

LESSON FOUR

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES, ASCETIC PRACTICES

TEXT ONE --- Shlomo Alkabetz, in Joseph Karo's Maggid Mesharim, introduction

Know that the saint and I, his and your humble servant, belonging to our company, agreed to stay up all night in order to banish sleep from our eyes on Shavuot. We succeeded, thank God, so that, as you will hear, we ceased not from study for even a moment. This is the order I arranged for that night. First, we read the Torah with a pleasant melody from the beginning until: *And the heaven and the earth were finished.* (Gen. 2:1-3) Then we read: *In the third month* (Ex. 19:1) to the end of the section. Then in the section **Mishpatim** from: *And unto Moses he said* (Ex. 24:1) to the end of the section. Then in the section **Va'etchanan** from: *And Moses called unto all Israel* (Deut. 5:1) to the end of the section: *Hear, O Israel.* (Deut. 6:9) Then in section **V'zot ha-berakhah** from: *And Moses went up to in the sight of all Israel.* (Deut. 34) Then we read the **haftarah**: *Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year* (Ezek. 1) and the **haftarah**: A Prayer of Habakkuk. (Hab. 3) Then the Psalm: *The heavens declare* (Ps. 19) and the Psalm: *Let God arise.* (Ps. 68) Then we read the alphabetic acrostic without the songs. Then we read the whole of the Song of Songs, the whole of Ruth and the final verses of Chronicles. All this we did in dread and awe, with quite unbelievable melody and tunefulness. We studied the whole of the Order **Zera'im** in the Mishnah and then we studied in the way of truth.

No sooner had we studied two tractates of the Mishnah than our Creator smote us so that we heard a voice speaking out of the mouth of the saint, may his light shine. It was a loud voice with letters clearly enunciated. All the companions heard the voice but were unable to understand what was said. It was an exceedingly pleasant voice, becoming increasingly strong. We all fell upon our faces and none of us had any spirit left in him because of our great dread and awe. The voice began to address us saying: "Friends, choicest of the choice, peace to you, beloved companions. Happy are you and happy those that bore you. Happy are you in this world and happy in the next that you resolved to adorn Me on this night. For these many years had My head been fallen with none to comfort Me. I was cast down to the ground to embrace the dunghills but now you have restored the crown to its former place. Be strong, My beloved ones. Be courageous, My friends. Rejoice and exult, for you belong among the chosen few. You have the merit of belonging to the king's palace. The sound of your Torah and the breath of your mouth have ascended to the Holy One, blessed be He, breaking through many firmaments and

many atmospheres until it rose upwards. The angels were silent, the **seraphim** still, **chayyot** stood without speech and all the host of heaven heard, together with the Holy One, blessed be He, the sound of your voice. Behold, I am the **Mishnah**, the mother who chastises her children, and I have come to converse with you. Had you been ten in number you would have ascended even higher, but you have reached a great height nevertheless. Happy are those who bore you, My friends, in that by denying yourselves sleep you have ascended so far on high. Through you I have become elevated this night and through the companions in the great city, a mother-city in Israel. You are not like those who sleep on beds of ivory in sleep which is a sixtieth of death, who stretch themselves out upon their couches. But you cleave to your Creator and He rejoices in you. Therefore, My sons, be strong and rejoice in My love, rejoice in My Torah, rejoice in the fear of Me. If you could only imagine My Torah, rejoice in the fear of Me. If you could only imagine one millionth of the anguish which I endure, no joy would ever enter your hearts and no mirth your mouths, for it is because of you that I am cast to the ground...

Therefore, O My dear sons, be strong and of good courage and rejoice. Cease not from studying, for a thread of mercy is stretched out over you and your Torah study is pleasant to the Holy One, blessed be He. Therefore, stand upon your feet and raise Me up, saying in a loud voice as on the Day of Atonement: "Blessed be the name of His glorious Kingdom for ever and ever."

We then rose to our feet with the joints of our loins loosened and we proclaimed in a loud voice: "Blessed be the name of His glorious Kingdom for ever and ever." He then repeated: "Happy are you. Return to your studies, not interrupting them for one moment. Go up to the land of Israel, for not all times are opportune. There is no hindrance to salvation, be it much or little. Let not your eyes have pity on your worldly goods for you eat of the goodness of the higher land. If you will but hearken, of the goodness of that land will you eat. Make haste, therefore, to go up to the land, for I sustain you here and will sustain you there. To you will be peace, to your household peace, and to all that is yours peace. *The Lord gives strength to His people. The Lord will bless His people with peace.*

All these things did we hear with our own ears and much more of a like nature, all matters of wisdom and great promise. We all broke into tears at the great joy we had experienced and when we heard of the anguish of the **Shekhinah** because of our sins, Her voice like that of an invalid in her entreaties. We took courage so that our mouths did not cease from study in joy and dread until daybreak. In the morning we immersed ourselves, as we had done on the previous two days. There we met the sages who had not been present on that night and we rebuked them. We

told them of all the good the Lord had wrought on our behalf so that their heart died within them. They smote their own faces and wept aloud. We persisted in our criticism of them since it was because of their absence that we failed to receive further revelations, as we said above. So we said: "Let us join one another the coming night and we shall be ten in number." It was agreed. Now although we did not sleep at all, not even one moment, on the first night, and although we were unable to sleep even during the day, since the saint, may his light shine, expounded the Torah in the afternoon and we all listened, yet we girded our loins to repeat the program of the first night on the second. In the great rejoicing that we were ten in number, they did not wait until the time for the **Mishnah** reading nor did they wait until midnight (on the previous night it happened exactly at midnight) but no sooner did we begin to read the portions preceding *Hear, O Israel* in Deuteronomy then the voice of our beloved knocked at the door. It began to speak: "Hearken unto me, O my beloved ones, choice ones. Awake and sing you who dwell in the dust, according to the mystery of the supernal dust, the two letters Heh " etc. And he spoke many words of wisdom. Afterwards he said: "Happy are you, My beloved ones. Happy are you in that you have elevated Me. I have become most elevated now that you are ten in number, the quorum for all sacred matters. Happy are you and happy those who gave you birth. Fear not the reproach of men and have no dread of their insults for you have elevated the Community of Israel and know that you are the chosen few (so did He continue, as above). To Me you cleave and the glory is above your head and there extends over you a thread of mercy. If permission had been granted for the eye to see, you would see the fire surrounding this house. Be strong, therefore. Do not allow the knot to be untied. Elevate Me by reciting in a loud voice *Hear, O Israel* and "Blessed be the name" as on the Day of Atonement."

Thus did he speak many things for about half an hour and we then returned to our studies. At midnight the voice returned, speaking for over an hour, repeating the praises of our studies. The voice said: "See! Did any people ever hear the voice speaking as you did? *Ask your father and he will inform you; your elders, and they will tell you* (Deut. 32:7), whether during these many hundreds of years they have heard or seen such a thing and yet you have been worthy of it. Therefore, let your eyes be upon your ways from now onwards. Let each help his neighbor and say unto his brother be strong. Let the weak say, I am mighty, and let each be great in his own eyes since you belong to the king's palace and have had the merit of entering the vestibule. Endeavor now to enter the great hall and do not leave the vestibule. For whoever leaves to go outside, his blood be upon his head. Awake, My sons, and see that I speak to you. Awake, My beloved ones. Be firm and valiant in battle. Be strong and rejoice and a thread of mercy will be extended over

you daily. Observe how intoxicated you are with worldly desires. Awake, O drunken ones, for the day comes when a man must cast away his gods of silver, worldly desires, and his gods of gold, lust for wealth. Go up to the land of Israel for so you are able to do if it were not that you are trapped in the mud of worldly desires and vanities. Whoever leaves your company and turns away his blood be upon his head. See! How worthy you have been, that of which no others have been worthy” (and so he continued at length in this vein).

(Alkabetz continues:) Now, my sons, hearken unto me. Incline your ears and your hearts to me. Who can be so foolish as to hear these things without resolving to return to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might? I call heaven and earth to be my witnesses that all I have recorded here and in the tract I composed is not even one hundredth of what actually transpired. And even with regard to the tract, you will sometimes note an asterisk after some words, to denote that here a mystery was revealed I could not allow myself to record in writing.

TEXT TWO --- Chayyim Vital, Sefer ha-Chezyonot, (“Book of Visions”), Part Four, pp. 134, 149-150.

These are the things that my master of blessed memory told me relating to me and the root of my soul...

14. One day I visited him, a whole month having passed during which I had performed none of the **yichudim** (unifications) he had prescribed for me. He recognized this in my face, and said: “‘If you leave me for a day I shall leave you for two.’ (a Talmudic phrase, also found in the Zohar) You cause great harm by failing to perform the unifications, for You caused the souls who wished to cleave to you to become separated from you.” I gave him the excuse that I only wanted to study the Torah during that time, especially since those souls did not come to me as openly as was appropriate. He replied that despite all this I must not fail to perform these unifications daily. It is more important than the study of the Torah, since it unites the upper worlds and so serves the dual purpose of Torah study and unification. He warned me that when I perform unifications my intention should not be only to attract the soul, but to repair it on high.

When I went with him to Tiberias to Rabbi Akiva’s tomb, he also told me that Rabbi Akiva said to him that I should mention Rabbi Akiva’s name ten times consecutively before each of the three daily prayers. As a result he will become

impregnated in me and will help me very much. He told me there was no need for me to say "Rabbi Akiva," only "Akiva."

He also told me that until the festival of **Sukkot** in the year 5334 (=1573), I shall need help, and he will assist me whenever I perform unifications. But after that time I will not need any help, since the two-and-a-half years that I sinned when I refrained from studying Torah will be completed. Previously, even if he did help me, it was haphazard, since it was impossible for it to be regular. However, from that time on, it will be regular, praise God.

15. He also commanded me not to refrain from performing the unifications he had transmitted to me. If I go to prostrate myself on the graves of the righteous, I should do so either on the eve of the New Moon or on the fifteenth day of the month, for then it is more effective than at any other time. I should not go on the Sabbath, festivals, or the New Moon, for at these times their souls ascend to heaven and cannot be communed with at the grave. Once he sent me to the graves of the righteous on **chol ha-moed** (the intermediate days of festivals) to pray there, but I did not prostrate myself.

TEXT THREE --- Vital, **Sha' ar Ruach ha-Kodesh**, p. 10a

And here is the secret of prophecy and the holy spirit. It is assuredly a voice sent from above to speak with this prophet, or with this man endowed with the holy spirit. But this same supernal spiritual voice cannot by itself materialize and enter the ears of this prophet, unless it first clothes itself in the physical voice which emerges from this man's mouth when, at a given moment, he studies Torah or prays and the like. And then it [i.e., the supernal voice] clothes itself in it, [i.e., the physical voice] joining it, and it comes to the ear of this prophet who [then] hears it. And without the man's own present physical voice it cannot achieve existence.

TEXT FOUR --- Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Mystical Element in Judaism," pp. 615-6

A new form of living was the consequence of the kabbalah. Everything was so replete with symbolic significance as to make it the potential heart of the spiritual universe. How carefully must all be approached. A moral rigorism that hardly leaves any room for waste or respite resulted in making the kabbalist more meticulous in studying and fulfilling the precepts of the Torah, in refining his moral conduct, in endowing every-day actions with

solemn significance. For man represents God in this world. Even the parts of his body signify Divine mysteries.

TEXT FIVE --- Karo, Maggid Mesharim, p. 1.

Be careful never to speak an unnecessary word, whether during day or night.

Take care to avoid any kind of talk that leads to frivolity, and if you overhear such talk, never laugh. This extends to the complete avoidance of mockery.

Never lose your temper over mere material things.

Do not eat meat at all for forty days, except for a little on Shabbat. Do not eat horseradish.

Drink no wine during these days except one drink at the end of the meal.

Be gentle in speech to all people.

Never be proud. “Be exceedingly humble in spirit.”¹

Sleep in your own bed. When you have to have marital relations in order to fulfill the precept to be fruitful and multiply, rise up from her bed a half an hour after you have completed the act and return to your own bed.

Be careful to avoid taking pleasure during eating, drinking, and marital relations. Act as if demons were forcing you to eat that food or indulge in that act. You should much prefer that it be possible for you to exist without food and drink, or to fulfill the duty of procreation without intercourse.

Always have your transgressions in mind and be anxious because of them.

Never eat for dessert more than one measure, and no more than twenty of melons, grapes and raisins. Except on Sabbaths and festivals do not eat of more than one type of fruit. At the beginning of the meal, cut three measures of bread and during that meal eat no more. Never drink your fill of water.

Train yourself to keep your eyes downcast so you will never chance to gaze at a woman forbidden to you.

Have the **Mishnah** in mind during the meal, and study a chapter of the **Mishnah** before **Birkat ha-Mazon** (Grace after meals).

Do not allow your mind to wander from Me even for the slightest moment, and limit your enjoyment. When you are eating and desire additional food or drink, desist from it. If you do this at each meal, it will be as if you offered a sacrifice; your table will be an actual altar upon which you slaughter the evil inclination.

TEXT SIX --- **Hanhagot** of Moses Cordovero

1. A person should not turn his heart away from meditating upon words of Torah and holiness, so that his heart will not be empty and void of reflection upon the commandments, and in order that his heart may become a dwelling place for the **Shekhinah**.
2. One should avoid anger altogether, because anger leads a person to commit a variety of transgressions. Come and learn from the example of Moses, our Rabbi, may he rest in peace. You are already aware of the injury which is incurred through anger from what our Sages, of blessed memory, taught in the **Zohar**. This is alluded to in the verses: *Cease ye for man, in whose nostrils is a breath; for how little is he to be accounted, and You that tear yourself in anger...* (Isa. 2:22; Job 18:4). And even if another person antagonizes him, he should act as one who is insulted yet refuses to insult others.
3. Let an individual always enjoy the company of others and behave toward them with a kindly spirit, even with respect to people who transgress the Torah.
4. One should drink no wine whatsoever during the daytime, but only at night, and even then diluted. Only on Sabbaths, Festivals, and the New Moon may one drink during the day.
5. One should be sparing with meat and wine during the weekdays, even at night, inasmuch as these foods endow Samael with strength.
6. A person should not spend his time thinking about idle concerns during the hour of prayer, but only about Torah, the fulfillment of the commandments and sacred matters.

7. An individual ought to refrain from speaking derogatorily about any person; this hold true even with respect to animals.
8. One must never curse any fellow Jew, even in a moment of anger; on the contrary, let him bless him, and by doing so be blessed, as it is written: *I will bless those who bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse* (Gen. 12:3)...
11. Let an individual refrain from touching his body with his hand, and from lowering his hand below his navel...
14. Let a person commune with one of the associates every day for the purpose of conversing about devotional concerns.
15. A person ought to discuss with this same associate, every Sabbath eve, what he did each day of that past week. From there he should go forth to welcome the Sabbath Queen.
16. One ought to pray the **Amidah** in a contemplative way to the degree that he is able; at very least he should concentrate meditatively during the three openings blessings, the four bows, as well as the four places where one stands erect again. For with respect to one who fails to concentrate upon these, the **Shekhinah** cries out: *The Lord has delivered me into their hands against whom I am not to stand* [Lam. 1:14].
17. An individual should take care to recite the afternoon prayer service while wearing a tallit and tefillin; this includes the Reader's repetition of the **Amidah**.
18. A man should recite the **Birkat ha-Mazon** in a loud voice so that his children may repeat it after him, letter by letter and word by word.
19. One should be careful never to eat meat on Sunday, nor any cooked dish, nor drink wine. He ought to take greater care not to indulge in levity on this day than on other days, unless it is a festival, New Moon, or a feast connected with a religious celebration.
20. Every night one ought to sit on the ground, mourn the destruction of the Temple, and weep on account of one's transgressions which delay the redemption.

21. A person should not prepare a secular banquet in his home, but only a feast which is connected with a religious celebration...
25. A person should donate charity every day so as to effect atonement for his sins, as it says: *and break off your sins with almsgiving* [Dan. 4:24]...
30. During the three weeks of mourning an individual should avoid reciting the benediction: "Praised are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has granted us life and sustenance and permitted us to reach this season." (**She-he-cheyanu**) Nor should he eat meat or drink wine unless he is about to fast. He is permitted to do so on account of his fast.
31. A person should fast in accordance with his capacity.
32. A person ought to meditate upon matters of Torah with each and every bite he eats in order that his food may serve as a sacrifice and his drinking of water and wine as drink-offerings...
35. One should weep during each of the prayer services, or at least during one of them.
36. A person ought to fast for three consecutive days, four times each year, during each of the four seasons. Praiseworthy is the individual who adds to this.
37. A person ought to converse in Hebrew with the associates at all times.
38. One should study **Mishnah** and one Psalm before **Birkat ha-Mazon**.
39. A person should study **Mishnah** every Sabbath eve in accordance with his capacity.
40. Every week a person ought to review all the **Mishnah** that he knows.
41. An individual should learn at least two chapters of **Mishnah** by heart each week.

TEXT SEVEN --- Isaac of Acre, (12th - 13th c.), quoted in Reishit Chokhmah, *Sha'ar ha-Ahavah* ("Gate of Love"), end of chapter 4

One day, a princess emerged from a bathhouse. One of the idle men standing there saw her and sighed deeply, and said: "Who might give her over to me, that I might have my will with her?" The princess overheard and said to him: "It will come to pass in the graveyard, but not here." When he heard these words, he rejoiced, for he took her to mean that he should go to the graveyard and wait for her there, and that when she would come to him, he could do with her as he wished. This was not her intention; rather, she meant to say that there all were equal: great and small, young and old, despised and honored. But here it could not be, for she is a princess and one of the masses could not possibly approach her.

So that man rose and went to the graveyard, and sat there, constantly thinking of joining with her, always thinking of her form. Because of his great desire only for her, he removed his thoughts from everything (else) sensual, concentrating only on her form and beauty. Day and night he sat there in the graveyard; there he ate and drank, and there he slept, saying to himself: "If she does not come today, she will come tomorrow." He did this for many days, and because of his separation from the objects of sensation, and the exclusive attachment of his thought to one object and his complete concentration and total longing, his soul was separated from sensual things and became attached only to the intelligibles (i.e., that which can only be perceived by the mind), until it became separated from all sensual things, including the woman herself, and he communed with God.

After a short time, he cast off all sensual things and desired only the Divine Intellect, and he became a perfect servant and a holy man of God, until his prayer was heard and his blessing was beneficial to all passersby, so that all the merchants and horsemen and foot-soldiers who passed by came to him to receive his blessing, until his fame spread far about...A man who does not desire a woman is like a donkey, or even less than one. In other words, from the physical, one may apprehend the worship of God.

¹ M. Avot 4:4.