsaltz that when I mention his name to people, they often ask if I know how he is feeling, and I wondered why.

He told me that there was a time in his life when he was very ill. In fact, he was gravely ill, and he spent a prolonged amount of time in the United States seeking medical attention for his illness.

He was born with a genetic disease that tends to run in Jewish families: Gaucher's disease (pronounced "go-SHAYZ").

"I am suffering from one of those Jewish maladies," he said, "Gaucher's disease. You possibly know about it. Friends showed me a medical textbook that incorporated all the pertinent new material about this malady that appeared in the past twenty years. And it contained a recommendation that if there is the chance that a child will suffer from Gaucher's disease, the parents are advised to abort the child.

"So in my case, either my parents didn't know or their doctors didn't know, and so I escaped the best medical advice of the time!"

Rabbi Steinsaltz told me that when he was very ill, he went to a physician, who said to him, "Rabbi, you are gravely ill; you must be operated on immediately. I will recommend a surgeon." He went to the recommended surgeon, and the surgeon said, "Rabbi, you are very, very ill; you need to be operated on immediately. I'm going to recommend a surgeon."

Then he went to the third doctor, and the man said to him, "Rabbi, you are gravely ill. You need to be operated on immediately. I'm going to recommend a surgeon"—at which point Rabbi Steinsaltz realized that he needed the surgery but nobody wanted to perform the potentially dangerous operation. So he said to the doctor he was with at the time, "I would like you to do the surgery. Let's schedule it."

Well, the surgery was scheduled, and it was a success. It also happens that in the past several years, major progress has been made regarding the treatment of people who have Gaucher's disease, and Rabbi Steinsaltz is participating regularly in that treatment. It is, as I understand it, extremely successful.

“On the eve of the operation, I worked late and slept well,” he told me. “I was either still needed here, or my job was done.” He then said, “In any case, with the operation behind me, I was able to plan ahead realistically. With God’s help, I was able to go on.”

He then added, “I had the advantage of being a very obstinate person. One must keep one’s aims clearly in mind. Life is a constant compromise. If you don’t keep your aims clearly before you, you come to a situation where means and ends become confused.”

It so happens that when Rabbi Steinsaltz’s older son was in his teens, he was diagnosed with a certain kind of leukemia. The Lubavitcher Rebbe was told about it, and the Rebbe advised the Steinsaltzes to change their last name. (It is more usual for a Rebbe to suggest that people visited by misfortune change their first name.)

The name *Steinsaltz* means “stone of salt.” But that is not the name on Rabbi Steinsaltz’s passport. The name that appears is the name that the Rebbe advised the Steinsaltz family to change it to, *Even Yisroel*, “Stone of Israel.” Rabbi Steinsaltz’s son wrote an article about the experience and told the story of the name change. Shortly after the name was changed, the leukemia went into remission and has not returned.

“I Belong to Hasidus”

I decided to ask Rabbi Steinsaltz about his relationship to Hasidism.

He replied, “I belong to Hasidus. My background is that of Hasidus. It is how Judaism has always appeared to me in any significant way. Looking at Judaism in the recent era without Hasidus would be like looking at the Talmud today and ignoring the *Acharonim*, the Talmudic commentators from the 1600s to the present.”

He added, “Hasidism was halted. Hasidism didn’t spread all over the world mainly because of the destruction of the Jews in Europe—the pogroms in Russia and the Holocaust. But if you ‘count heads,’ you’ll find that a majority of Jews are connected, in some way, to Hasidic tradition.”

Many times, people have asked me if Rabbi Steinsaltz is a Lubavitcher Hasid. I too have wondered from time to time if he would consider himself a follower of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, but for some reason that day, I didn’t feel comfortable asking him.

What business was it of mine what label he might or might not give himself? And in fact, for years, it really wasn’t *my* question.

Other People’s Questions

When I was in my early twenties, I spent some time with Elie Wiesel. He is perhaps known best as a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize and as a witness of the Holocaust, but during the years that I have had opportunities to spend time with him, I have never asked him about the Holocaust. My questions for Elie Wiesel have always been of a different nature, a religious nature.

But during one of our conversations, I did ask a question about the Holocaust. I asked, “What did you learn from your Holocaust experience?”

Two things, he replied. The first thing he learned is not to delay when fighting evil. “Fight evil immediately,” he said. “Don’t wait. Don’t try to convince yourself that it’s going to get better.”

And the second thing he learned was this: “Don’t let other people tell you what your questions should be. Don’t let other people’s questions become your questions.”

I asked him to explain, and he said, “For example, if somebody says to you, ‘Why do you wear that beard?’ don’t feel that you have an obligation to answer that question. It may not be



What is Hasidism? What is its innovation? Hasidism strives for consciousness of one's inner essence and simplicity—in relation to Torah, man, and divinity—and for this, there are no adequate words or direct definitions. Because it deals with man's inner essence, Hasidism defies easy definition or description.

—Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *Opening the Tanya*, p. xi

your question. It's somebody else's question. You don't have to justify yourself to others. Don't let other people's questions become your questions. Don't let others force their questions on you.”

So the question of whether Rabbi Steinsaltz was a Lubavitcher was for a long time not my question.

I confess that I did once ask a close colleague of the Rabbi's if he knew whether Rabbi Steinsaltz considered himself a Lubavitcher. And the response was, “If Rabbi Steinsaltz is a follower of any rebbe, I think he is a Hasid of the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, the Baal HaTanya, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Lyadi.”⁷

Although it was not a pressing question for me, so many people ask me about this that I ultimately did speak with him about it. “People have asked me many times if you are a Lubavitcher Hasid. What should I tell them?” I asked.

With a familiar twinkle in his eye, he first said, “It depends, of course, on who asks.”

I understood what he meant. I knew that Rabbi Steinsaltz has tried, as far as he possibly can, to stay independent of any

specific groups throughout his life. He is for the unity of the Jewish people and he is working tirelessly to achieve that goal. So for example, I wouldn't say to a person who *is* a Lubavitcher that Rabbi Steinsaltz isn't a Lubavitcher. After all, his wife was born into a Lubavitcher family, his sons both prepared to become rabbis in Lubavitch schools, he prays at an old and well-known Lubavitch shul in the Old City of Jerusalem, and he visits the Rebbe's grave almost every time he visits New York (which is about three to five times a year).

On the other hand, if a secular Jew asks me, I am more inclined to say that Rabbi Steinsaltz dislikes labels, is really for Jewish unity, and considers every Jew to be just as Jewish as any other Jew.

I know from my reading about Rabbi Steinsaltz, as well as from my countless discussions with people far and wide who know him and have known him for years, that the Rabbi has made an effort not to affiliate with any one particular movement or group. He considers himself a Jew and a teacher within the Jewish family, but he transcends all movements.

One can ask rabbis of every denomination—Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Renewal, Orthodox—and one will find so many rabbis in all of those movements who will agree that Rabbi Steinsaltz is one of the most extraordinary Jewish teachers and that his teachings transcend individual movements.

But when I pressed him on the subject, suggesting to Rabbi Steinsaltz that I might not always know what to say to whom, he said to me, “The Rebbe always considered me to be one of his.” He then remarked, “What do people say? If it looks like a duck and walks like a duck . . .”

“Being a Rabbi Is My Hobby”

When we arrived at the synagogue, there was no place to park. The synagogue parking lot, as well as every street in the vicinity,

seemed to be overflowing with automobiles. The synagogue was filled to capacity. The one available spot was right next to the synagogue, reserved for the synagogue rabbi. I took a chance and parked there. I later learned that the synagogue was between rabbis, so I hadn't actually usurped anyone's spot.

Rabbi Steinsaltz used the rabbi-less synagogue to make some observations about synagogue life in America. He began the lecture by saying, “My training is in science; being a rabbi is my hobby.

“I do not want to deliver a sermon that was written somewhere in heaven. Or in the words of the Kotsker Rebbe, ‘Other rabbis want to speak so that their words can reach the sky; I want to speak so that my words will reach the stomach.’ I do not want to offer sparkling words about Torah and *halakhah* [Jewish law] or mysticism or about what can and has been done but rather to instill in all of you the feeling that time is so short and the work is so great, how can anyone be idle, how can anyone say, ‘I am not trying to do something’?”

Rabbi Steinsaltz told the audience he's never taken an official job as a rabbi and joked that being a rabbi is an unappealing job. He also said that if he could do one thing for the American synagogue, he would ban sermons.

He then said, “In too many places, the rabbi doesn't teach and the congregation doesn't learn. It's a kind of colossal trick. The community knows it has to have a rabbi. But it doesn't feel it needs a rabbi in the sense that a man needs a doctor when he is ill or a drink when he is thirsty.”

He went on, “When I come to America, I see these big American synagogues and sometimes I wonder whether Americans build these big synagogues thinking that if you go to a synagogue big enough, you can keep God *in* it. Unfortunately, God won't stay in the synagogue. He is also in the bedroom and also in the kitchen and also in the marketplace.”

Rabbi Steinsaltz then reminded the audience that “a Jew can be born, can be circumcised, can be named, can be a bar mitzvah, can be married, can be buried without ever meeting or needing a rabbi.”

The Rabbi went on to encourage the congregation to take advantage of the fact that there wasn’t an official rabbi and increase the learning and praying that goes on there.

“Gentle by Definition”

At six o’clock the following evening, I brought Rabbi Steinsaltz to a modern Orthodox synagogue in New Jersey. We crossed the George Washington Bridge in my car, with little conversation, as I needed to focus on the unfamiliar driving directions and making sure that the Rabbi would get to his destination on time.

The place was packed. There were people out the door. I was sitting way in the back. But I was able to see and hear everything well.

Rabbi Steinsaltz came in and walked to the front of the sanctuary with the rabbi of the synagogue. Everyone stood up in complete silence. A journalist reporting on another lecture Rabbi Steinsaltz once delivered wrote, “His own life’s work has sparked not only excitement but reverence, evidenced by the hush that fell over the packed hall as he entered, when the mixed crowd of Orthodox and non-Orthodox people rose to their feet.”⁸

The rabbi of the synagogue then introduced Rabbi Steinsaltz.

Rabbi Steinsaltz began his talk by saying, “Ladies and gentlemen, I am extremely uncomfortable at the moment.”

You could hear a pin drop. The place was jammed to capacity, people had come from far and near to hear Rabbi Steinsaltz, and the rabbi began with a reprimand. “I am *very* uncomfortable with the way you have situated me here this evening. I am uncomfortable with my position.”

Now, I have seen Rabbi Steinsaltz many times over the years, and sometimes he's harsh and sometimes he's gentle. When he is harsh, he can be very harsh. He is not vulgar, never vulgar. But giving individuals, organizations, or audiences a kick in the pants is something that he is very capable of doing.

He has joked that his first name, Adin, means “gentle” and that since his first name is Adin, he's “gentle by definition.”

The audience in this particular Jewish community, as I said, was completely silent, wondering what it was that prompted Rabbi Steinsaltz to feel so uncomfortable that he made a public statement about it. Where did we go wrong? they wondered.

The Rabbi then clarified. “I am very uncomfortable speaking in the synagogue with my back to the Aron HaKodesh,” the Holy Ark, which contains the Torah scrolls.

“Help Me Become a Torah”

The next moment, he turned and almost whispered to the rapt audience. In a soft, loving, voice, he said to them, “But there is *one* way that I can continue. There is *one* way I can have my back to the Aron HaKodesh and speak to you here this evening. And that is if I become a Sefer Torah, a Torah itself. If I can become a Sefer Torah, then I can proceed. So I am asking you all here this evening for your help, to make me a Sefer Torah tonight. So then we can speak with one another.”

As Rabbi Steinsaltz said this, I recalled a line from the Talmud: “Oh the fools who stand up for a Torah but not for a living Torah.” A great teacher can embody the wisdom of the Torah, but he also needs the help of eager students. Together, the transmission can occur, with the congregation elevating the teacher and the teacher seeking to rise as high as possible in order to earn the right to teach.

He then, of course, delivered, as he always does in my view, an extraordinary lecture.

Advice on Raising Children

As we left the lecture, I had a pressing question based on my relatively new status as a father. I asked the Rabbi if he had any advice on raising children.

Not seeming the least bit tired after his busy days of lectures, appointments, and more, Rabbi Steinsaltz gave me two pieces of advice, which in some way are two sides of the same coin and were words of advice and wisdom that I have made sure to follow over the years with my children.

His first piece of advice was this: “Don’t only teach your children things that they can understand. Just because they can’t understand something is no reason to avoid teaching it.”

The example Rabbi Steinsaltz gave me was that of the recital of the *Modeh Ani* each morning. The sages of Jewish tradition urge us, in our spiritual work and our spiritual practice, to wake up each morning with feelings and thoughts of gratitude on our mind for the new day that God has given us. Our first thoughts of waking consciousness each morning should not be “What’s for breakfast?” or “I better get to my appointment” but *Modeh Ani*, “I am grateful,” an expression of gratitude to God for my soul’s presence in the world.

“Your grandmother can teach you, when you are a tiny child, to recite the one-line prayer *Modeh Ani*, the daily prayer of gratitude, recited as the first words on your lips each morning when you wake. And you can have no idea what it is about, what it really means at that young age. But when you grow up a little and learn what it means, you already have it in you.”

The second piece of advice was this: “Teach your children the most abstract theological notions. Don’t dumb it down.”

His words called to mind a Bob Dylan line: “Don’t wanna learn from nobody what I gotta unlearn.”⁹

Rabbi Steinsaltz said to me, “Don’t teach your children things that ultimately they’re going to have to overcome. If you

teach your children that God is an old man with a long beard who lives in the sky, then when that child gets older, it will be even more difficult to come close to God because before any progress can be made, first an old image has to be discarded. Always aim for the highest expression of the truth with your children.”

Rabbi Steinsaltz went on to tell me that if you were to say to a group of adults that God is everywhere, they would almost surely have all kinds of difficulties and all kinds of theological problems with that statement. But if you say to a child that God is everywhere, usually that child finds no obstacles at all to a clear grasp of what that might mean.

I brought those two pieces of advice home that day. And it became a guiding force in my life as a parent. My children and I have been speaking about God, about faith, about the most abstract theological ideas in life for many years now.

It has been an extraordinary trip.

