

the various *sefirot*. Nonetheless, Kabbalists tend to catalog the biblical patriarchs and matriarchs, archangels, parts of the human body, names of God, directions, planets, vowels, colors, and a wide variety of associated qualities with various *sefirot*.

The Tree of Life is viewed as a graphic representation of the blueprint of creation. Because each emanation is an archetype, each represents a wide spectrum of categories. The system is complex because the archetypes are not easily defined. The *Sefer Yetzirah* uses language like "These are the ten *sefirot* of nothingness: the breath of the living God; breath from breath; water from breath; fire from water; up, down, east, west, north, south."<sup>2</sup>

Read literally, the first *sefirah* is the breath of God; the second is breath caused by this breath; the third is water; and the fourth is fire, followed by six directions—ten *sefirot* in all. The Hebrew names usually given to the ten *sefirot* are *keter* (crown), *chochma* (wisdom), *binah* (understanding), *chesed* (lovingkindness), *gevurah* (strength), *tiferet* (beauty), *netzach* (triumph/dominance), *hod* (grandeur/empathy), *yesod* (foundation), and *malkhut* (sovereignty).<sup>3</sup> Since *keter* is ineffable and inaccessible, an additional *sefirah* called *daat* (knowledge) is often added to the list so that there are ten working attributes.

The Tree of Life is commonly represented by an illustration of ten (sometimes eleven) drawings of circles. Schematically, the *sefirot* are drawn in three vertical lines. The center is the trunk, representing four (or five) *sefirot*. Two vertical branches, one on either side of the trunk, represent three *sefirot* each. (See illustration page 87).

## DNA AND THE TREE OF LIFE

DNA researchers have discovered that four amino acids—adenine, thymine, guanine, and cytosine—form themselves in various combinations that are sequenced into patterns upon which all life is built. Each pattern holds within it a genetic code that determines all of our genetic characteristics.

Each amino acid always works in a pair, and each always pairs with the same partner: adenine pairs with thymine (A-T), and guanine pairs with cytosine (G-C). We can imagine these pairs like coins with heads and tails. If we line up coins on a sheet of glass, whatever they read on top would be opposite from the way they would read from under the glass. Similarly, for amino-acid pairs, if we had a sequence such as A, A, A, G, G, G, there would

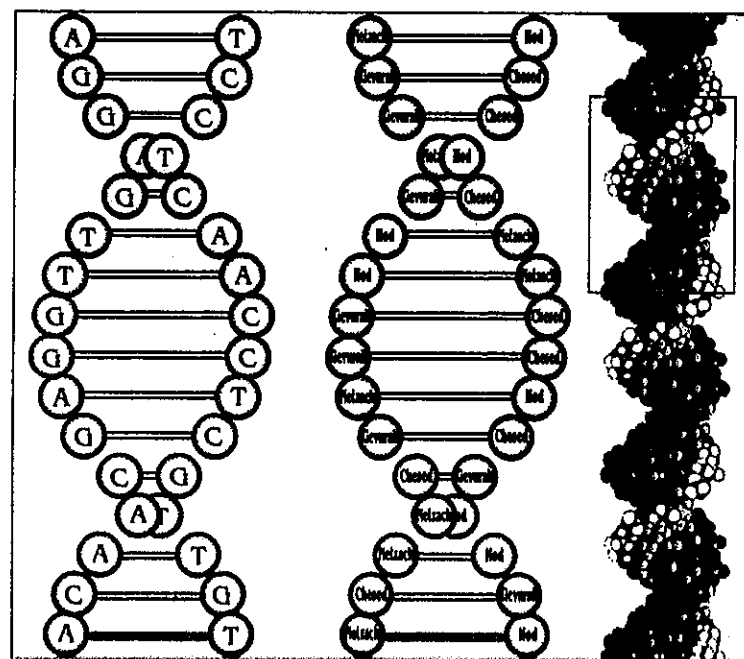
be a parallel track that would read T, T, T, C, C, C.

It is said that the code for a human being contains billions of pairs. Can you imagine how many variations on a theme we could have by stringing out a billion coins and then turning them one at a time to form new combinations? The number is enormous.

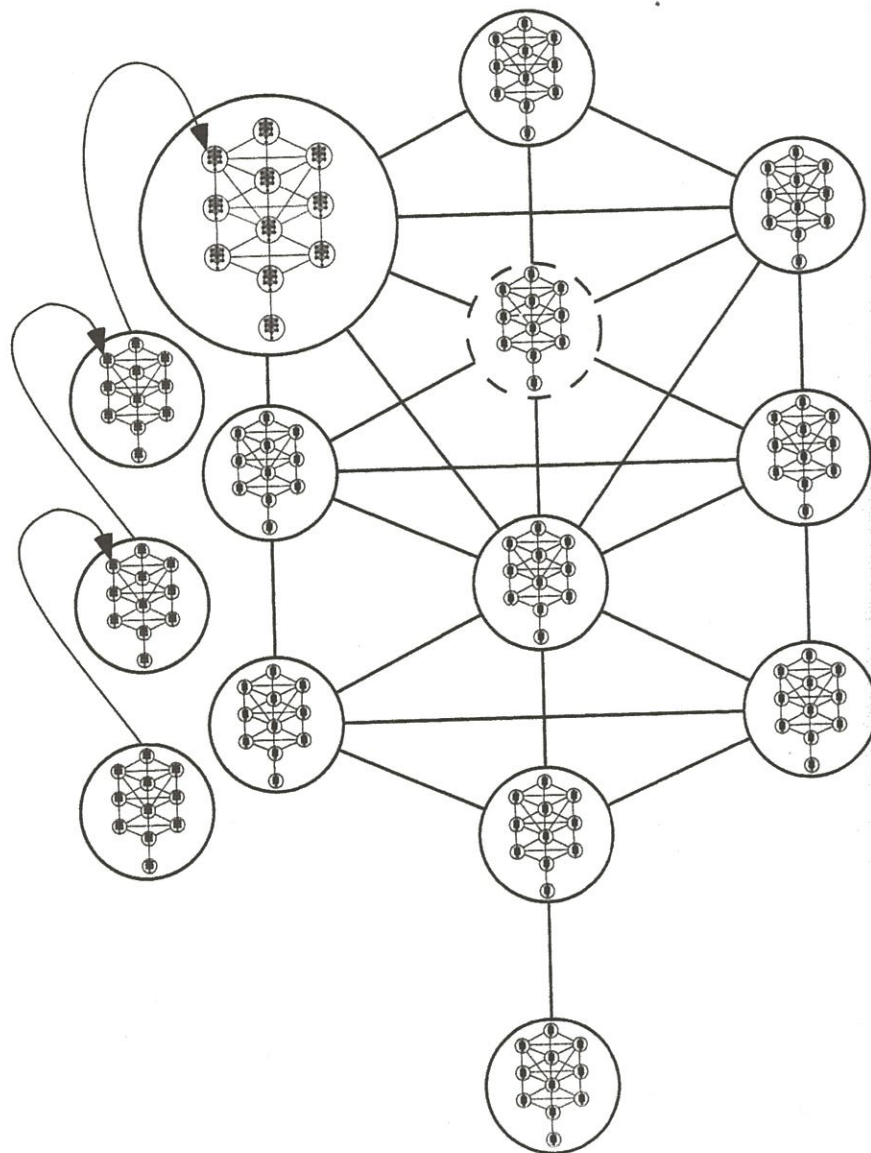
The sequence in which pairs of amino acids are combined is the determining factor of heredity. Microbiologists describe these extended strands as parallel tracks that curve into a spiral, called a double helix, in order to fit into a small space.

Today we have DNA testing to determine many things. Microbiologists must find the precise location along this thin thread of a double helix where the encoded combination for a particular gene resides. When they zero in on this location, they can determine whether or not the code matches another sample.

Thus only four amino acids, coupled into two pairs, offer an almost unlimited prospect for variation. This is precisely the same model that Kabbalists have used for a thousand years. Rather than amino acids, the Kabbalists have described four key elements of creation: expansion (*chesed*), which always pairs with contraction (*gevurah*); and giving (*netzach*), which always pairs with receiving (*hod*).



## Sefirot Within Sefirot



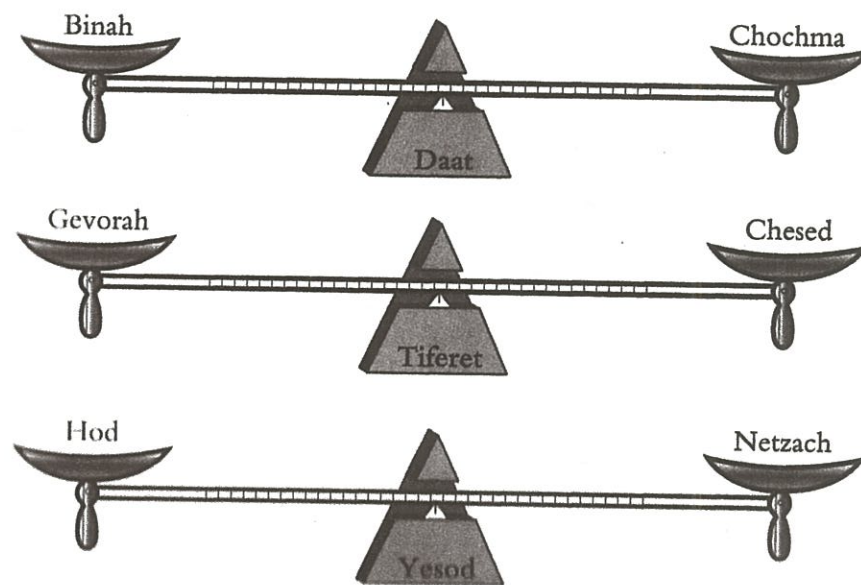
ality quirks, physical strengths and weaknesses, emotional idiosyncrasies, neuroses, patterns of social behavior, and so on.

If we had tools to measure all of the energies represented in the Tree of Life, we could find patterns, just like the microbiologist does with amino acids. However, because the kabbalistic system is extraordinarily diverse, expanding well beyond the field of genetics, our task is far more complicated than that of a scientist measuring the spectrograph of DNA results.

A currently popular system used for personality classification, called the Enneagram, suggests that there are nine personality archetypes. Some commentators have shown the parallels between this system and the Tree of Life. But the kabbalistic approach is somewhat more subtle than the descriptions of personalities in the Enneagram. The Tree of Life is modeled in triads; two aspects work in opposition to each other, with a third on a moving equilibrium point between the two. Here is how it works.

*Chesed* is the quality of expansiveness and generosity, the part of us that yields even though another part says no. It operates best when there is no self-consciousness holding it back. The tendency of *chesed* is to be extremely liberal, willing to try anything. Uncontrolled, however, it has the potential to smother the recipient. It has no self-limitation; it knows only how to be-

## Sefirot Triplets





stow things. Pure generosity will keep piling the food high on the plate; it will spin cotton candy until it fills the circus tent; it will give away the family jewels.

*Gevorah* is the quality of contraction and restraint. It stands in opposition to generosity. Restraint is the ability to say no even when social pressure is brought to bear. *Gevorah* represents universal justice as well; it understands that everything impacts and has repercussions. The tendency of *gevorah* is to be excessively conservative, preferring things just as they are. Uncontrolled, *gevorah* is stifling. It does not allow for any movement. It is strictly conformist, unspontaneous, rigid, and hypercritical.

These two poles work and interact with each other. At times we are drawn more by our generous spirit; other times we withdraw. The system is dynamic and continuously fluid. We all have tendencies to lean one way or the other. Yet we are under the influence of many variables. Thus, nobody is ever 100-percent predictable.

Because the poles of generosity and restraint constantly tug or push against each other, a pendulum, or balance point (*tiferet*), is needed to mediate between the two. *Tiferet* represents compassion and beauty. In many ways it is the middle path, neither too self-indulgent nor too self-restrictive. It is important to note that *tiferet* has its own impact on the triad; it is not merely the passive consequence of the two opposing forces. It brings to bear a third component, which is drawn from the trunk of the tree itself: reflection to generosity, and consideration to restraint. Thus one can see that the entire triad is dynamic and mobile.

The next triad includes *netzach*, which represents parent, domination, confidence, and self-centeredness. Its opposite is *hod*, which represents child, yielding, receptivity, and acceptance. We can immediately see positive and negative aspects in this dichotomy. Parenting, which is a force of protection as well as one of domination, versus childing, which has purity and innocence as well as dependency. In simple terms, this is the dance between our inner parent and our inner child, between self-confidence and yielding to that which is outside of the self.

The mediator for this is *yesod*, normally translated as foundation, but often called harmony. Without a balance in the drama between inner child and inner parent, we do not have a solid foundation. Once again, however, this system is dynamic. Sometimes we are more self-confident; other times we are quite insecure. We have various degrees of acceptance, depending upon the strength of our inner voice of doubt. We sometimes push harder to get our way, while at other times we yield to a situation.

Harmony slides along this line and brings to bear an additional force. It

pressures the inner child to be more assertive; it pushes against our ego-centeredness to lighten up. It invites a balance between individual confidence and the potential of yielding to reason.

Finally, *malkhut*, at the bottom of the tree, is the result of everything happening in these other six *sefirot*. It is our reality. Things happen to us in life that cause ripples upward. *Malkhut* is the receiver from both ends. We are the accumulation of a set of archetypes that interact with the world drama that enfolds us.

## CHOCHMA AND BINAH CONSCIOUSNESS

The lower seven *sefirot* represent ordinary consciousness. All the things that normally go on in our minds could be defined by combinations of the lower seven *sefirot*. They represent the physical universe. This is the level at which ordinary consciousness operates.

However, we have access to higher realms of consciousness. Various names are attributed to the experience of these higher levels, such as *satori* or cosmic consciousness. In Kabbalah, we call it *chochma* and *binah* consciousness.

Kabbalah says that thought is born out of the realm of Nothingness. This Nothingness is called *chochma*, which translated literally means "wisdom." (Obviously, it does not mean wisdom in the ordinary way. Rather, it is an archetype of wisdom out of which the mold of thought can first form.

If somebody offers a mathematical formula, such as  $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$ , it is meaningless unless we know how to apply it. We must know what A and B represent. Without this understanding, a formula is pure *chochma* consciousness. It is an empty mold. It may have great wisdom, it may represent a universal truth, but without the element of *binah* (understanding), it does not help us in any way.

*Binah* would be the realization that there is a relationship between the two sides and the hypotenuse in every right triangle. This is interesting and good information, but it is not of too much use until we know how the relationship works. Once we put *chochma* together with *binah*, the formula with the understanding, we have knowledge (*daat*). This is the model of consciousness suggested in the Tree of Life. It is the conscious process for almost everything we do in life.

At first, we go through each level, up to *daat*, at lightning speeds. But if

first is *Keter*, the crown. The second and third, *Chokhmah* and *Binah*, are modes of knowing. The fourth and fifth, *Chesed* and *Gevurah*, are the arms but also represent dimensions of parenting—both of which are indispensable in the formation of a healthy child. The sixth, *Tiferet*, is in the center; it is the torso and functions as harmonizer and is therefore also associated with beauty. The seventh and eighth, *Netzach* and *Hod*, are the organs of sexuality. Everything is balanced, like a circus act, on the top of the ninth, *Yesod*, the foundation, which is also called *Tsaddik*, a righteous person. Think of it: all of being, borne by one good person! Finally, at the bottom, the tenth, we arrive at *Malkhut*: our world; the community of Israel; the *Shekhinah* or the feminine, indwelling presence of God.

The left *sefirot*, *Binah*, *Gevurah*, and *Hod*, are feminine, as is *Malkhut*. The right *sefirot*, *Chokhmah*, *Chesed*, and *Netzach*, are masculine, as is *Yesod*. One curious surprise is that, contrary to Western sex-role stereotypes, *Gevurah*—rigor and stern judgment—is seen as feminine and maternal, whereas love and mercy are portrayed as masculine. Professor Daniel Matt once wryly suggested to me that this may have been because the author of the *Zohar* had a very interesting mother.

This sefirotic system is the heart of the *Zohar* and all subsequent Kabbalah. Not only do the *sefirot* correspond to parts of the human body and the psyche, but since they represent the core structure of being itself they are present everywhere. For Kabbalists, each *sefirah* is represented by a character in the Hebrew Bible. All the stories of the Bible are also about happenings *within* the sefirotic realm. Each color in the spectrum even has a sefirotic counterpart. The result of all this, as Professor Arthur Green of Brandeis University has suggested, is that, with the *sefirot*, the Kabbalists have effectively created a new language. Here then is the sefirotic diagram.

[Figure 1]





This illustration simply points out that the idea of *tzeddakah*, righteousness, includes in it the sense that we are vehicles through which the Divine Will can be expressed. When the will of God is invoked, rather than when our personal wills are the motivating force, the righteousness is purer.

The Talmud advises, "If a person is anxious to give charity, the Holy One will furnish the money to do so."<sup>34</sup> This idea completely reverses our normal survival mechanism that says, "Take care of me first." It suggests that if one is really concerned more about helping others than oneself, the means will be found.<sup>35</sup>

### *Practicing Generosity*

1. Take one dollar and fold it a few times. Put a paper clip on it and keep it handy in your pocket or purse. The next time you see a stranger who is asking for charity, no matter what he or she looks like, give away this dollar. Try to have a dollar in your pocket each day to give away.
2. Write a check for five or ten dollars, leaving the name blank. Put it on your fridge with a magnet so that you will be constantly reminded of it. The next letter or advertisement you see asking for charity, fill in the name and send this check. Try to do this at least once a month.
3. Calculate your net income. Determine a percentage that you intend to give away. Make the percentage low enough that you can actually fulfill your commitment. (Some traditions, including Judaism, suggest 10 percent, but for many people these days, this is too much of a burden. Even 1 percent is sufficient for this practice. The important thing is to decide, and then to do it!)
4. Whenever you gamble, buy a lottery ticket, or receive any kind of financial windfall, commit to giving to charity at least 10 percent of the found money. If you win, send the charity off within one or two days. Don't delay.
5. When you know someone who seriously needs money but is too proud to ask for it, find a way to send a significant donation anonymously. You can have a messenger deliver an envelope of cash, or you can have a cashier's check drawn and request not to have your name

on the check, and then send it without a return address. Once sent, forget about it. Never tell the person, or anyone else, about what you have done. Never.

6. Each time you receive your paycheck or any other money, always reflect upon the conditions that allowed that money to come in: your mental and physical health, your family support, your background and training, your business relationships, the economy, the weather, and most important, the presence or absence of God-given events. This reflection and contemplation are vital parts of coming to terms with what ownership and property are all about, and how tenuous is our personal wealth.

### 4. THE PATH OF LOVINGKINDNESS

The path of generosity was enormously respected by the sages. The Talmud says, however, that "Our rabbis taught that lovingkindness (*gemulit chesed*) is superior to charity in three ways. 1) Charity can be done only with one's possessions, while lovingkindness can be done with one's person and one's possessions. 2) Charity can be given only to the poor, while lovingkindness can be given to both rich and poor. 3) Charity can be given to the living only, while lovingkindness can be done both for the living and the dead."<sup>36</sup>

Acts of lovingkindness are far more subtle than charity; they require a letting-go of more than property. This letting-go might come easily and naturally. A person may trip and fall in the street, particularly a child or an older person, and we automatically hurry to their aid without a moment's hesitation. But letting go might also come with considerable resistance. Our elderly parent may call on the telephone for the umpteenth time to ask a favor. We are busy. We have our own lives to lead. We resent being a primary caretaker. Still, Mom needs help, she sacrificed many times, and who else is there for her? So we let go and fit the errand into our lives.

In many ways, charity is simpler, cleaner, and easier than lovingkindness. Once we hand it over, we are done with it. However, there is never an end to acts of lovingkindness. Given the extent to which we inflict pain on one another, the world has an almost insatiable need for lovingkindness.

One's social status does not matter. Rich and poor alike yearn for a loving touch. Who does not respond to a genuine, heartfelt smile? Whose soul does not warm when given a simple little gift, even if it costs only a dime?

Acts of lovingkindness are not just for humans, by the way. Our kind treatment of animals comes under the category "pain of living animals" (*tza'ar ba'alei chayyim*). It is a talmudic edict that we pay special attention to domestic animals so that they are not caused undue suffering. We must feed our animals before ourselves,<sup>37</sup> and we must relieve an animal's pain even if it means breaking the Shabbat laws.<sup>38</sup> One is not permitted to purchase an animal unless he or she has the means to take care of it.<sup>39</sup> Causing an animal to suffer, or imposing a blemish, is also forbidden.<sup>40</sup> Hunting in general is frowned upon, since the kosher laws do not allow the consumption of meat from a *treif* (torn) animal, which usually results when an animal is killed by a hunter.<sup>41</sup>

What does it mean that acts of kindness can be done for the dead? The talmudic commentary says that offering tributes at a funeral, accompanying a person to the grave, and saying blessings over the dead are acts that lift the sparks of the soul of the deceased in other realms. Moreover, as we will see in the chapters on death, we can help the soul of someone deceased with kabbalistic meditation techniques.

Acts of lovingkindness do not have to be overt. A person may not even realize that he or she has done something. We can help someone indirectly by acting as an intermediary; we can casually hint to another at something we know will help a person. We can pray for the person in the quiet of our own hearts. "When we concentrate mind and heart on the Source of Sources, blessings can be drawn from the depths of the 'cistern,' the Source of Life, the stream from Eden. Prayer draws this blessing from above to below."<sup>42</sup>

The mystical approach to each act of lovingkindness is that it is the binding force that holds the world together. It is said: "Sometimes it happens that the world is exactly balanced between people whose good deeds bring life and those whose evil deeds bring death. Then, one righteous person can turn the scale and the world is saved. But should it ever occur that one wicked person is left, then the world would be destroyed."<sup>43</sup> The *Zohar* goes one step further and asserts that "a person should always imagine that the fate of the whole world depends upon his or her actions."<sup>44</sup>

In the talmudic process we always question ourselves, testing the deeper meanings of things. What does it mean that our actions are so important? Isn't it said in Ecclesiastes, "All is futility! What profit does a person have of

all their labor under the sun?"<sup>45</sup> . . . The work that was done under the sun was grievous to me; all is futility and striving after wind"<sup>46</sup>? If this is so, what do our little acts of lovingkindness accomplish after all?

In response, the *Zohar* says that "futility, in this case, refers to acts of humans that are done 'under the sun.' However, righteousness and lovingkindness are acts done 'above the sun.'"<sup>47</sup> These acts work in this world and transcend it at the same time. From the perspective of this world, history seems to repeat itself. But the transcendent perspective is that we are propelled inexorably toward higher levels of awareness: "Man's purpose is to move in the direction of higher consciousness and not toward lower consciousness. Therefore it is meritorious for human beings to love each other and to expel animosity toward each other, so as not to weaken higher consciousness."<sup>48</sup>

Our acts of lovingkindness not only matter, they are the medium through which we can bring the world together in a new era of human relationship. Many practices in Judaism are described with fixed times and amounts. However, lovingkindness is one for which there is no fixed measure.<sup>49</sup> We can perform these acts from morning to night throughout the week. We can set lovingkindness in our souls as a lifelong practice that will always call to us.

The path of lovingkindness leads directly to the highest realms. This path is illuminated by untold billions of sparks that are continuously being released from their husks, while all along, each day of the process, we constantly widen the expanse of our hearts and of those around us.

### Practicing Lovingkindness

1. Buy a blank journal, a large one, that will be your lovingkindness record book.
2. Spend thirty minutes writing down every act of lovingkindness you can ever remember doing. Leave one or two inches of space under each entry. Each of these will become a category.
3. Two or three times a week, or more often if you wish, check off specific acts of lovingkindness that you have done in their respective categories. If you have done new things not on your list, record them as new categories.

4. After a while, you will have a long list of acts of lovingkindness, some of which have only a couple of check marks, some of which have many checks associated with them.
5. Start a new section near the back of the book under the title "Opportunities Missed" for doing an act of lovingkindness. Make a note of these. The point of this exercise is not to feel guilty about missed opportunities, but to be alert to possibilities that have come and gone. This awareness itself can be a loving act if converted into a prayer. It is better to notice something missed than to be oblivious altogether.
6. Do not discuss this journal or what is listed in it with anyone, except perhaps a spiritual guide. The journal is for your personal use; the work you do in this area is between you and God.

The purpose of this exercise is to heighten awareness. We should neither be prideful of areas with many checks, nor regretful of those lonely deeds that went unattended. Rather, we want to be attuned to the needs of the world around us and to the possibilities for offering a piece of ourselves. There are no measures in this for success or failure. We are simply working on heightening our own consciousness and raising one spark at a time.

### *Other Practices of Lovingkindness*

1. When you read in the newspaper or hear on television about someone who touches your heart, write a brief note to that person and send it to her or him via the newspaper or television station. Letters from strangers are wonderful to receive.
2. If you think of someone you may have wronged in the past, write her or him a letter from the depths of your heart. You do not have to send the letter if you don't want to, but writing it is important. Of course, you can also send it.
3. Think of someone you know who is physically or mentally ill. Concentrate your thoughts and prayers on this person, holding him or her in your imagination as completely healthy. Think positively; send the person healing angels. The person does not need to know you

are doing this for it to be successful. Do this practice each day for as many people as you wish.

4. Search out a soup kitchen, charity, or other local service organization and contribute food, clothing, anything you can. Volunteer at the local thrift shop, home for the elderly, hospital, Meals on Wheels, Salvation Army, etc. Even a couple of hours a month is great.
5. Try to find a way to invite needy guests into your home once a month for a meal. You may have to provide transportation as well. This is work, but enormously heartwarming.

You get the idea. The opportunities are limitless.

## 5. THE PATH OF MODERATION

The key to the higher levels of spiritual development is said to be restraint (*haprishut*). Mastery in general is the ability to hold back, to focus on the task at hand without being distracted, to have a clear sense of priority in the midst of temptation. The master in a particular field is usually someone who has devoted a great deal of time to developing particular skills. Occasionally mastery comes through talent alone, but normally it is the result of sincere effort.

Rabbi Bachya ibn Paquda, eleventh-century author of the classical text on Jewish spirituality *Duties of the Heart*, said that many interpretations of the practices of restraint and moderation suggest extreme abstinence and renunciation. In his opinion, however, a better definition suggests that we simply meet our essential needs without requiring anything in excess.<sup>50</sup>

Judaism has never encouraged asceticism. In the eleventh century, it was common for spiritual aspirants to renounce worldly life. They lived as hermits in rocks and caves, dressed in rags, and completely withdrew from all social contact. Rabbi Paquda frowned upon extreme expressions of piety like this.<sup>51</sup> The general view is that excessive asceticism is ironically an act of self-indulgence with considerable ego-attachment. Moreover, the gifts of this world all have divine sparks and should not be scorned.

Rather, the goal is to willingly undertake some abstinence, to constrain oneself mindfully. Moderation gives one an opportunity to experience every



part of this creation, in modest amounts. Paquda said that *haprshut* includes the qualities of fairness, simplicity, humility, forbearance, resoluteness, consideration, temperance, patience, and resignation, among others.

The path of moderation can be applied to everything we do: the quality and quantity of food we eat; the choice of media we take in; the amount of time we work, party, socialize, or entertain ourselves; and the amount of money we spend on clothes, furniture, toys, and automobiles. Indeed, moderation should apply as well to our spiritual aspirations. Excessive attachment to any aspect of our lives will often produce unfavorable results like pride, arrogance, conceit, or other egotistical behavior.

Moreover, if we do not develop the skills of moderation, we remain trapped in our desires, always wanting what we do not have, never content, never in harmony. Desire has an infinite appetite: the more we have, the more we want.

There are natural boundaries that keep us somewhat in check. The day has only twenty-four hours, our credit cards have limits, our stomachs can fill only so far, and our bodies need to rest. Relying strictly on these natural regulators, we survive.

The teaching of moderation suggests, however, that if we want to achieve peace of mind in our lives, we must learn to hold back from the flood of abundance, lest we be swept away. This does not mean that we must avoid the sweets of life (heaven forbid). Rather, we need to learn how to be content while consuming fewer of them.

Moderation is the key to mastery. One approaches it slowly. It is not difficult if we are gentle. We cannot force ourselves into a moderate lifestyle because force and moderation are contradictory terms. Rather, we can embrace moderation in increments, and the excess baggage of our lives will slowly melt away.

### *Practicing Moderation*

1. Assess the following aspects of your life on a subjective scale: too much, too little, just about right.
  - a. I work . . .
  - b. I eat . . .
  - c. I watch TV . . .
  - d. I read magazines . . .
  - e. I entertain myself . . .

- f. I spend time with the family . . .
- g. I work on my inner life . . .
- h. I work on spiritual practices . . .
- i. I read inspiring books . . .

2. Add anything to the list that comes to mind as a quality you feel is represented too much or too little in your life.
3. Look over your list to determine those things that you feel are excessive. For each, calculate the amount that you consume each day (such as four hours of TV, or three full meals a day plus snacks and extra dessert after dinner).
4. Now, assuming you had to diminish the quantity of only one of the things on your list by 25 percent, which would it be?
5. Imagine how you would go about cutting back 25 percent of this thing (such as, "I'd watch television an hour less each day"; "I'd cut out a percentage of my snacks and dessert"; . . .).
6. See if you can actually do this for a week. If so, do it for a month. If you succeed, you can reward yourself by adding to your life something on the list that says "too little." Otherwise, keep trying, or choose another thing on the list.
7. Each time you have success, give yourself a reward by increasing the time given to "too little" items. Work on your list until there is nothing left that says "too much."

### *Other Practices of Moderation*

1. Pick something that you want to master that can be started right away without a great deal of preparation or costing too much money. Suggestions: becoming skilled in learning to play a musical instrument, writing prose or poetry, learning a foreign language, painting with watercolors, sculpting in clay, reading through an entire encyclopedia (for people who are interested in Judaism, the *Encyclopedia Judaica* is highly recommended), cooking special pastries for others, and so forth.



2. Choose the best time of day when you can devote thirty to forty-five minutes to developing this practice. It should be a time that can be totally dedicated, without interruption, at least five days a week.
3. Make this time each day sacred. Let the family know that you are not to be interrupted (except in emergencies). Do not answer the telephone (get an answering machine). If you like music, put on a headset to cut out all distracting noise. Give yourself permission to be completely devoted to your practice this time each day.
4. Stay with it. Gentle self-discipline is the key. You will love this time with yourself, and after a while you will become skilled in whatever you are doing. But the skill is not the goal. Much more important is giving yourself the time. This is where you will gain self-confidence, and with self-confidence comes more peace of mind. This practice teaches us how to develop mastery one step at a time.

The path of moderation is one of the primary elements in a more extensive practice that leads to the ultimate level of enlightenment in Judaism. The more we practice moderation, the more we are able to reprioritize our lives for the things that will deepen our spiritual practice.

Moderation gives us a clearer perspective of who we are and what we need to survive. When we practice it, modifying the degree to which we are driven by incessant desire, we soon realize that we are surrounded by thousands of chariots to higher realms—thousands of new opportunities to connect with God. Every interaction in life is a new opportunity to take the reins of these chariots. We have more choice over our destiny than most people realize. It is a matter of setting our priorities, slowing down, reflecting, simplifying, and paying attention.

## 6. THE PATH OF PURITY

The goal of purity in the context of spiritual exercise is to minimize or eliminate thoughts that cause inner conflict. We attempt to clarify the difference between our own will to do something, and God's will. Purity is a level of attachment to God in which thoughts have more of a selfless quality. By attaching ourselves more to the presence of the Divine

by placing God before us, always, we are able more to "do deeds for the sake of their creator and speak about them for their own sake."<sup>52</sup>

Mastery in purity comes through contemplation. We closely observe how the world operates and thereby gain wisdom. We experience the transient nature of things, that fortunes rise and fall, that good times come and go, and that life is ephemeral. In this, we gain greater awareness of our own limitations, and greater appreciation for the way things unfold.

It is said that we can be distracted from developing purity by pursuing pleasure, fame, honor, or status.<sup>53</sup> Each of these is temporarily ego-gratifying but is ultimately an insatiable and disheartening quest.

Earlier in this book we explored the concept that the higher level of soul is always pure. We can use this idea in a meditative practice to deepen the realization of the part within us that is always connected to God. Once we fully appreciate the implication of this teaching, it changes the way we relate to others forever.

### *Practicing Purity: Tehora He (The Soul Is Pure)*

1. Sitting with your eyes closed, imagine that you have X-ray vision and can penetrate yourself as if you were composed of translucent material. You can notice many small parts interconnected in your body.
2. Looking very closely, imagine that a subtle being is illuminated within. The light that allows you to see comes from somewhere deep inside and fills the body with a glow.
3. Imagine your body many years younger than you are now. Notice that although the image of the body may change, the light that illuminates it remains the same. It is simply light; it does not change.
4. Try to imagine yourself many years from now. The body will again change, but the light will stay the same.
5. Now imagine a beloved. Notice how his or her body is completely different from yours, but the light illuminating it is of the same quality as yours. Light is light.
6. Do this exercise with people you know and love, and with people you may not get along with so well. Again, the light will be the same

principles, we will look again at meditation itself and at how it supports the joyful awareness that lies at the heart of the Jewish path.

### The Paths of Torah

One of the fundamental principles of Judaism is that Torah can be transmitted only through relationship with the Infinite One. But there are two broad methods, or paths, by which this relationship is learned and passed on: the path of passion (or heart) and the path of mind. Basically, I teach according to the path of passion and heart. Both ways are time honored, and neither one is better than the other; which path one chooses is more a matter of what kind of music one responds to. The same melody is not for everyone.

The passionate path advocates a practice that builds an *emotional* relationship with the Infinite. This path is sometimes called *hitlahavut*—the way of flame. Those who take the mental path, on the other hand, seek primarily to understand and accumulate learning. For example, the members of Chabad, a school of intellectual Chasidim, for example, believe that “contemplative prayer is very much a severe intellectual exercise, in which emotional rapture . . . must follow on

contemplation but not be a part of it.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, the followers of Chabad enthusiastically assume that the power of mind will eventually lead the individual to joy in God’s infinite process. Unceasing study of the Talmud is a technique hallowed by the Jewish tradition and adhered to by large numbers of Jewish people.

The path of heart perceives the nature of the Infinite through the lens of intimacy and person-  
alness. God is father, mother, brother, friend,  
lover, God. The holy Zohar, one of the main  
books of Jewish mysticism, asserts that God and  
the Torah are one, by which it means that if you  
look deeply enough, there is no separation be-  
tween the mystical and the concrete. One may  
make this realization gradually, or one may swal-  
low it in one gulp (to paraphrase an old Zen say-  
ing). The passionate practice attempts to per-  
ceive the universe *all together*—blood, bone, and  
spirit. This intimate path is through the heart and  
the senses. It perceives the Infinite through the  
driving principle of the universe, which is *chesed*,  
or loving-kindness. The path of heart suffuses us  
with the love of the universe and of all creation  
that inhabits it, for all of creation is organically  
connected. Moses De Leon, the probable writer  
of the Zohar, said, “Everything is linked with  
everything else down to the lowest ring on the



chain, and the true essence of God is above as well as below, in the Heaven and on the Earth, and nothing exists outside of Him."<sup>2</sup> The path of heart asks us to see this connection in an *intimate* rather than an abstract or distant way. And so we learn to see this totality (which we call God) reflected in the very finiteness, close-upness, and personalness of our lives.

The passionate path teaches that the heart of the universe hears our pleas and has compassion for us. We do not need to worry about whether there is a *God* in the world; we need only realize that the universe is filled with *godliness*. When we recognize this, we become able to receive God's love—and to love in return. We put ourselves in a state of total reciprocity. Rebbe Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev used to teach, "When God wishes to bestow good, we must be able to accept it. It is God's nature constantly to bestow His love upon us. . . . When we put ourselves in a state where we can accept God's good, this is His delight."<sup>3</sup> And it is our delight, too.

The mental path, by contrast, places an enormous emphasis on textual study. This is the route taken by much of modern Orthodoxy, including the ultra-Orthodox and Chasidim. It is sometimes called *Torah lishma*, or Torah for its own sake. In an ideal setting, this approach is an ex-

cellent one. For just as doing *zazen*, Zen sitting meditation, only for its own sake and not for the sake of enlightenment can actually lead to enlightenment, so, too, the all-consuming discipline of Torah study, by relaxing the mind, has the potential to yield tremendous spiritual fruit.

However, because this is a textually based sensibility, it can sometimes degenerate into mere sophistry—even as the path of heart can degenerate into debauchery. When either of these things happens, the soul that hungers is left without nourishment; it is removed from the source of joy. It is as though the people who are hungry for spiritual food are given only a menu to eat. Every emphasis, every possible path in spirituality, has a potential dark side. We should always be aware of this while not allowing ourselves to become unduly burdened by it. The most important thing is to persevere. Ultimately, all that is required is that we hear the music and join the dance. Sometimes, on any path, this is very simple, sometimes very difficult.

But the end result, the goal (to the extent that these two approaches have goals), is essentially the same. Ultimately it is *echad*: unity, oneness. The paths offer different gates. None is ultimately more correct. The Kabbalah at one point describes the Jewish path as a candle in a room of mirrors.



This is very apt. There are a thousand doorways. Each one works. The most difficult thing is deciding which one works best for you.

### Engaging the Heart

If we choose the path of heart, then of course our focus is ultimately and always on love. Love is the cornerstone of many of the world's religions, especially the mystic paths. Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav used to say that achieving the simplicity of love is one of the highest enlightenments. The attainment of true loving-kindness is the cornerstone of Jewish practice. Often this comes easily; the sluice of the heart is opened and the water flows. But some of the gates of the heart are closed, and these can be opened only through a strong spiritual practice.

Our experience of loving-kindness fills us with joy; in fact, according to the Torah, joy is the normal healthy state of the soul. When I was a child, I had a set of Punch-and-Judy dolls—those large, child-sized dolls with the rounded bottoms that always return them to an upright position regardless of how often you knock them down. Our soul, too, has a rounded base, which always returns us to the state of *chesed*, no matter how often we are knocked down.

*Chesed* can be translated as loving-kindness, though it is an active word rather than a passive one. I tend to translate it as something like “joyful compassion” or “ecstatic compassion” or “compassionate joyful love.” No phrase is quite adequate in English. *Chesed* does not necessarily involve a Hare-Krishna-style ecstatic jumping around (though there is nothing wrong with this); rather, it generally refers to what happens when we experience the connection between the soul and the reality of God. When the joining of these two is acknowledged, the heart swells with *chesed*, and every part of creation feels this swell. Here is how the psalm describes it: “The heavens exclaim God’s glory, the sky affirms. . . . Day speaks to day and night to night. There is silence, there are no words—But their voices resonate throughout the earth!”<sup>4</sup>

When we speak of the heart, which is the lens of *chesed*, of course we speak of love. Love is the doorway to the soul. It is the consuming wisdom that arises when a person is connected to the source. It is the melody Nachman described as filling every leaf, every stone. Part of our task in meditation is to learn to hear this melody—and the more we hear it, the deeper it will resonate in our soul. The *chesed* that underpins the world is boundless. It is the very fabric of the world. This



is reflected in the root word for love in Hebrew: A-H-V. Normally we pronounce this word as *ahavah*, but the grammar of Hebrew (which is without vowels) permits us to break it down into two words: *eh-hav*, meaning "I will give." And love is being given constantly, though we may be closed to it.

Most of the discipline of Jewish practice is aimed at helping the student fall in love. This is the passionate way. The Talmud tells a story of a great master who went home and began making love with his wife. Suddenly he realized someone was under his bed! "Who's there?" he cried.

"It is me," responded one of his students.

"What the hell are you doing?" shouted the master.

"This, too, is Torah; I must learn it as well," responded the eager disciple.

The Talmud does not relate how the master responded to this quick-witted fellow; no doubt he threw the rascal out. But he might also have embraced him. For the disciple was following the spark; he realized that everything depends on the flame of the heart.

Once, after I gave a talk, someone from the audience asked me to sum up this passionate path of heart that I kept talking about. I responded with an old Chasidic parable. "Imagine a forge," I said. "This represents your practice. Now imag-

ine the worker with his tools. This is you and your intention. But what is lacking? Only a spark. This is the path of *chesed*, to ignite the spark that gets the whole forge going. Without it the forge remains cold." The path and the exercises in this book, then, aim at igniting the spark, feeling the joy of *chesed*.

I have sometimes heard Buddhism described as the way of the quiet pool or of the moonlit garden. The Jewish way is the way of the wave, crashing and laughing; it is the way of flame.

### The Personal and Communal Nature of Torah

When we begin to learn the Torah way, we notice right away the numerous mentions of God. For many Americans the notion of God is very difficult; it is not a concept that has much meaning for many of us. Perhaps we think of a large man with a beard and a bad temper. This difficulty is compounded by the paucity of English words that denote God. In everyday language we use four or five words for God: Lord, Father, Mother, God . . . and that's about it. In Hebrew, Aramaic, Yiddish, and Ladino (the common languages of Jewish God-talk), there are easily forty or fifty words for the ever-changing notion of God. God may be expressed as a verb as easily as it is



as a noun. God may be thought of as a process rather than as an entity.

But even when we have made our peace with our own sense of God, the spirituality found in the Torah, while superficially easy to understand, may be difficult to grasp: there are all those men and women bashing each other, and a Supreme Being who seems perpetually either very angry or very happy!

Grasping this mystery is key to all of Jewish spirituality and to the discipline of meditation. All of Torah is based on the idea of relationship and intimacy. The language of the Torah is wildly anthropomorphic, but the *purpose* of anthropomorphism is to bring us into closer contact with the Infinite, to give us a sense of the *personal*. The Torah's anthropomorphic language is very different from the language of Buddhist sutras and of the Hindu Upanishads, which are very logical and impersonal in tone. The Torah's truth lies in its simple, unassuming stories and speech. Corey Fisher of the Traveling Jewish Theatre once said that the world is not made up of atoms but of stories. Indeed it is. This is a profound insight into the entire manner by which Torah and *mochin gadlut* are transmitted in the Jewish tradition. The force of the Infinite is found in the simple contexts of life, not in high, philo-

sophical revelations. *Ayn Sof* can best be possessed when we are at our most human—that is, at our most intimate. Not when we have limited our palette of human response and emotion but when we have expanded it are we able to access *Ayn Sof*.

This brings us back to the experience of joy that is central to the way of flame. Joy is by its nature forever in the present. When we are very happy, we are usually not very aware of the past or the future. We are in the eternal now. But to cultivate this presentness requires a responsibility to the past and the future. Every creature we have encountered and every occurrence we have experienced are with us always. Ultimately there is no forgetting and no leaving behind. Thus, our own past and the Jewish tradition combine to ground us in a communal, familial setting, and it is this communal context that gives us the strength to be in the (often difficult) present.

This brings us round again to the foundation stone of the Jewish path: Even in the furthest reaches of enlightenment, even in the furthest reaches of the Infinite, there is the personal. The personal exists in community and family; hence these disciplines are stressed as part of the spiritual path. Development of intimacy with all things is the essence of the Torah.



The task of spirituality in general and of meditation in particular is not to make us dull or to shut us down. This is a common misconception. Rather, meditation is meant to open us up. The Jewish meditative tradition does not call for the dropping away of personality traits as, for instance, some forms of Buddhism do. Rather, each of our traits is kept and transformed. "The spark is elevated"—this is how it is usually described. The unique traits that make up each person's self are the building blocks, and we work with them rather than trying to imitate some external model.

We should enter meditation and prayer with a certain naïveté. Every one of our desires, hopes, and fears should be put into it. Rabbi Nechunia, one of the great teachers of the Talmud, was said to know all the complex kabbalistic meditations associated with prayer. But when he prayed, he would pray simply, like a small child.

Meditation can be thought of as having results that are very grandiose or very modest. I prefer that students start with rather modest ambitions. As Jonathan Omer-Man, the founder of Metivta (an acclaimed school of American Jewish meditation in Los Angeles), once said, "Meditation is boring. Don't expect more." And then he laughed. He was trying to convey a sense of proportion.

We often begin a practice with the belief that enlightenment will be ours within the month. And when this fails to happen, we are bitterly disappointed. So restrained expectations are always best.

But it is also true that it is very hard to experience deep and long-term spiritual growth without incorporating into our lives some systematic contemplative practice. And meditation is the best technique we have for passing through the gateway of consciousness to the bliss of *mochin gadlut*. It offers a direct route into a greater awareness of the sweetness of existence and the curious, cranky nature of the self. Jewish meditative practice is straightforward and should not be needlessly complicated. As the Maor v'Shemesh taught, "Today it is improper to use complicated meditations—better to simply bind one's external and inner self to the *Ayn Sof* . . . and attach oneself to that infinite splendor." However, one should always pursue this goal with a teacher; otherwise the student runs the risk of taking the wrong direction and staying mired in illusion.

To meditate, we sit quietly and become aware of each moment, each thought. During our practice it is common to become distracted. These distractions are merely white noise that moves our consciousness from the path of wisdom. Because



the Jewish path embraces the notion that everything is connected and that this connection is rooted in the personal, it is understood that these distractions are not random. They have their function and should not be suppressed or even necessarily dropped away, as in a Buddhist practice. Rather, as the Baal Shem Tov taught, these thoughts enter one's mind in order that we should heal and elevate them. By noticing them and giving them over to the Holy One's purposes, we grow in intimacy with them and gain in joy, and so we arrive at healing.

Meditating in this way requires a great deal of patience. This patience with oneself and with one's practice is a very important concept to get right from the beginning. For when we can be patient with our mind's wanderings, we move closer to our own healing.

Ultimately we arrive at the perception that everything is filled with the song of God.

*Even in the inorganic things  
such as stones or dust or water  
there is to be found the quality  
of soul and spiritual life.<sup>8</sup>*

And eventually, through many *gilgulim*, reincarnations, every soul will be received back into the One.

## EXERCISE

## General Healing

When we are able to experience *chesed*, true loving-kindness, we are truly in a state of blessing and being blessed. Much of the Torah concerns itself with cultivating loving-kindness and compassion, for these are seen as being the essence of God. A simple exercise to strengthen this quality in ourselves consists of taking a phrase from the Bible that deals with *chesed* and healing and repeating it to oneself. Take fifteen minutes in the morning or evening and experiment with a few different phrases until you find one that resonates in your heart. For example: "The one who pursues . . . loving-kindness finds life" (Proverbs 16:6) or "This is the kindness to show—at every place say . . . 'He is my brother'" (Genesis 20:13).

The next step is to fix a person in your mind's eye. You should begin, if possible, with an actual person. Try to let yourself be aware of their totality as a person, with their flaws and aches and pains. Repeat the phrase while your mind is fixed on this person. Let the phrase, with its