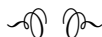


# CHAPTER 1



## Contemplating God

*“One of the most important ways of experiencing the love and awe of God is through meditation on the Divine.”*

### ✿ The decision to follow God

The essence of the Exodus is in the initial, faith-motivated decision to leave the ordinary, the routine life, and to follow God.

This is the all-inclusive point of departure.

Prior to that, there is nothing.

All the rest is elaboration.

### ✿ Constantly standing before Him

I am here, and God is here.

What am I to do, especially since He knows not only my innermost thoughts but also how I will act them out?

Whether one meditates on this or not, for a Jew, seeing himself in this way, standing before God, is the subject for constant reflection.

There can be no uniform technique or rigid form to this contemplation, just as there is no single channel in which thought can be made to flow.

What we can say, however, is that on the one hand, it is a striving to deepen the thought, entering further into it and penetrating it with the whole of one's being.

On the other hand, it is also an effort to expand the thought, repeating it and seeking additional sides to it, finding new aspects to its possible manifestation.

One may call it a kind of creative meditation, in contrast to the mainly passive meditation practices in certain Eastern traditions.

## Awareness of the Divine presence

Upon undertaking the performance of a *mitzvah*—even a very ordinary, routine action, like prayer—a person is advised to take time to prepare himself by reflecting on God, by being aware of the awe and trembling of his being before the Divine presence.

As he draws the prayer shawl over his shoulders or dons the *tefillin*, he should also be conscious of drawing the Divine light over himself.

## Meditating on the Divine

It is axiomatic that one of the most important ways of experiencing the love and awe of God is through meditation on the Divine.

But not everyone has the capacity for abstract conceptualization.

A certain amount of knowledge and learning is needed.

It is difficult to meditate on the greatness of God without a minimal grasp of the laws of nature and the immensity of the cosmos.

An emotional maturity is needed in order to integrate the understanding into one's being, to convert the meditation from an intellectual truth to a power for living.

### ✿ Contemplating God's greatness

If any person, wise or ignorant, great or small, will concentrate on the thought that God really fills all that exists in Heaven and earth with His glory and God sees the inwardness of man, his liver and heart, his thoughts and actions, then a kind of awareness of oneself is built up.

If a person reflects on this each day of his life, deliberately taking an hour to do so, it will become engraved in his being and have a permanent effect.

This amounts to a process of self-education, although it consists of no more than regular contemplation on the greatness and glory of God.

The time spent in such concentrated meditation is also cumulative in power, and whatever is gained becomes a firm basis for further insight.

It is often sufficient just to recollect an experience in order to reawaken its spiritual significance for oneself.

### ✿ Awareness requires inner growth

The King brings one into His chamber, but one may fail to comprehend what is happening.

Only he who has reached a certain level of understanding will appreciate it.

As one of the many allegories puts it, a king went out into the fields, and a certain farmer, not knowing who the king was, offended him. The courtiers wanted to have the farmer executed on the spot, but the king said that such punishment was not equal to the crime.

Instead, he suggested bringing the man to the royal palace and educating him until he became aware of the enormity of what he had done.

In order to appreciate what God has given one, there has to be a certain level of awareness of the world and one's place in it, of Divine transcendence and human creatureliness. To awaken this awareness requires a process of education and inner growth.

## Focusing and clinging to God

The demand for *kavvanah*, for focusing and clinging to God, pertains not only to prayer but also to the Grace After Meals and to every blessing that a person recites in the course of the day.

Reciting a brief blessing with *kavvanah* is even more difficult than praying with *kavvanah*.

Blessings are said often and in a variety of settings and often when neither place nor time is conducive to full concentration.

## God is not an abstraction but an actuality

When asked, "What did Hasidim bring into the world?" the Kabbalistic answer, given by Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch of Ziditzov, was the following:

Let us imagine someone returning from a long journey to a distant land and telling us that he saw a bird with a human face and the legs of a horse.

Afterward, someone else goes to the land and, upon returning, says that indeed he saw the creature. But it didn't have the face of a human, although there was a certain resemblance.

And the legs were, in the abstract, like those of a horse, even if not at all identical.

Hearing this, there were more people prepared to believe the story. But there still remained many skeptics.

Whereupon a third person made the same journey and brought the very bird back with him.

This, of course, was decisive.

So, too, there are three levels of insight into the mystery of God.

First, there was a level exemplified by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who came and told us about the Divine presence in the *Zohar*, which is full of such fantastic tales, strange configurations, images, and countenances that one could hardly believe him.

Then, after a number of generations, came the level exemplified by Rabbi Isaac Luria. His pupils wrote down the evidence he conveyed with all its greater attention to detail.

Finally, the Baal Shem Tov came. He exemplified the third level, and so he brought to us the very reality of the Holy One, blessed be He.

