

Teshuva and the Question of Change

Throughout the Yamim Noraim we do teshuva, the heart of which is a commitment to change for the better. This idea of change is complicated, as we know that in our Torah lives sometimes change is necessary and sometimes it is frowned upon. True introspection — a prerequisite to teshuva — requires that we explore how to maintain our commitment to personal and communal traditions while still developing in a positive religious direction, growing closer to Hashem.

Change is difficult. Regarding a change of character traits, it is reported that Rabbi Yisrael Salanter considered it more difficult to change one deficient trait than to master all of Talmudic literature. Behavioral change is also a monumental task. The strenuous nature of this kind of change is attested to in the written works of many prominent researchers and clinicians, including Dr. James Prochaska and Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski.

One of the most complex issues we face in the world of change in our religious lives is whether we should change in the first place. Often, we deliberately maintain a particular practice since this is how we've acted throughout our lives, perhaps in



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continuation of our parents' behavior. Sometimes these practices exist across an entire community and may be a notable hallmark of a specific group. Change in our religious lives can be controversial and filled with tension. We find an example among students who study in Israel for a year after high school and often change their religious behavior, bringing home new customs, a stronger commitment to Torah study, as well as what some would call a stricter level of observance. In a study of this phenomenon, begun in May 2007, the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration¹ found that while most parents supported their children's changes in religious behavior, some parents reacted negatively. This study highlights a question that we each face individually, and our community faces collectively: when should religious change be encouraged and when should it not? Which practices should we maintain and strengthen and which should we leave behind as we go through life? Does it matter

if these changes are focused on spiritual accomplishments or social conventions? What about changes between varying Torah communities and traditions?

A Need For Change

It can be universally agreed upon that in certain areas of Jewish life, personal change is necessary. In the world of Torah study, for example, we must change over time. There would be an obvious deficiency if one's understanding of a verse in Chumash as a grown adult were at the same level of sophistication and shared the same perspective as that of an elementary school child. Similarly, a basic goal of maturation in life is to change our behavior over time to reflect a more refined character. The verse in Mishlei states:

הַחֲזִק בְּמוֹסֵר אֶל תִּירָף נִצְרָה כִּי הִיא חַיִּיד
*Hold fast to discipline; do not let go;
keep it; it is your life.*

Mishlei 4:13

The Vilna Gaon, in his *Commentary to*

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Mishlei explains:

כי היא חייה: כי מה שהאדם חי הוא כדי לשבור מה שלא שבר עד הנה אותו המדה לכן צריך תמיד להתחזק ואם לא יתחזק למה לו חיים.

It is your life: Because the reason why a person lives is to break the [negative] character traits that one has not broken until now. For this reason, one must constantly inspire oneself, and if one doesn't want to inspire oneself, why live? We all expect our children to grow out of the self-centered behaviors of youth and build emotionally intelligent lives that include new levels of empathy and concern for others. This constant change — seeking new ways to improve our character — is the essence of our lives, according to the Vilna Gaon.

Staying the Same

However, there are other aspects of our lives in which we do not encourage change as we age. In his magisterial eulogy for the late Rabbi Chaim Heller zt"l, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik described the aspiration of maintaining childlike faith in one's religious life and one's *emunah* in Hashem. Unlike the intellectual realm of Torah in which one morphs and grows over time, the experiential feeling of G-d's presence requires a youthful perspective, which he ascribes to his own grandfather, Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik zt"l:

מה היה הסבא שלי, ר' חיים, איש בריסק? מחד גיסא - גדול המחשבה המופשטת, שהכניס שינויי יסוד במתודולוגיה ההלכתית, ר' חיים הגדול. ומאידך גיסא - ילד קטן ורך, שלא יכול לכבול את רגשותיו הרותחים, געגועיו למשהו יפה ונעלה, חלומותיו ותקוותיו. הוא, איש המשמעת הקפדנית בתחום השכל, שכבש וריסן בדפוסי היגיון חד ודייקני את כל העושר ההלכי, נישא ללא כל הסתייגות בזרם

עוז של פשטות, תמימות, רגישות, מבוכה, בהלה ילדותית וגם ביטחון שלא ישועה אל מרחבים אשר לא שזפתם עין. דברי הגות והערכה עמ' 159

Where you find their maturity you find their childlike quality. What was my grandfather, R. Hayyim of Brisk? On the one hand, he was a great abstract thinker, who introduced basic conceptual transformations in the field of halakhic methodology. On the other hand, he was a child, unable to restrain his warm emotions, his yearning for something beautiful and elevated, his dreams and hopes. He, the man of iron discipline in the intellectual sphere, who captured the richness of halakha in acute, exact, logical molds, was swept without reservation in a bold stream of simplicity, innocence, sensitivity, perplexity, childish confusion, but also immeasurable confidence.

Shiurei HaRav (ed. Joseph Epstein) pg. 63

This fealty to a religious experience of youth may be found expressed in a beautiful image — the shawl of Shmuel Hanavi. When faced with his final crisis, King Shaul seeks a sorceress to conjure up the soul of Shmuel for guidance. When she does, she describes his appearance:

וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַה תֵּאָדָרוּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִישׁ זָקֵן עֵלָהּ וְהוּא עֵטָה מְעִיל וַיִּדַע שְׂאוּל כִּי שְׂמוּאֵל הוּא וַיִּקַּד אַפָּיִם אַרְצָה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה.

"What does he look like?" he asked her. "It is an old man coming up," she said, "and he is wrapped in a robe." Then Saul knew that it was Samuel; and he bowed low in homage with his face to the ground.

Shmuel I 28:14

The immediate question is, how did Shaul know from this simple, nondescript portrait that this was, in fact, Shmuel? Rashi cites a verse earlier in the book of Shmuel:

וּמַעִיל קֶטָן תַּעֲשֶׂה לוֹ אִמּוֹ וְהַעֲלֵתָהּ לוֹ מִיָּמָיִם יְמִימָה בְּעֹלֹתָהּ אֶת אִישָׁהּ לְזִבְחַת אֶת זֶבַח הַיָּמִים.

His mother would also make a little robe for him and bring it up to him every year, when she made the pilgrimage with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice.

Shmuel I 2:19

Rashi explains:

והוא עוטה מעיל. שהיה רגיל ללבוש מעיל, שנאמר ומעיל קטן תעשה לו אמו, ובמעילו נקבר.

He is wrapped in a robe; he was accustomed to wearing a robe as it states, "His mother would also make a little robe for him," and he was buried in his robe.

It is incredible that one of the greatest prophets of Jewish history, in his old age and into the afterlife, was still wearing the same shawl that his mother, Chana, knitted for him when he was a child. The shawl not only symbolizes the youthfulness described by Rabbi Soloveitchik, but also symbolizes how Shmuel Hanavi identified with his parents. It is a symbol of his identification with his upbringing and the family within which he was raised.

Each of us has a shawl given to us by our parents that we must keep with us, no matter what age or stature we attain. This concept of familial loyalty and its accompanying resistance to change is a strict halachic principle based on a Talmudic story:

בני ביישן נהוג דלא הוו אולין מצור לצידון במעלי שבתא אתו בנייהו קמיה דר' יוחנן אמרו לו אבהתין אפשר להו אנן לא אפשר לן אמר להו כבר קיבלו אבותיכם עליהם שנאמר שמע בני מוסר אביך ואל תטוש תורת אמך.

The residents of Beit She'an were accustomed not to travel from Tyre to market day in Sidon on Shabbat eve. In deference to Shabbat, they

adopted a stringency and would not interrupt their Shabbat preparations even for a short sea voyage. Their children came before Rabbi Yohanan to request that he repeal this custom. They said to him: Due to their wealth, it was possible for our fathers to earn a living without traveling to the market on Friday; however, it is not possible for us to do so. He said to them: Your fathers already accepted this virtuous custom upon themselves, and it remains in effect for you, as it is stated: "My son, hear your father's rebuke and do not abandon your mother's teaching." In addition to adhering to one's father's rebuke, i.e., halacha, one is also required to preserve his mother's teaching, i.e., ancestral customs.

Pesachim 50b (Translation from The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud)

This Gemara is the basis of the concept of minhag and the binding nature of personal, familial and communal precedent. Halacha grants significant weight to authentic minhagim in almost all cases.² Oftentimes, prior practice helps establish halachic standards, and changes to prior practice can also raise concerns of disrespecting previous generations. Just one example of this is found in the halachic discussion in 19th-century Europe regarding the kosher status of turkey. The *Darkei Teshuva*, in his commentary to *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 82*, cites these arguments in the name of the Netziv: since people have been consuming turkey with the presumption that it is kosher, we cannot overturn that presumption without a bona fide proof that it is not kosher because doing so will cast aspersions on previous generations that they ate non-kosher.

This is true not only of personal and familial customs; it is equally true of communal character as well. Each community within the overall spectrum of Judaism must maintain its unique traditions in Jewish outlook and practice. Moreover, it is noteworthy that a diversity of minhagim and practices between Jewish communities and families is not just an accident of history. It is an intentional, original design of the Jewish people. The creation of twelve distinct tribes reflects the need for differentiated modes of avodat Hashem. The classic introduction to the Chabad Siddur, *Sha'ar HaKollel*, makes this point in stating that there are going to be thirteen gates of entry to the Third Beit HaMikdash, one for each tribe, and a thirteenth that is all-encompassing. This is to reflect the many gateways and traditions to serving Hashem.

We learn that it is important to maintain the character of our specific community within the masorah of Torah communities.

A Challenge

The challenge, then, is how to balance this commitment to the unique character of our family and community with a quest to come ever closer to Hashem, which is our ultimate calling as avdei Hashem. Does fealty to tradition mean that we should never adapt or change in new circumstances? Should it be enough to say that we should never deviate from the practice of our parents and grandparents? What if this practice is inconsistent with accepted halacha? Does any shift in more scrupulous observance mean we are moving, as is often described, "to the right"? This question could be answered with a

rhetorical question. Would a business executive in the 21st century decline use of a website for ordering today because his firm didn't do business that way in the 1950s? Certainly not.

Imagine a couple celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Would anyone expect the manner in which they speak to and treat each other to change in the years that they've known each other? Certainly not. As both the book of Shir Hashirim and the book of Eicha describe, we have a relationship with Hashem, our beloved. This relationship is deepened over time, and things that would have been acceptable during the initial stages of our relationship may no longer be appropriate. Times change and circumstances change. While certain practices may be appropriate in a given time and place, they may no longer be appropriate at a later time. This need for revision throughout life is conveyed in a fascinating parable of a map maker:

But the biggest problem of map-making is not that we have to start from scratch, but that if our maps are to be accurate we have to continually revise them. The world itself is constantly changing. Glaciers come, glaciers go. Cultures come, cultures go. There is too little technology, there is too much technology. Even more dramatically the vantage point from which we view the world is constantly and quite rapidly changing ... If we are to incorporate this information, we must continually revise our maps, and sometimes when enough new information has accumulated, we must make very major revisions. The process of making revisions, particularly major revisions, is painful, sometimes excruciatingly painful. And herein lies the major source of many of the ills of mankind.³

Once we understand that within a commitment to one's personal and communal past there is still room, and sometimes a necessity, for new ideas and practices, we still face the challenge of navigating change. How do we know when change is appropriate and when it is not?

Perhaps a first consideration is motivation. Is the change to a new practice motivated simply by a lack of confidence and desire to imitate another person or community? If so, then it is just shallow mimicry. If, however, it is a truly profound affinity for a specific religious community or overall desire to grow closer to Hashem that motivates change, then it is worthy of consideration. Additionally, a second, more complex issue is assessing the merit of the both the current and proposed practice.

Merit

Before abandoning a current practice, one must research and understand its values and merits. Occasionally, current practices may seem questionable on the surface but upon further inquiry have a sound halachic basis.⁴ On some occasions, however, we encounter a practice that is deemed a *minhag ta'ut*— an errant practice, which lacks halachic merit entirely. For example, no one could claim that they have a family or community minhag to eat non-kosher food just because members of a previous generation, who were not observant, did so.

A similar inquiry should be done regarding the acceptance of a proposed practice. Does this new practice fulfill a Biblical or Rabbinic mitzvah or is it a stringency? Stringencies, known as *chumrot*,

are a meaningful and time-honored expression of piety. However, our rabbis have always stressed caution and balance when introducing them, as they may violate the Torah's restriction against arrogance and sanctimony. The Gemara states:

אליעזר ועירא הוה סיים מסאני אוכמי וקאי בשוקא דנהרדעא אשכחוהו דבי ריש גלותא וא"ל מאי שנא הני מסאני אמר להו דקא מאבילנא אירושלים אמרו ליה את חשיבת לאיתאבולי אירושלים סבור יוהרא הוה אתיוה וחבשוה

Eliezer Ze'eira was wearing black shoes, unlike the Jewish custom of that time, and standing in the market of Neharde'a. Officials of the house of the Exilarch found him and said to him: What is different about you that causes you to wear these shoes? He said to them: I am wearing them because I am in mourning over the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, and so I wear black shoes, as is the custom of mourners. They said to him: Are you a man of such importance to publicly mourn over Jerusalem? They thought that it was simply presumptuousness on his part. Since he was acting against the prevalent Jewish custom, they brought him to the prison and incarcerated him.

Baba Kama 59b (Translation from The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud)

Chazal are teaching us that only certain individuals are entitled or permitted to observe certain *chumrot*— for others they are off limits, as they are beyond the person's current spiritual rank. In addition, the value of a stricture must be weighed against other halachic and meta-halachic considerations that may counterbalance it. As the Talmud notes, a stricture in one area of halacha and life may actually be a leniency and infringement upon another area.⁵

Hesitation

Even when all of these conditions are fulfilled satisfactorily, we often still feel uncomfortable around others who have made positive religious changes, as described in the Azrieli study above. We also often hesitate

R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto on Taking on Additional Stringencies

והנה מה שצריך להבין הוא כי אין לדון דברי החסידות על מראהיה הראשון, אלא צריך לעיין ולהתבונן עד היכן תולדות המעשה מגיעות, כי לפעמים המעשה בעצמו יראה טוב, ולפי שהתולדות רעות יתחייב להניחו, ולו יעשה אותו יהיה חוטא ולא חסיד... יש איזה תוספות חסידות שאם יעשה אותם האדם לפני המון העם ישחקו עליו ויתלוצצו, ונמצאו חוטאים ונענשים על ידו, והוא היה יכול להניח מלעשות הדברים ההם, כי אינם חובה מוחלטת.

What a person needs to understand is that one should not judge the matters of chasidut according to their superficial appearance. Rather, one must examine and contemplate the full extent of where the future consequences of the deed leads. For sometimes, the deed itself may appear to be good but since the consequences are evil one must abstain from it. For doing it would not have made him a chasid but rather a sinner ... there are some additional matters of piety, which if a person were to do before the common people, they will laugh at him and ridicule him, thereby sinning and incurring punishment through him, and this is something he could have abstained from doing since these things are not complete obligations.

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to make these changes for ourselves even when we know they are advisable and even necessary. Why are we so reticent? This is something with which I personally struggle, like many others, as Eric Hoffer notes in his book, *The Ordeal of Change*. There are many factors that impede and hinder change. In the context of teshuva, we can point to one emotional and psychological core issue that nags at our subconscious. It is highlighted by the words of the Rambam, who describes the transformation of teshuva in chapter 7 of *Hilchot Teshuva*:

גדולה תשובה שמקרבת את האדם לשכינה שנאמר שובה ישראל עד ה' אלהיך ונאמר ולא שבתם עדי נאם ה' ונאמר אם תשוב ישראל נאם ה' אלי תשוב כלומר אם תחזור בתשובה בי תדבק התשובה מקרבת את הרחוקים אמש היה זה שנאי לפני המקום משוקץ ומרוחק ותועבה והיום הוא אהוב ונחמד קרוב וידיה.

Repentance is of the greatest importance, inasmuch as it brings a man nearer to the Shechinah; for it is said: O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God (Hos. 14. 1); again it is said: Yet have ye not returned unto Me, saith the Lord (Amos 4. 6.); and it is also said: If thou wilt return, O Israel, saith the Lord, return unto Me (Jer. 4. 1); meaning, if thou wilt but turn with repentance, thou wilt cleave unto Me. Repentance brings near to God those that were remote from Him. The same man who, but the day before, was despised, condemned, and rejected by God, is now beloved, accepted, a kin and a favorite.

Hilchot Teshuva 7:6

On one level, these comments of the Rambam are incredibly empowering and invigorating. Each of us has at hand the opportunity to completely transform ourselves and our relationship with Hashem through teshuva. It is dramatic. It can be summarized in a quote from the Alter

of Slabodka, “Teshuva is not becoming better: it is becoming different.”⁶

However, there is a clear implication here regarding the status of a person before teshuva, and perhaps this impedes teshuva. When I see someone else who has made changes in their lives, perhaps some part of me feels (and perhaps on some level we ought to feel) “despised, condemned and rejected by G-d.” Perhaps the reflection makes us feel inadequate. The thought of making changes and moving forward may make us uncomfortable because it challenges our past identity. It labels us in a way we don’t like. Hence, we avoid change. We aren’t prepared to condemn our past selves and completely change our identity — to literally change our name as the Rambam also encourages (*Hilchot Teshuva* 2:4).

Development, Not Change

Perhaps the answer to this concern and hesitation is an approach to teshuva suggesting that G-d and the halacha do not actually require us to shed our prior identity, even if it were sinful, in favor of a new one. Teshuva is about continuous development rather than a wholesale change of identity.

This idea is demonstrated in a remarkable story in the Gemara, *Menachot* 44a, describing the religious journey of a prostitute. The Gemara records that a certain individual was about to commit an illicit act with this prostitute, when his tzitzit hit him on the face. This inspired him to cancel his appointment. The woman was so moved by this, she asked the individual to write his name on a piece of paper, and she began a journey toward conversion to Judaism. The Gemara continues:

עמדה וחילקה כל נכסיה שליש למלכות ושליש לעניים ושליש נטלה בידה חוץ מאותן מצעות ובאת לבית מדרשו של ר' חייא אמרה לו רבי צוה עלי ויעשוני גיורת אמר לה בני שמא עיניך נתת באחד מן התלמידים הוציאה כתב מידה ונתנה לו אמר לה לכי זכי במקחך אותן מצעות שהציעה לו באיסור הציעה לו בהיתר זה.

Thereupon she arose and divided her estate into three parts; one third for the government, one third to be distributed among the poor, and one third she took with her in her hand; the bed clothes, however, she retained. She then came to the Beth Hamidrash of R. Hiyya, and said to him, ... “Master, give instructions about me that they make me a proselyte.” He replied: “My daughter, perhaps you have set your eyes on one of the disciples?” She thereupon took out the script and handed it to him. He said: “Go, and enjoy your acquisition.” Those very bed-clothes which she had spread for him for an illicit purpose she now spread out for him lawfully.

Menachot 44a (Translation from The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud)

There are many incredible aspects and lessons of this story. One of the most striking is the fact that she does not discard the old bed clothes of her prior life when she arrives at the doorstep of Rabbi Hiyya’s yeshiva, nor does Rabbi Hiyya instruct her to do so. On the contrary, he encourages her to keep what might seem to be an obvious reminder of a not-so-honorable past. This Talmudic passage teaches that when we make changes in our lives, even drastic ones, we do not need to disown or rewrite our pasts. Maharal (*Chiddushei Aggadot* there) notes the woman sold two-thirds of her property, yet she kept one-third. He suggests that the allocation of the funds symbolizes that although most of her life was being transformed, she

maintained a piece of her prior self. We learn that even a convert, whose transformation is compared by Chazal to being “born like a child,” is not completely reborn. Part of their prior identity remains with them as a badge of honor, not a mark of Cain.

This notion, that as we do teshuva we do not reject our past, demonstrates that we seek to develop more than we seek to change. Change, or “flipping out,” means becoming something or someone else. Development means taking myself to another level, closer to Hashem and closer to my potential. This is why Judaism’s term for repentance is teshuva, which literally means a return. Teshuva is about returning to our true selves, not becoming something or someone else. This may be why when we do teshuva, we do not erase our past misdeeds. When we embrace spiritual development with love, our past errors become merits as Reish Lakish teaches:

אמר ריש לקיש גדולה תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו כשגגות שנאמר שובה ישראל עד ה' אלקיך כי כשלת בעונך הא עון מזיד הוא וקא קרי ליה מכשול איני והאמר ריש לקיש גדולה תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו כזכיות שנאמר ושוב רשע מרשעתו ועשה משפט וצדקה עליהם (חיה) יחיה לא קשיא כאן מאהבה כאן מיראה.

Reish Lakish said: Great is repentance, as the penitent’s intentional sins are counted for him as unwitting transgressions, as it is stated: “Return, Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled in your iniquity” (Hosea 14:2). The Gemara analyzes this: Doesn’t “iniquity” mean an intentional sin? Yet the prophet calls it stumbling, implying that one who repents is considered as though he only stumbled accidentally in his transgression. The Gemara asks: Is that so? Didn’t Reish Lakish himself say: Great is repentance, as one’s intentional sins are counted for him as merits, as it is stated: “And when

the wicked turns from his wickedness, and does that which is lawful and right, he shall live thereby” (Ezekiel 33:19), and all his deeds, even his transgressions, will become praiseworthy? The Gemara reconciles: This is not difficult: Here, when one repents out of love, his sins become like merits; there, when one repents out of fear, his sins are counted as unwitting transgressions.

Yoma 86b (Translation from The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud)

Reish Lakish, one of the Talmud’s most renowned baalei teshuva, ultimately concludes that past actions remain a proud, meritorious part of our identity. This perspective on teshuva as not wholly rejecting our prior, unredeemed identity is advanced clearly by Rav Kook in his writings.⁷ Here is one example:

כשעוסקים בתשובה ... צריך לברר את הטוב הנמצא בעומק הרע ולחזק אותו - באותו הכח עצמו שבורחים מן הרע, כדי שתהיה התשובה כח פועל לטובה, המהפכת ממש את כל הזדונות לזכיות.

When we engage in repentance ... we need to filter out the good that is found in the depths of the bad and strengthen it — with the same energy that we have when we run away from the bad — in order that the repentance has a positive energy that can actually transform our wanton deeds into merits.

Shemonah Kevatzim 1:240

We learn that we can find positive qualities even in flawed behavior. We do not need to hide or be ashamed of our past or of our parents. We do not need to judge previous generations. Rather we can look to their good qualities with pride and learn from them even if our practice diverges as we develop.

The need to develop a fealty to our past is a delicate balance. We must maintain

the unique traditions of our families and our *baalei masorah*. We do not need to mimic others or convert to any of the other tribes of Israel. However, as part of our teshuva process, we must engage in what Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l, termed “introspective commitment and committed introspection.” In “The Future of Centrist Orthodoxy,” an essay whose relevance has not diminished over the passage of time, he teaches us that:

Above all, what is needed is a *heshbon ha-nefesh*: a process of self-examination that should recognize, and hence develop, strengths, but that should also acknowledge, and hence issue an initiative to surmount weakness. As we approach the mitzvah of teshuva during the days of awe, we should consider how our commitment to change this coming year will be both a continuation of our personal and communal traditions and a new stage in developing our relationship with our Creator.

Endnotes

1 David Pelcovitz and Steven Eisenberg, “The Year In Israel Experience” (2010).

2 In cases where a minhag conflicts with established halacha, see *Magen Avraham, Orach Chaim* 690, *Chasam Sofer* there and *Shu”t Aseh Lecha Rav* vol. 3 page 84.

3 M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*, pg. 25.

4 An example of this could be the practice found among Tunisian and other Jews to throw the pieces of challah to those seated at the Shabbat table. While halacha generally prohibits throwing bread, this practice is based on the tradition that our table is like the mizbeach and the offerings on the mizbeach must be thrown.

5 See, for example, *Pesachim* 48b.

6 *Great Jewish Wisdom*, p. 113.

7 For a further discussion, see *Yesh Lech Kanfei Ruach*.