
AM I READY TO FIND MY SOUL MATE?

PART I

DISCOVERING YOUR INFINITE SELF

“What is man?” – the central question of anthropology – has preoccupied thinkers since philosophical reflection began thousands of years ago. From the pre-Socratics and the Hellenistic philosophers through ... theologians and down to Kant, Hegel and the existentialists, explicit answers were sought to the questions of man’s place in the world and the nature of his being. And these questions continue to command the attention of Western thought to the present day. (Introduction, “The Emergence of Ethical Man,” Rabbi Joseph B. Soleveitchik,” 2005.)

The New York Times declared this year that this question is no less pressing. The October 6, 2015, *New York Times Magazine* ran a provocative, confrontational assessment of the confusion we have in establishing and maintaining a personal identity: *The Year We Obsessed Over Identity: 2015’s headlines and cultural events have confronted us with the malleability of racial, gender, sexual and reputational lines. Who do we think we are?*

In response to both this confusion and changes in forging an identity, we have prepared a fresh approach to discovering the Self. We will see how this search for Self so powerfully impacts one of the most, if not the most, important choice we make in life – whom we marry. By discovering the essence of the Self – that each person has a soul – we become aware, or maybe more conscious, of an entire spiritual dimension which we previously might not have considered central to our identity. We will then explore the implications of this discovery for marriage. If I don’t understand who I am, then how can I find my significant other? Conversely, by having a true awareness of the Self, I am better able to develop my potential, which includes having a happy and fulfilling marriage.

Furthermore, we will explore fundamental ideas about marriage: that true love makes us feel expanded, that we seek unity in a relationship, and what this means. We will ask: What is a soul mate? Must my soul mate be Jewish, and if so, why? What is a healthy relationship? And what is the goal of marriage?

The first class in this four-part series is about the definition of “Self.” Are you defined by your body, or your mind? Or is there another part of you that goes beyond the physical? Who is the real you? We will explore the different ways in which we are used to defining ourselves, and in the process of this exploration encounter the idea that the real Self has a spiritual definition.

Next we go on a journey, following in the footsteps of Avraham – the first person to independently discover the power of his own Self by developing a spiritual identity. Seeing how he did this can help us start on the path as well.

Finally, we take instruction from Avraham for our own quest for the Self. Appreciating his discovery of the soul and its potential will enable us to unleash our own latent power.

In the course of this class we aim to answer the following questions:

- ☞ What is significant about my decision of whom to marry?
- ☞ What limits do we place upon ourselves?
- ☞ How do these limits affect how we define who we really are?
- ☞ How can I tell that I have a soul? And even if I do, what does it matter?
- ☞ What did Avraham, the first Jew, discover that no one else had realized before him?
- ☞ How did Avraham come to his discovery?
- ☞ What does his story have to do with us today?

CLASS OUTLINE:

Prologue. The Nuclear Missile Attack Early Warning System

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PROLOGUE. THE NUCLEAR MISSILE ATTACK EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

The shift change began at 7 P.M. on September 26, 1983. Stanislav Petrov, a lieutenant colonel, arrived at Serpukhov-15, south of Moscow, a top-secret missile attack early-warning station, which received signals from satellites. The brain of the center was the M-10, the best supercomputer that existed in the Soviet Union, which analyzed the data and searched for signs of a missile attack.

For the eleven years Petrov worked at the early-warning center, they had been rushed. The United States and the Soviet Union threatened each other with missiles on hair-trigger alert. The two superpowers had between them about 18,400 nuclear warheads poised to be launched from missiles in silos, on submarines hidden under the seas and from bombers. In the event of a nuclear attack, a decision whether to retaliate would have to be made in minutes, and enormous efforts were made by each superpower to gain precious time for warning. The satellites, the antennas, the computers, the telescopes, the map and the operations center — they were the night watch for nuclear war.

The furor in recent months had been hard to ignore. President Ronald Reagan had called the Soviet Union an “evil empire” in March, and only a few weeks before Petrov’s night at the operations center, Soviet Air Defense Forces had shot down a Korean airliner in the Far East, killing 269 people including U.S. Congressman Larry McDonald.

Petrov saw himself as a professional, a technician, and took pride in overcoming long odds. He understood the enormity of the task, that in early warning there could be no room for false alarms. His team had been driven hard to eliminate the chance for error. While they had tried strenuously to make the early-warning system work properly, the apparatus was still troubled.

*At 12:15 A.M., Petrov was startled. Across the top of the room was a thin, silent panel. Most of the time no one even noticed it. But suddenly it lit up, in red letters: **LAUNCH**. A siren wailed. On the big map with the North Pole, a light at one of the American missile bases was illuminated. Everyone was riveted to the map. The electronic panels showed a missile launch. The board said “**High Reliability**.” This had never happened before.*

As they scrambled, Petrov scrutinized the monitors in front of him. They included data from the optical telescope. If there was a missile, sooner or later they would see it through the telescope. Where was it headed? What trajectory? There was no sign of it. The specialists who sat in the darkened room, also watching the telescope, spotted nothing. Petrov scrutinized the data on his monitor, too. Could it be a technical error?

If not, Petrov ran through the possibilities. If just one missile, could it be an accidental or unauthorized launch? He concluded it was not likely. He knew of all the locks and precautions — and just one person could not launch a missile. Even the idea of two officers conspiring to launch a missile seemed impossible. And if one missile was launched, he thought, what did that mean? This was not the way to start a nuclear war. For many years, he had been trained that a nuclear war would start only with a massive strike. He said

it again, to himself: this is not the way to start a nuclear war.

*The panel flashed: another missile launched! Then a third, a fourth and a fifth. Now, the system had gone into overdrive. The additional signals had triggered a new warning. The red letters on the panel began to flash **MISSILE ATTACK**, and an electronic blip was sent automatically to the higher levels of the military. Petrov was frightened. His legs felt paralyzed. He had to think fast.*

Petrov knew the key decision-makers in a missile attack would be the General Staff. In theory, if the alarm were validated, the retaliation would be directed from there. Soviet missiles would be readied, targets fed in and silo hatches opened. The Soviet political leadership would be alerted. There would be only minutes in which to make a decision. The siren wailed. The red sign flashed.

Petrov made a decision. He knew the system had had glitches in the past; there was no visual sighting of a missile through the telescope; the satellites were in the correct position. There was nothing from the radar stations to verify an incoming missile, although it was probably too early for the radars to see anything.

He told the duty officer: this is a false alarm. The message went up the chain. Stanislav Petrov later reflected, "I knew perfectly well that nobody would be able to correct my mistake if I had made one."

Stanislav Petrov is credited with saving the world from a nuclear war on September 26, 1983.

*(From David Hoffman, *The Dead Hand*, Anchor Books. 2010, pp 6-11, bbc.com/news/world-europe, and wikipedia.org/wiki/1983_Soviet_nuclear_false_alarm_incident)*

The Talmud [Sanhedrin 37a] teaches that the life of each Jewish person is compared to an entire world: *Why was Adam created alone? To teach that whoever destroys a single Jewish life is as if he has destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a single Jewish life is counted as if he has saved an entire world.* Why such high stakes? Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Jewish thinker and physicist, understands the Talmud here on a straightforward, practical level.

Now let us assume that a boy and girl marry. Assume that they have a family of two children. And assume that each of their descendants also has a similar family, averaging two children. We again see that the number of descendants doubles in each generation. (In mathematics, this is known as a geometric progression.) The couple has two children, four grandchildren, eight great-grandchildren, sixteen great-great-grandchildren. With each generation, the number doubles.

Again, after ten generations, this couple has 1024 descendants. After twenty generations, there will be 1,048,576 descendants. And after only 24 generations – a mere 600 years – there will be 16,777,216 descendants. This is very close to the current world Jewish population.

A single marriage one thousand years ago could have changed every single person alive today. A marriage is therefore an event of tremendous consequence. Thus, when a couple decides to marry, it is much more than a personal decision. It is a decision that will ultimately affect the entire Jewish people. (Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Made in Heaven, Moznaim Publishers, pp. 4-6.)

The Talmud is teaching us that the decision of whom to marry is perhaps the most consequential choice a person will ever make. As such, just as the superpowers require reliable security systems for self-preservation, so too, each Jewish individual must vigilantly establish a *Personal Identity Early Warning System* to keep himself on track in identifying, pursuing, and actualizing his life goals. In a sense, we are all like Stanislav Petrov. We need to carefully interpret and navigate the myriad pieces of data, information, and experiences that come hurtling towards us, and in our case, to determine how to evaluate who is that “most significant other” to share in building our future world.

SECTION I. THINKING ABOUT THE SELF

In order to understand the significance of whom we marry, we need to appreciate the significance of ourselves. How do we define who or what we are? What do we identify as being the most essential element of our own being? When we start asking such questions, we might just discover that we are not who we thought we were.

PART A. THE LIMITS WE PLACE ON OURSELVES

Before we start looking for answers, we must be aware of the fact that our initial responses to such questions might themselves be flawed. The reason for this is that we all too often place upon ourselves artificial limits that hold us back from discovering who we really are or could be.

In recent experiments, scientists have found that even elite athletes can be tricked into improvement by essentially lying to them. In one experiment, cyclists were told to pedal a stationary bike at top speed for the equivalent of 4,000 meters. Later they repeated the task while watching an avatar of themselves pedaling in the earlier time trial. What the cyclists didn't know was that the researchers had turned up the speed on the avatar. And yet the cyclists were able to keep up with their avatars, surpassing what they thought had been their top speed. “It is the brain, not the heart or lungs, that is the critical organ,” said the esteemed neurologist Roger Bannister, best known as the first human to run the mile in less than four minutes.

All of us face barriers – physical, financial, temporal – every day. Some are unquestionably real. But others are plainly artificial – expectations about how well a given system can function, or how much change is too much, or what kinds of behaviors are acceptable.

The next time you encounter such a barrier, imposed by people who lack your imagination and drive and creativity, think hard about ignoring it. Solving a problem is hard enough; it gets that much harder if you've decided beforehand it can't be done.

*If you doubt the adverse power of artificial limits, here's a simple test. Let's say you haven't been exercising and want to get back in the groove. You decide to do some push-ups. How many? Well, it's been a while, you tell yourself, let me start with 10. Down you go. When do you start getting mentally and physically tired? Probably around push-up number 7 or 8. Imagine now that you had decided on 20 push-ups instead of 10. When do you start getting tired this time? Go ahead, hit the floor and try it. You probably blasted right past 10 before you even remembered how out of shape you are. (From Stephen Dubner and Steven Levitt, *Think Like a Freak*, pg. 33)*

Our first step to empowering ourselves is to open our minds to consider what lies beyond these artificial limits.

Exercise #1 – Testing the limits we place on ourselves.

Below are five examples of limits we put on ourselves. Next to each “limit” is an example of how I might perceive myself were that limit removed. Read each one, and next to it write or discuss with a neighbor how your perception of self would change were you able to remove this limit. For example, what would you do differently?

Here is an example:

Limited: “I am not so interesting.”

Unlimited: If I discovered my inner world and found it more enthralling than any movie I've ever seen, I would spend a lot more time getting to know myself, feel more confident to be myself and share that person with others, and I'd be excited to do what only I can do in the world with the confidence that it would be appreciated.

- **Limited:** “I am not so interesting.”

Unlimited: If I discovered my inner world and found it more enthralling than any movie I've ever seen, I would _____

- **Limited:** “Life is dull. Therefore, I need to entertain myself and look forward to big life events.”

Unlimited: If I discovered that my every action had enormous significance, each moment building momentously on the next, I would _____

- **Limited:** “I am concerned about what others will say about me.”

Unlimited: “If I discovered that no one is interested in my impressing them, rather everyone wants me to be the best me I can be, I would take time to _____

- **Limited:** “I am not sure I’ll ever end up with a Jewish partner, or anyone who truly loves me.”

Unlimited: “If I clearly understood that I have a soul mate with whom I will experience intensifying love for my lifetime, I would push off other people to wait for this person. How about you?”

PART B. THE REAL YOU

Now that we are aware that we place artificial limits upon ourselves, let us try to break through those limits in thinking about who or what we really are. Are we our bodies? Our emotions? Our brains? How do we define the “Self”? Who we are in essence?

Exercise #2 – Are you your body?

- Look at your hand. What do you see?

A part of your body, an appendage made of bone and sinew covered with flesh and skin. It is filled with nerves, blood vessels and lymph ducts, which run through it and connect it to your body, making it part of you.

You can open and close your hand. It obeys every command that your mind sends to it. It is yours, a part of you.

- But what are you? Who is the real you?
- What happens when you tell your hand to open and close? How does your mind will it to obey its commands?

Now point a finger at yourself. Probably, you will point a finger at your chest, like most people do. You think of yourself as your body.

- But is your body the real you?

The notion that you are your body and your body is you has been challenged by scientific progress, which forces us to review the entire concept of our identity. Heart transplants are now an almost commonplace occurrence and do not even make the news anymore. A man can live with another person’s heart beating in his breast. If we would ask such a man to point to himself, would he point at his heart? Is this transplanted heart really part of him?

- Is the heart that beats within your breast the real you?
- Or is the real you something else entirely? ...

(Adapted from If You Were God, by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, NCSY Publications, pp. 25-28, and personal correspondence of Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Jerusalem).

The late Christopher Reeve of Superman fame stated that he was in a severe depression for a lengthy period following the accident that left him a quadriplegic who could not even breathe without a machine. Then his attitude changed. His perspective and outlook became optimistic and happy. He embarked on a mission to help others who suffered from paralysis and neurological challenges. How did things change? Christopher Reeve explained that he realized that, “The real me is not my body. The real me is something far, far greater. Happiness isn’t limited to my body. Happiness is the pleasure I derive from my wife’s and children’s smiles. Happiness comes from the real me bringing happiness and faith to others.” (From Rabbi Yitzchak Fingerer, Search Judaism, pg. 32)

At this point, we can probably acknowledge that the “real” Self is not our body. But what about our brains?

1. **Rabbi Yitzchak Fingerer, Search Judaism, pp. 33-34 – There is more to us than just a biological brain.**

Perhaps “the real you” is centered in your brain? Let’s investigate this possibility.

The science of cybernetics has discovered many similarities between computers and the human brain. Computer technology allows one to program a memory transfer, taking all the information contained in one computer and transferring it to another. Imagine that electromagnetic brain transfers were also possible. Information from the brain of one human being would be electromagnetically transferred to another person’s brain.

Imagine that all your “information” – your memories, knowledge, etc. – were transferred to another person. Would that person now be you? And, now devoid of your memories and knowledge, would you still be you?

An amnesia patient who cannot recall his own name or any of his past history, experiences, and acquired knowledge still has a sense of self. Is that sense of self tantamount to the biological brain?

Consider identical twins. These two human beings share the exact same DNA; they are genetically identical. If “self” is located in the biological brain, then assuming that these twins are raised in the same environment, they should have identical personalities, ambitions, and predilections. Yet experience reveals that even identical twins are disparate individuals with their own unique personalities. If their brains are the same, how can they be different?

Going a step further, let us analyze a hypothetical human clone. Cloning theoretically works by extracting DNA from any cell of a person and then enucleating a donor egg and transplanting the DNA of the person being cloned into the egg. The egg is then transplanted into a woman’s womb. The baby who is born is an exact genetic replica of the person cloned. Physically, the baby and the human being cloned are identical. They have the exact same brains. Will the clone have a different and distinct sense of self or will he be like a well-copied CD?

Many scientists believe that the mind, as opposed to the physiological brain, cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts.

2. **Ibid. – The mind is much more than just the brain.**

Philosopher of science Sir Karl Raimund Popper wrote, “I intend to suggest that the brain is owned by the self.” That means that the real you is an entity separate from the brain.

The famous neurosurgeon Dr. Wilder Penfield stated that the mind is a basic element in itself, which cannot be accounted for by any neuronal mechanism. Other scientists were so perplexed by the mind (as opposed to the brain) that one scientist referred to it as the “Ghost in the Machine.”

Dr. Penfield drew his conclusions on the basis of research that patients could be aware of what was going on in the operating room and, at the same time, when their brains were stimulated with electrodes, they could have vivid flashbacks of the past. These patients would essentially relive past events as if they were happening right then. Yet they were not confused by these simultaneous occurrences. They could actually say to Dr. Penfield, “You made me do that.” There was clearly a “self” that was aware and knew what was happening, and there was a brain, or data bank, which was being activated to elicit events from the past.

Dr. Penfield couldn’t find any place in the cerebral cortex where electrode stimulation caused a patient to believe or decide something. The functions of the “self,” or the real you, cannot be accounted for by any neuronal mechanism. As neuroscientist Professor Sir John Eccles, who won the Nobel Prize in physiology, opines, “It is a mistake to think that the brain does everything and that our conscious experiences are simply a reflection of brain activities.”

Dr. Gerald Edelman is the preeminent director of the Neurosciences Institute and a Nobel Prize winner in immunology. Despite the fact that he set out to prove that the mind does not exist as an independent entity but is a product of Darwin’s selection process, he capitulated recently and admitted, “It’s not totally reductive, meaning that it can’t be totally attributed to mere physical reality or evolution.”

Another scientist, Dr. David Chalmers of Australian National University and director of the Centre for Consciousness, said that consciousness has to be considered a fundamental category like space, time, or gravity – explicable only by “special psychosocial laws.”

In other words, the real you is more than the biological, neuronal, and chemical systems allowing you to read this article. The real you must be something that transcends the physical.

So if we are neither our bodies nor our brains, what are we?

Exercise #3 – We can infer the existence of the soul.

No one has ever seen a black hole, and no one ever will. There isn't anything to see. It's just a blank spot in space...The extreme density and strong gravitational field of a black hole keeps everything, including electromagnetic radiation, from escaping from it. Therefore, black holes themselves are impossible to detect by any instrument. The presence of a black hole is deduced by the effects it has on its surroundings. It's like looking out a window and seeing every treetop bending in one direction. You'd almost certainly be right in assuming that a strong yet invisible wind was blowing. Through observing the behavior of celestial bodies around the black hole called M87, astronomers calculate that approximately 3 billion solar masses are present at its center. That's a pretty big something to infer! (Based on National Geographic, Star Eater, by Michael Finkel, March 14, 2014).

In the same way, various phenomena strongly suggest the existence of a soul:

- Neurologist Robert Collins said, "It's amazing that the body feeds the brain sugar and amino acids, and what comes out is poetry and pirouettes." The same biological ingredients travel to the brains of human beings and animals, yet the outcome is so different. Why?
- When you say, "I am feeling happy," which part of you is the "I" who is feeling happy? Is it your cerebrum? Your medulla? Your lungs? Your liver? Who is the "I" that owns the feeling?

How can we recognize the existence of the soul within us? One way is to point to these universal phenomena that defy explanation on purely physical or biological grounds.

PART C. CONNECTING TO "SOMETHING" GREATER

Let's look at the creation of Adam, the first human and the archetype for all future generations. The Torah indicates that he was composed of elements from both the heavenly and earthly realms.

1. Bereishit (Genesis) 2:7 – Man was created from the dust of the earth and from the "breath" of God.

God formed man of the dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became a living being.

וַיֵּצֶר ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם, עָפָר מִן-הָאֲדָמָה,
וַיִּנְפַח בְּאַפָּיו, נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים; וַיְהִי הָאָדָם, לְנֶפֶשׁ
חַיָּה.

What does it mean that God "breathed" the soul into man and he became alive?

2. **Rabbi Jeremy Kagan, *The Jewish Self*, Feldheim Publishers, pp. 22-23 – The soul is the life-force that connects each person to the Divine Source.**

Man was initially formed from the earth. This gave him existence with mobility, sensory experience, and rudimentary emotions. What the Torah considers life however only came with the addition of a Divine soul. God blew his breath into man's nose and he came "Alive." The Hebrew term for soul, *neshamah*, reflects this origin for it comes from the root *neshimah*, meaning breath. The soul is the "breath" of God.

Even though the soul is beyond the world of the physical and we cannot see it, some of our drives are "soul-like." For, example, each person has intrinsic importance and desires to express his individuality.

3. **Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 4:3 – Everyone has intrinsic importance.**

He [Ben Azzai] used to say: ... There is no one who does not have his hour, and there is nothing that does not have its place.

הוא היה אומר: ... אין לך אדם שאין לו שעה,
ואין לך דבר שאין לו מקום.

On the other hand, people also have the drive to experience themselves as part of something greater. It is the soul within us that feels this connection beyond the physical boundaries of the body. The balance of both drives is how we discover our identity and purpose.

4. **Rabbi David Aaron, *Channeling Spiritual Light*, aish.com – The soul is our channel for "greater purpose."**

If God were the sun, each of us would be a ray of His divine light ... Judaism teaches us that we are each created in the image of the Divine, and that our goal is service. In other words, that each and every one of us is an individualized expression of God and serve as unique channels for His presence into this world. This is our purpose and our ultimate joy.

We naturally want to experience the truth of who we are. We seek a connection to a greater whole because we are connected to a greater whole ... We, in essence, are individualized manifestations of the Soul of all souls ... To serve God means to embody and channel into the world God's love, wisdom, understanding, kindness, justice, compassion, beauty, truth, peace, etc.

When you act mercifully, you are serving to make manifest the Source of all mercy. When you act intelligently, you are serving to make manifest the Source of all intelligence. And when you serve justice, you are serving to make manifest the Source of all justice. You experience the joy of ultimate meaning when you make your life a means to an end, greater than yourself. But when you make your own life the be all and end all, then that is the end of your life.

This is because when we live in our own little world, we become limited and stuck in ourselves and can no longer express anything greater than ourselves. But it is when we merge our individuality with the greater whole that we truly express ourselves.

5. **Rabbi Akiva Tatz, *The Jewish Teenager's Guide to Life*, pg. 76 – Our unique role only comes out once we begin to see ourselves as part of something greater.**

Certain team sports, which depend on perfect interaction between members of the team, provide a unique thrill...If one member were to make a small move expressing his own individual existence, breaking the tight discipline of the team, the entire experience would be destroyed.

So too we thrill at being single, alone and unique; and yet we also thrill at becoming part of a larger whole. We respond in these two opposite ways because that is exactly the nature of human experience: each of us is unique, cosmically important; yet we achieve our uniqueness precisely when we fit into a larger order perfectly.

Remarkably it is when we blend into the Universal picture exactly as we should in terms of our private unique qualities and abilities that we thrill to the realization that no one else could stand exactly here and do what must be done here. I fit in perfectly so that I become indistinguishable as an individual, and yet in doing so my individuality swells to the proportions of the Universe. I am nothing, yet I am everything.

PART D. HAVING SKIN IN THE GAME

You might say to yourself, “What does it matter what I do? We live in a society that believes in subjectivity, where nothing can be proven as true. Maybe God exists, and maybe He doesn’t. Maybe I have a soul, and maybe I don’t. You can’t prove it either way.” But the fact is, we don’t live this way. As Bob Dylan wrote in his famous song: “*You’re gonna have to serve somebody*.” Just read the **hundreds** of blogs reflecting a myriad of positions tailing the latest controversial news item that gets the world fired up. Everyone *does* believe in something because we get up in the morning and think, speak, and act based on our principles and ideologies.

Why can’t we just throw up our hands and say, “Oh, why should I care?” or “I really don’t care!”? Because we have basic needs; and that’s why we care. We can’t avoid our needs, we’re invested in them, and therefore we have “skin in the game.” William Glasser, who developed Choice Theory and reality therapy, which is similar to cognitive behavior therapy, enumerates five basic needs that we all have and that matter to all of us, each to a varying degree:

1. The physical need for **survival** (money, health, food, clothing, personal safety and security).
And four fundamental psychological needs:
2. The need for **love and belonging** (relationships, emotional satisfaction).
3. The need for **power** (learning, significance, self-expression, achievement).
4. The need for **freedom** (independence, personal responsibility).
5. The need for **fun** (quality of life, enjoyment, relaxation).

Why did God give us these needs? Because He wants things to matter to us. Someone who has none of these needs is either a monk or a liar. Whether we like it or not, we're going to have to make some money, have some relationships, create some quality of life, seek some sense of self-expression, and achieve some level of freedom. The fact that these things matter to us is our "skin in the game" – our personal investment in the business of our lives.

So the decisions we make about life do matter. We matter, and our life matters. Whom we marry also matters. Based on our skin in the game, we construct a range of values which guide all our life's decisions. We will ultimately define ourselves and our actions according to the values we've chosen. So we'll always be serving "someone or something."

And then, we'll pass these values on to our children, or we'll let them decide what values or religion they want in their lives. But they're also "gonna have to serve somebody."

(Based on Rabbi Yosef Kaufman – Yeshiva Machon Yaakov, and Rabbi Meir Parker, PhD – Beis Medrash Ahavas Shalom).

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I

- ⌘ Many of us place artificial limits upon ourselves. These self-imposed boundaries keep us from fulfilling our potential in many areas of life.
- ⌘ The most significant limitations are those we place on the very definition of who we are. Defining ourselves as bodies or brains rather than souls cuts us off from the most important area of personal growth and fulfillment.
- ⌘ We can recognize the influence of our soul by considering the spiritually-driven desires both to express our individuality and to connect to "something" beyond ourselves. Getting in touch with our soul's desires can free us from the confines of a less-than-meaningful existence.
- ⌘ We all have "skin in the game." We are invested in ensuring that our five basic needs, described above, are met. As such, our lives and the decisions we make do matter. And, as Bob Dylan put it: "You're gonna have to serve somebody."

SECTION II. FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE FIRST JEW

How can we start identifying ourselves with our souls? So much of the culture we live in defines us by our physical wants and desires; how can we expand our view of ourselves?

The answer to this lies in our genes – our spiritual genes. All Jews are related to the first person to discover the infinite power of his spiritual Self: Avraham, the first Jew.

Abraham is now regarded as one of the most influential people in all of history. The world's three largest monotheistic religions – in fact possibly monotheism itself – found

their beginnings with him. Over 3 billion people in the modern world cite Avraham as the “father” of their religion. (From Encyclopedia.com, Entry: Abraham)

Avraham lived around 1800 BCE, and his discovery changed the face of human history. In this section we shall follow his journey towards self-discovery and see whether it reveals anything to us about ourselves.

PART A. THE FIRST STEP TO SELF-DISCOVERY: CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS

In his youth, Avraham was literally an iconoclast – he smashed the idols in his father’s workshop. Although raised in an idolatrous society cut off from any knowledge of God, Avraham was able to challenge the assumptions of his own society. Challenging the assumptions of our own upbringing is the key to discovering what we truly believe and who we really are.

1. Rashi, Bereishit 14:13 – Why is Avraham called the Ivri?

“Avram [the original name of Abraham] the Ivri.”

Rashi: The *Ivri* – The one who comes from the “other side (ever) of the river.”

אברם העברי

רש"י: העברי - שבא מעבר הנהר:

2. Bereishit Rabbah 42:13 – The “other side of the river” reflects Avraham’s ability to stand against the world of falseness.

“Avram the Ivri.” Rabbi Yehudah said, “[This teaches us that] the entire world was on one side, and he was on the other side.”

“אברם העברי” רבי יהודה אומר כל העולם כולו מעבר אחד והוא מעבר אחד.

At an early age, Avraham was open-minded enough to challenge the assumptions of his day.

3. Rambam (Maimonides), Laws of Idolatry 1:3 – Avraham discovers God through reason.

Though he [Avraham] was a child, he began to [explore and] think [incessantly] throughout the day and night, wondering: How is it possible for the [earth’s] sphere to continue to revolve without having anyone controlling it? Who is causing it to revolve? Surely, it does not cause itself to revolve.

He had no teacher, nor was there anyone to inform him. Rather, he was mired in Ur Kasdim among the foolish idolaters. His father, mother, and all the people [around

כיון שנגמל איתן זה התחיל לשוטט בדעתו והוא קטן והתחיל לחשוב ביום ובלילה והיה תמיה היאך אפשר שיהיה הגלגל הזה נוהג תמיד ולא יהיה לו מנהיג ומי יסבב אותו, כי אי אפשר שיסבב את עצמו.

ולא היה לו מלמד ולא מודיע דבר אלא מושקע באור כשדים בין עובדי כוכבים הטפשים ואביו ואמו וכל העם עובדי כוכבים והוא עובד עמהם ולבו משוטט ומבין עד שהשיג דרך האמת והבין

him] were idol worshipers, and he would worship with them. [However,] his heart was exploring and [gaining] understanding until he arrived at the way of truth. Ultimately, he appreciated the way of truth and understood the path of righteousness through his accurate comprehension. He realized that there was one God who controlled the Earth, that He created everything, and that in all existence there is no other God. He knew that the entire world was making a mistake ...

Avraham was forty years old when he recognized his Creator.

קו הצדק מתבוננתו הנכונה, וידע שיש שם אלוה אחד והוא מנהיג הגלגל והוא ברא הכל ואין בכל הנמצא אלוה חוץ ממנו, וידע שכל העולם טועים

ובן ארבעים שנה הכיר אברהם את בוראו.

The following Midrash illustrates how Avraham's clarity gave him the great strength to challenge the limits society tried to place on him, even when he was a child.

4. **Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 38 – Avraham debated the idolaters and even King Nimrod himself.**

[Avraham's father] Terach was a manufacturer of idols. He once went away somewhere and left [young] Avraham to sell them in his place ...

One time a woman came with a plateful of flour and requested, "Take this and offer it to... [the idols]." So ... [Avraham] took a stick, smashed the [idols], and put the stick in the hand of the largest [idol]. When his father returned he demanded, "What have you done to them?" "I cannot conceal it from you," [Avraham] rejoined. "A woman came with a plateful of fine meal and requested that I offer it to them. Then one of the idols claimed, 'I must eat first,' while another claimed, 'I must eat first.' Thereupon, the largest [idol] arose, took the stick, and broke them." "Why do you make fun of me?" [Terach, his father] cried out. "Do idols know [how to do anything!]" To which Avraham retorted, "May your ears listen to what your mouth is saying!"

טרח עובד צלמים היה, חד זמן נפיק לאתר, הושיב לאברהם מוכר תחתיו...

חד זמן אתא חד איתתא טעינה בידה חדא פינג דסולת, אמרה ליה הא לך קרב קודמיהון, קם נסיב בוקלסא בידה, ותבריהון לכולהון פסיליא, ויהב בוקלסא בידא דרבה דהוה ביניהון, כיון דאתא אבוה א"ל מאן עביד להון כדן, א"ל מה נכפר מינג אתת חדא איתתא טעינה לה חדא פינג דסולת, ואמרת לי הא לך קריב קודמיהון, קריבת לקדמיהון הוה דין אמר אנא איכול קדמאי, ודין אמר אנא איכול קדמאי, קם הדין רבה דהוה ביניהון נסב בוקלסא ותבריהון, א"ל מה אתה מפלה בי, וידעון אנון, א"ל ולא ישמעו אוניך מה שפיך אומר.

The following Midrash, a continuation of the previous one, shows us that Avraham tapped into his true identity, his soul – the part of himself that that was stronger than the will to live, which is perhaps the strongest sense a person has. For this Avraham was given the “super” title “Ivri” – the father of a people whose identity is built on fighting for clarity.

5. **Ibid. – Avraham debated the idolaters and even King Nimrod himself.**

[After destroying his father's idols, Terach his father] then seized him and delivered him to Nimrod (the dictatorial ruler).

(Avraham's freethinking presented a threat to Nimrod who manipulated the common people by proclaiming himself a god. Therefore, before attempting to kill him, Nimrod attempted to convert Avraham to idol worship.)

“Let us worship the fire!” he [Nimrod] proposed.

[Avraham] responded. “Let us rather worship water, which extinguishes the fire.”

“Indeed, let us worship water!” [Nimrod agreed.]

[Then Avraham said,] “Let us rather worship the clouds which bear the water.”

“Indeed, [Nimrod agreed] let us worship the clouds!”

[Then Avraham said,] “Let us rather worship the winds which disperse the clouds.”

[Nimrod agreed,] “Indeed let us worship the wind!”

[Then Avraham said,] “Let us rather worship human beings, who withstand the wind.”

[Infuriated Nimrod] exclaimed: “You are just bandying words [to make a fool of me]. We'll worship the fire. Behold, I will cast you into it, and let your God, to whom you bow, come and save you from it.”

נסביה ומסריה לנמרוד,

א"ל נסגוד לנורא,

א"ל אברהם ונסגוד למיֵּא דמטפין נורא,

א"ל נמרוד נסגוד למיֵּא,

א"ל אם כן נסגוד לעננא דטעין מיֵּא,

א"ל נסגוד לעננא,

א"ל אם כן נסגוד לרוחא דמבדר עננא,

א"ל נסגוד לרוחא,

א"ל ונסגוד לבר אינש דסביל רוחא,

א"ל מילין את משתעי,

אני איני משתחוה אלא לאור, הרי אני משליכך בתוכו, ויבא אלוה שאתה משתחוה לו ויצילך הימנו.

Unlike the rest of his society, Avraham questioned the accepted value system and searched for genuine truth. Do we unthinkingly accept societal norms, or do we live by a thought-out code of ethics?

Exercise #4 – Does Our Society Condition us to Its Values?

- What does your society value more: entertainment or human dignity? Cite three proofs.
- Is exploitation of women justified to sell products?
- Does the value of pluralism, “I’m OK, you’re OK,” make it difficult for you to develop and assert clear values?
- Is a girl in high school looked down upon for covering her body?
- Will I be condemned or approved of by others if I claim I know what I know to be absolutely true at the expense of someone else’s truth?

Are you aware what the values of your society are? Could it be that you have passively accepted some of them? If you are aware of them, are you comfortable challenging the values of your society?

Why should Avraham’s clarification of the truth give him the strength to challenge authority? Why should this information transform him?

PART B. AVRAHAM’S BURNING QUESTION

The above stories about Avraham’s youth are not included in the Written Torah itself. We find them in the Midrash. That means that they took place before God ever spoke to Avraham. Growing up in an idolatrous society, how did Avraham have such clarity about God that he was willing to risk his life for his beliefs?

The answer is a question – Avraham’s question.

1. Bereishit Rabbah 39:1 – Avraham looks at the world and realizes that the order he sees is a sign of intelligent planning.

Rabbi Yitzchak said, “There was once a person traveling from place to place who saw a palace that was burning. He wondered, ‘Is it conceivable that this palace has no one in charge of it?’ Thereupon, the owner of the palace appeared to him and said, ‘I am the master of this palace.’”

Similarly, because Avraham our father wondered, “Is it conceivable that this world has no one in charge of it?” the Holy One, Blessed be He, appeared to him and said, “I am the Master of the world.”

אמר רבי יצחק משל לאחד שהיה עובר ממקום למקום, וראה בירה אחת דולקת אמר תאמר שהבירה הזו בלא מנהיג, הציץ עליו בעל הבירה, אמר לו אני הוא בעל הבירה.

כך לפי שהיה אבינו אברהם אומר תאמר שהעולם הזה בלא מנהיג, הציץ עליו הקב"ה ואמר לו אני הוא בעל העולם.

This Midrash can be explained on different levels. It can be seen as a parable for recognizing God as the Creator and Director of the universe (see Morasha Syllabus class entitled Spirituality I). On another level, it can be explained as Avraham's discovery that we have a soul, through which we connect to the Master of the universe – God.

Let us analyze the Midrash to discover this second aspect of Avraham's discovery.

Rabbi Yitzchak said, [to what can Avraham's discovery be compared] "There was once a person traveling from place to place

- *Place to place* means that wherever the traveler looked, he saw the same thing. He discovered a principle. What was the principle he observed?

who saw a palace that was burning.

- What does discovering a *burning palace* mean? There are two elements to this: a palace and fire. The palace represents planning and design. First, Avraham observed that an intelligent Force had masterfully invested love and care in order for each object to exist. Second, he observed that this same Force allowed everything in existence to be destroyed. When thinking about death, one might ask "Why does the Master let bad things happen?" Avraham did not ask this. Rather he declared just the opposite.

He declared, 'Is it conceivable that this palace has no one in charge of it?'

- What did Avraham see? This world will one day cease to be. If so why do we have a world? The Master of the world would not have built it merely to destroy it, just as the owner of the palace would not have built it to burn it down. There must be another level of existence that we do not immediately see, just as we do not see the master.

The world, represented by the palace, is simply a stage where each of us has a chance to discover that we can have a direct relationship with the Infinite. We can walk behind the stage and see the Master of the world Himself hidden behind every act. We can live together with the Master, even when the world ceases to be. How is it possible to live without a world? Just like the Master is beyond the world, so too, we have an Infinite soul which will live on past this world. Hence...

The owner of the palace then appeared to him and said, "I am the master of this palace."

Similarly, because Avraham Avinu wondered, "Is it conceivable that this world has no one in charge of it?" The Holy One, Blessed be He, appeared to him and said, "I am the Master of the world."

- Indeed, this world provides the venue to discover the Master as well as one's own soul, which connects him to the Master of the world.

Avraham's intellect allowed him to observe his own makeup. In his observation of self he discovered he had two parts, one physical and temporary, and the other spiritual and eternal. He discovered that this second part – his soul – must be an emanation of God, who gives us life.

Avraham discovered that God placed in each person a soul as a vessel that connects each

person to God and allows His Infinite Presence to dwell within him. As such, it must be that once our bodies die, this part of our identity lives on with God forever. Hence, even if the “palace burns down,” we still have an eternal relationship with its Master via the soul, which comes from God’s inner essence.

2. **Rabbi Jeremy Kagan, *The Jewish Self*, p. 152 – The “Castle Burning” represents Avraham’s logical discovery of a world designed to point towards its Infinite Creator.**

Why does the Midrash compare the world to a burning castle, and why should its burning lead Avraham to the conviction that the world must have a master? Burning connotes destruction. Avraham looked around the world and saw that everything either dies or is destroyed. People grow old and die, as do trees and animals. Mountains, continents, even stars eventually wear down or burn out. Nothing is permanent. He saw on the one hand his body aging towards death. Though that aspect of himself which was accessible to [Avraham’s] senses – his body – was mortal, that which he knew in its essence – his self – was experienced as meaningful and infinite.

He concluded that if the only thing he knew in its essence was infinite, even though its physical manifestation was mortal, it must be that, though the world which he could see was finite, there is something beyond it, infinite and forever. At that moment Avraham discovered both himself and God. Thus the midrash states that Avraham learned Torah “from himself” (Bereishit Raba 95:3) – from his root awareness of self, which contradicted the culture and philosophy of his times. Avraham built his vision of the world from himself.

Avraham’s major discovery was not the existence of God. Since the time of Adam, the whole world had known about God. In fact, our Sages explain that in order to follow self-serving biases and avoid God, Adam’s grandchildren invented idol worship. The novelty of Avraham’s discovery was that he discovered the self and that life has transcendent significance.

3. **Rabbi Ezriel Tauber, *Thoughts for a Jewish Heart*, pp. 129-131 – Avraham discovered the power of his own self. If one man, Adam, could destroy the world, one man can also fix it.**

God chose Avraham because he was the first one to realize that the world was created for him. Noah, Shem and all the Sages and righteous people of earlier generations unanimously recognized the existence of the Creator. They believed that He was the first and the only Supreme Being, and the Creator of all the worlds. But they never thought that God’s satisfaction in all His grand Creation comes from lowly man, here in this physical world.

The ancients did not lack *Emunah* (faith) in the Creator. What they lacked was *Emunah* in themselves: who they are and what they can accomplish ... This is the train of thought that led to the world’s decline. People took the attitude that it was improper

for the lofty and almighty Creator of the World to concern Himself with humans, formed of material substance, who live in this lowly world.

This deteriorated into the belief that the Creator was uninvolved in what happens in our world; that He gave the world over to the rule of the astrological influences of the stars and planets. People began to think that man was incapable of changing anything, that he was controlled by the zodiac. Confusion increased until mankind began actually worshiping the stars and planets.

Avraham Avinu's situation made it almost impossible for him to choose the good. Born to the heathen Terach, he lived in a house full of idols and was raised in the clasp of idolatry. He had every reason in the world not to choose the good. But, thanks to his profound insight, he discovered Creation's awesome secret: the world was created for man. Man has free choice, he acts as an independent agent; thus, he can rectify the world – or ruin it.

Avraham believed in this potential with all his heart. He believed that God is just “waiting” for the person who will come along and discover that man is the focus of Creation. Avraham succeeded in his mission: He became the father of the eternal nation that will bring the world to its final rectification.

He knew that man's ability to choose good applies even in a virtually impossible situation, as in his case when the whole world stood against him and violently opposed him.

Exercise #5 – If we look at the world the way Avraham did, what will we conclude?

Observing nature, an object's form reveals its function. For example, the sun is designed in an ideal way and positioned precisely in the universe so that it casts rays at a distance of 90 million miles from the Earth, enabling life to exist here. Man was designed with the “awareness” to conceive that he, and even the sun, is a mere speck in the universe.

- Why is the sun, and man himself, designed with such precision?
- What is the purpose of this design feature apparent throughout nature?

PART C. GO FOR YOUR “SELF”

We saw above that Avraham clarified his beliefs, and even put his life on the line for them, by standing up to Nimrod and the society he lived in. When God first spoke to Avraham, He told him that it was time to leave his homeland to establish a new identity in the world: as a Jew. This command, known as Lech Lecha, “Go for yourself,” is the mantra of every Jew. We all need to rise above the accidental circumstances of our birth, clarify our true beliefs and values, and live a life that expresses them.

1. **Bereishit with commentary of Rashi 12:1 – In the words “Go for yourself,” we see Avraham’s path was meant to reveal the greatness of his identity to the world.**

And God said to Avram, “Go for yourself, from your homeland, from your birthplace and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.”

Rashi: Go for *yourself* – For your own pleasure, for your own good, and there I will make you a great nation, but here you will not merit children. Furthermore, [go so that] I will make known your character in the world.

ויאמר יקוק אל אברם לך לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל הארץ אשר אראך:

רש"י: לך לך - להנאתך ולטובתך, ושם אעשה לגוי גדול, וכאן אי אתה זוכה לבנים. ועוד שאודיע טבעך בעולם.

In essence, Avraham was being told to go on a spiritual journey that would bring him closer to God and allow him to be an even greater example to others. His character – his truly powerful soul – will become known to the world, as God brings out all of his potential greatness. “Go for yourself,” for *your* “Self,” to fulfill your unique purpose in the world.

2. **Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky, Netivot Shalom, pp. 62-63 – Lech Lecha was a command to Avraham to go and fulfill his potential.**

No two people have been created alike, from the time the world was created until now. No one can fulfill the mission that his friend is intended to fulfill. That is, each person has a mission and calling which he must achieve in his life. This includes the specific purpose that he came into this world to fulfill. God sets up each individual's life with the specific circumstances and conditions necessary to fulfill his purpose, to achieve his unique mission and calling.

All the conditions of a person's life – whether physical or spiritual, the good as well as the bad – are granted to him in order to fulfill his unique purpose in the world. Only with these specific conditions can a person fulfill his calling; without them he would not be able to. And since each person has his own specific purpose and calling, the conditions of each person's life differ one from another; one person has an easy

אינו דומה אדם לאדם מיום בריאת אדם והלאה ואין אדם אחד יכול לתקן מה שעל חברו לתקן. והיינו שלכל אדם יש את ייעודו ותפקידו אותו עליו לתקן בחייו, ובכלל זה גם העניין המיוחד עבורו ירד לעולם לתקנו כידוע. והקב"ה מעמיד לכל אחד את כל הנסיבות והתנאים שיוכל לתקן את אשר מתפקידו לתקן, ולמלאות ייעודו ותפקידו בעולמו.

כל תנאי החיים של האדם – בגשמיות וברוחניות, הטובים והרעים, כולם נתנו לו כפי השייך לתיקון עולמו, שרק ע"י תנאים אלו יוכל להגיע לייעודו, ובלעדיהם לא יוכל להגיע לייעודו, ובלעדיהם לא יוכל לתקן את אשר תפקידו לתקן. וכיון שלכל אחד יש תפקיד וייעוד מיוחד, לכך שונים תנאי החיים של כל אחד, וזה חייו קלים ולשני החיים קשים יותר...

life, and another has a more difficult life... This is the meaning of, "Go from your land and your birthplace and your father's house." Go for yourself – towards your mission, and the perfection of your soul.

וזהו פירוש "לך לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך", לך לך, היינו אל ייעודך, אל תיקון נשמתך מה שאתה צריך לתקן בעולם הזה.

To carry out his mission, Avraham was not only being asked to rid himself of the culture of his country but to go deeper into the very concept of self and rid himself of the vestiges of his upbringing.

3. **Ibid. – The command to go beyond and fulfill our potential is said to each of us.**

God's directive to Avraham is the injunction to every Jew, the children of Avraham: "Go for yourself" – to fulfill the task of your soul and your own particular mission. (This means you must overcome the conditions that you are challenged with individually.)

You must leave "your land," "your birthplace," and "your home" – that is, all your life's circumstances, your dispositions, and your nature. Indeed, the root of every personality or nature stems from these three arenas. Some stem from "your country," for every culture has its own negative characteristics, such as murder or theft, etc. These dispositions are shared by the entire country. Some characteristics are inherent in "your birthplace," meaning the negative traits inherited from one's predecessors. And there are others that emerge from "your home," for the way parents conduct themselves profoundly influences their children.

This is what was meant by *Lech lecha*: In order to fulfill your unique purpose, you must abandon all the negative traits of your land, birthplace, and home, all of which are unique to the root of each person's soul and purpose in life. Then you will come to "the land that I will show you," to the perfection of your soul, which is your task in your world.

וזה הוא דבר ה' אל אברהם, שנכלל בזה גם הוראה לכלל ישראל זרעו של אברהם, לך לך פי' להגיע אל תקון הנשמה השייך אליך ולתכלית המיועדת אליך.

עליך לצאת מארצך ומולדתך ובית אביך, היינו מכל התנאים והתכונות והטבעיות שלך. דהנה השרשים של כל התכונות והטבעיות נובעים מג' ענינים אלו. יש תכונות ששרשם מארצך, לכל ארץ יש את התכונות הרעות השייכים אליה כגון רציחה וגזל וכדו' ששרשיהם מתפשטים אל כל בני הארץ. ויש השייכים ממולדתך, הם התכונות הרעות שיש בכל משפחה והמדות שמצד התורשה, ויש הנובע מבית אביך, שלפי ההתנהגות בקדושה של ההורים נמשך כמ"כ על בניהם.

ועל זה נאמר לך לך, להגיע לתקון ולתכלית שלך, עליך לצאת מכל התכונות הרעות של ארצך ומולדתך ובית אביך, אשר כל אלו שייכים לאדם לפי שורש נשמתו ותפקידו, ואז תגיע אל הארץ אשר אראך, לתקון הגמור של נשמתך שהוא יעודך בעולמך

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II

- ⌘ Avraham's path to self-discovery started with questioning the assumptions of his upbringing.
- ⌘ Avraham conducted logical investigation in order to understand his world. This search led him to look within and discover the true essence of Self.
- ⌘ Avraham's logical path led him to trace his identity directly to his Source, the Source of all life. In discovering God, Avraham discovers who he is – a soul clothed within a physical body.
- ⌘ The path of self-discovery that Avraham was told to take by God is a clarion call for us as well. We must follow Avraham's footsteps in breaking the pattern of habit and conformity to limited definitions of Self.

SECTION III. IGNITING THE SPARK

Now that we have seen the path to self-discovery blazed for us by Avraham, all that is left is for us to develop the self-confidence to try it out for ourselves. We can achieve this self-confidence by appreciating our spiritual inheritance and the inner greatness that is our heritage.

PART A. DISCOVERING THAT YOU ARE “SUPERMAN”

We may think of ourselves as ordinary people – but we may be wrong. Perhaps each of us has untapped inner strength that has yet to surface? Maybe each of us is a superhero?

Exercise #6 – If we look at the world the way Avraham did, what will we conclude?

Imagine yourself as a kid playing in your bedroom. Your mother calls you in and asks you to sit down, and to listen very carefully to what she is about to tell you.

Then she asks you: “Honey, have you ever heard of Krypton?”

You answer her: “Sure Mommy, Krypton is where Superman is from. Everyone knows that. Why?”

She tells you in a hushed voice: “The time has come for me to tell you that we are also from Krypton. We also have special powers.” As a child you trust your Mommy (disbelief is trained in later years).

- If this happened to you, how would you feel hearing this piece of information?
- At an age where your heart and the power of your imagination are pure and bright – what would it mean to find out that you were a little Superman?
- Would you put on a cape and try flying out the window?

Chances are that your sense of self, your sense of potential, and your entire worldview would be instantly transformed from this one revelation. The same should happen when you learn one simple fact about your identity: You are Jewish!

Sound anticlimactic? Let us right now do what Avraham did. Let us each act as an iconoclast, and destroy a false perception that limits us – the imagined limitation of being Jewish. Is the part of our self we call “Jew” a useless feature, like an old identity card in our wallet, or do we hang on to it for some deeper reason? What does this “feature” have to do with the “Self”?

The word Jew or *Yehudi* comes from the Hebrew word *lehodot*, “to acknowledge.” The name “Jew” means one who “acknowledges.” What is it that he is acknowledging? That the “Force is with him.” That is, that all his power comes from an Infinite Source. This power is the soul that God, the Infinite Source, breathed into us. This is our intrinsic connection to Him (see Section I, Part C, #2).

Finding out we are superheroes is actually less radical a self-discovery than understanding that being Jewish is simply a step-by-step path to accessing the full power of your Infinite Self. Avraham instructs us how to access the Infinite Self. This path, the culture of the soul, is what Judaism spells out detail by detail. Without understanding the power of the soul, we will never access the true power of who we really are.

In truth, the quest to understand the Self and the significance of the role we are meant to play in the world requires us to honestly investigate what it means to have been born as a Jew. Let us continue and see whether we are emotionally ready and open enough to smash our preconceived notions as Avraham did.

PART B. THE SPARK OF AVRAHAM WITHIN US ALL

How can we choose to identify ourselves with our souls as Avraham did? From where can we draw the strength to do such a thing?

Fortunately for us, the spiritual path has already been blazed by Avraham. He is our father and as such we have inherited his spiritual genes. As we saw above, God’s command to Avraham of *Lech Lecha* speaks to us as well. And just like our father Avraham, we too have the potential to transcend the limitations of our culture and even our upbringing. It is up to each of us to heed that voice and set out on a spiritual journey in order to fulfill our potential.

1. Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner, *Ruach Chaim on Pirkei Avot 5:3* – Avraham is called “our father” because we carry his spiritual genetics within ourselves.

Why does this Mishnah refer to Avraham as AVINU (our forefather) ...? This is in line with the verse, “A righteous man goes with perfection; fortunate are his children after him” (Mishlei 20:7). The righteous man will make an intensive effort to perfect a character trait. Once he succeeds, he

כאן אמר אברהם אבינו - ולעיל אמר “מנח ועד אברהם” ולא אמר אבינו? ירצה בזה לפי מה שכתוב (משלי 7) מתהלך בתומו צדיק אשרי בניו אחריו. כי כמה מדות שהצדיק טרח ויגע להשיגם המה כטבע מוטבע לבניו אחריו ובקצת יגיעה יגיעו לזה... העשרה נסיונות היו להישר הדרך לפנינו.

bequeaths this trait to his children. For them it is a latent talent that needs but minor effort to blossom. The purpose of Avraham's ten trials was to pave the road before us.

2. **Rabbi Akiva Tatz, Will, Freedom and Destiny, pp. 19-22 – The essence of the Jewish soul as inherited from Avraham is to take nothing for granted and to make deliberate choices about how to live one's life.**

No choice is necessary to remain undeveloped, to persist in childish self-interest. For the natural *yetzer* (basic inclination) to define life's agenda no effort is necessary; that will happen with no choice at all. Choice must be asserted to be good, to assert the *yetzer tov* (higher inclination). Either we choose the good, or we passively surrender to the lower *yetzer*. The defining choice is between using free will and not using it; the real task of the human is to be a chooser, to assert the will in the formation of a character that reflects the Divine. The task is to create a new self from the raw material of unthinking nature and habit.

Abraham, the originator, was the archetypal iconoclast, dismantling all that was previously accepted. There was nothing that he did simply because it had been done before. This lies behind his description of himself as "I am earth and ashes..." Ash is what remains when a compound is burned; it comprises raw elements only. Abraham's life process was a constant ashing of his past, a radical burning of his history to leave only the pure elements, and from those constantly to form a rich earth for new growth. Every moment of his life represented a conversion of the dead past to the living medium of new construction, the production of fertile earth from inert ashes; a constant resurrection.

Abraham chose to stand against the whole of human society; he rejected an entire culture. He forged a road where none existed; he followed no one. His father represented the values of the current society, its outlook and its religion; Abraham went against all that. He expressed his identity in the world not as a son, but as a father; not as a flow of continuity, but as a point of origin ("Abraham" implies "father of multitudes," Genesis 17:5). Abraham does the surprising act of abandoning his father (Rashi, Genesis 11:32); this appears strange because honoring parents is a most basic element of the spiritual path [Note: The Torah does not reveal openly that he left his father in Charan (it is derived indirectly by a calculation of the relevant chronology) because this is not to be a source for standard practice; it is unique to Abraham]. But he did that precisely because he was in every way a radical beginning; his essential identity had nothing to do with his natural origin (Gur Aryeh, Genesis 11:32). He does not continue his father's history; he begins his own. Abraham is all newness, a product of choice and not heritage.

That is the essence of the Jewish character and its work in the world. It is a character

driven to choose, to create radically, constantly to bring new things down to the world. Jews are inveterate revolutionaries; that goes back to Abraham, the original revolutionary.

Choice is real, alive, when it is made against the stream of habitual forces. Going along with no conscious assertion against innate forces is a failure of choice. When no intelligent control is asserted, no choice is being made and that is a demotion of man to the material. Fish moving with the current may be alive or dead, it may be impossible to tell; but fish moving against the current are certainly alive.

3. **Rabbi Akiva Tatz, *The Jewish Teenager's Guide to Life*, pp. 12-13 – Avraham's path asks us today to clarify what we believe in the face of what society tells us to want.**

Avraham was ready to stand against an entire world. His values were thought out and consciously chosen, and were not those of his society or his generation. Ever since then that has been our way ...

Judaism is a life path that requires thinking. Judaism requires the courage to think powerfully about values and it requires the courage to reject values despite their acceptance by society at large. We accept values because they are right, not because the world around us does. And we reject values when they are wrong, even if the whole world believes in them.

We live in a society that does not think Jewishly. In many ways the ideas and values of the society around us are completely opposed to those of Judaism. We live in a society and we absorb its values, its norms and its thoughts. We see through the eyes of a culture, but that culture is not ours ...

We need to see things as they are. We need to think clearly and objectively ... clarifying how much is our own original thought and how much is the passively absorbed material of a worldview that is not ours.

Do you have the courage to do that? Can you handle the challenge of looking at yourself honestly and fearlessly?

Exercise #7 – Finding a spark of Avraham within ourselves.

- Did you ever stand up for something?
- If so, what value did you feel you were fighting for?

Imagine for a moment that you had a personal trainer who helps you live each moment with this value.

- Would your life be different?
- How so?

Our personal identification with a timeless value is more significant to our identity than what we look like or what music we listen to. The value we relate to tells us about our essence. Many great people in our history are described by the value they exemplified. For example: Avraham – loving-kindness; Isaac – self-sacrifice; Jacob – truth; Joseph – purity; Aaron – peace; Moses – humility. Clarifying the truth of a value in our life and learning how to aspire to it consistently in all we do gives us the strength to stand up for something bigger and raise ourselves above the world around us. It gives us our identity.

Long before Avraham discovered the power of his infinite soul, he did something very simple – something each of us can do. He asked simple questions about his life and the world around him. This is our starting point in discovering who we are.

4. **Ibid., pp. 76-7 – Two steps to gaining our true self: discovering self and commitment to a greater context.**

In order to begin the path of genuine self-development, you must learn to reject the mode of today's culture, which sees the world as existing to serve the individual's self-interest.

You must look beyond yourself [You must be able to see yourself as part of a greater context ...] If you cannot really give of yourself to anyone or anything else, you will forever be alone in your undeveloped smallness. When you have begun to resolve the conflict of living as part of a greater reality and yet in that greater, expanded reality discover your own individual uniqueness, you have begun to walk the long road that leads to real maturity and real greatness.

So there are two phases: First ... strive to discover your uniqueness ... What essential part of the world is yours to build? This question is critically important – a life spent pursuing some unrealistic and inappropriate goal is a life wasted, and worse *it damages the entire world*. When that small insignificant screw in [the] engine rattles around in the wrong place ... the entire engine may be irreparably damaged.

Second, develop the depth to see that the thrill of fitting in is a much more mature experience than the thrill of being a loner at any cost. The immature personality will choose to step out of line in order to experience its own uniqueness ... Immaturity cannot see the beauty in yielding the self in order to actualize the self; in truth, however, that is the only way to genuine selfhood.

A common example of phase two is deciding to get married and to bring up your children with the values you believe in.

Exercise #8 – How Well Do I Know Myself?

- My career plan/college major was a result of: (a) an inner sense of what I need to know to fulfill my purpose in the world (b) clarity of my gifts and strengths which I need in order to fulfill my purpose (c) what others told me I might like (d) none of the above

- I am _____ about what I value and refuse to value: (a) clear, (b) not sure, (c) in agreement with my peers, (d) willing to take time to begin thinking.
- When I think about my unique role, I: (a) look at career opportunities that sound interesting, (b) listen to the advice of others for what to do (c) examine my life experiences to see what areas I excel or fail in to get a realistic picture of where I should invest my energy (d) first try to clarify why I am here in the world in general.
- I have a clear sense of what is good for me and worth pursuing, and what is a fantasy that although exciting is not realistic and probably bad for me. (a) True (b) False (c) Never thought about it (d) Good question; how do I figure that out?
- My friends and boy/girl friends are people who: (a) share my likes (b) are similar to me (c) share my values even if they are different from me (d) happen to be around me.
- I'd feel stronger about being myself if I had more clarity about: (a) what makes me special (b) what it means to be Jewish (c) what I believe in (d) all of the above.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III

- ✧ Discovering the spiritual heritage of being Jewish – of being directly descended from Avraham – is no more radical a discovery about our true inner power than finding out that we are superheroes.
- ✧ The word Jew, or *Yehudi*, comes from the word “to acknowledge.” The name “Jew” means one who acknowledges that “the Force is with him,” that is, that all his power comes from an Infinite Source. This power is the soul that God, the Infinite Source, breathed into us. This is our intrinsic connection to Him.
- ✧ Discovery of the Self requires expanding our limits to discover what we can be. The first step is to recognize that the beliefs we pick up from society limit us. The second is to think about Avraham as a role model of the ability to challenge and clarify what a person knows to be true. We have the power to be like Avraham, to make independent deliberate choices about what we believe and how to live our lives.
- ✧ We can start the process by clearly identifying values that we have fought for and envisioning that our identities would be more vibrant were we to live with that clarity.

CLASS SUMMARY:

This series proposes that there is something extraordinary and unique about the Jewish soul and that this precept has implications for marriage. We have to be equipped to decipher all the information before us, to be able to protect ourselves and preserve a future for those who will descend from us.

WHAT LIMITS DO WE PLACE UPON OURSELVES?

- Whether we realize it or not, we are constantly placing artificial limits upon ourselves. This fact plays out in all sorts of ways in our lives, be it our health (e.g. the common ongoing struggle with dieting) or our social behavior (“I simply cannot get along with that guy!”). To experience such a limitation, just try the push-up exercise and see how many more you can do when you expect more of yourself!

HOW DO THESE LIMITS AFFECT HOW WE DEFINE WHO WE REALLY ARE?

- The most significant limitation we place upon ourselves is how we define who or what we are: a body, a brain, or whatever else. If we see ourselves strictly as physical beings, we will not tap into the deeper side of ourselves. When we relate to ourselves as being a soul, a whole new dimension of who we are opens up to us.

HOW CAN I TELL THAT I HAVE A SOUL? AND, WHAT DOES IT MATTER?

- The main barrier to relating to ourselves as a soul is that we are not quite sure what the soul is or whether or not we really have one. But with a little probing we can see that we all have desires that cannot be explained by a purely physical definition of the Self.
- One way in which we can intuit the fact that we have a soul is in the desire to connect to something beyond ourselves.
- We all have “skin in the game.” We are invested in the business of our lives, ensuring that our five basic needs are met. The decisions we make about life are significant, including whom we marry. Based on our skin in the game, we construct a range of values which guide all our life’s decisions. We will ultimately define ourselves and our actions according to the values we’ve chosen. So we’ll always be serving “someone or something.”

WHAT DID AVRAHAM, THE FIRST JEW, DISCOVER THAT NO ONE ELSE HAD REALIZED BEFORE HIM?

- We are used to hearing that Abraham discovered God, but that is not the whole story. Many people had had a relationship with God before Abraham.
- The uniqueness of Abraham was that he recognized his “Self,” his soul residing within the physical body.

HOW DID AVRAHAM COME TO HIS DISCOVERY?

- Avraham's journey started with questioning everything that he had been taught, all the beliefs and values of his society. By making himself into a blank slate, he made a fresh start free of any assumptions or ulterior motives.

WHAT DOES HIS STORY HAVE TO DO WITH US TODAY?

- Firstly, we need to accept the challenge of “Lech Lecha” that God gave to Avraham and to us, his descendants. This challenge calls upon us to seek the expression of our inner spiritual Self. We need to rise above the accidental circumstances of our birth, clarify our true beliefs and values, and live a life that expresses them.
 - Knowing that we are related to Avraham and have inherited his spiritual genes gives us the confidence to embark on such a journey of self-discovery and spiritual actualization.
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In Class II, we will develop a deeper understanding and awareness of the Self and further examine how this impacts the most important decision of choosing our soul mate.