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MAN—THE FOREVER INCOMPLETE BEING

A wise man, Reb Zusha, once said of himself: “When you go up to heaven, you will not be asked why you were not Moses. You will be asked why you didn’t become yourself.”

As humans, we are spiritually dynamic—something that cannot be said about any other creature. When it comes to spiritual growth, animals are completely static. While they can develop emotional relationships, acquire new skills, and mature both physically and intellectually, they cannot grow spiritually. The Hebrew word for “animal,” *beheimah* (בהמה), reflects this reality. The word *beheimah* is made up of two words, *bah mah* (בה מה), which means, “in it, there is ‘what.’” The total reality (“whatness”) of the animal is already inside the animal. It has no growth potential.¹ Animals are incapable of having a moral vision or of pursuing a spiritual trajectory. You will never find a lion sitting on a rock having an existential crisis about the meaning of life. From a spiritual point of view, animals are born complete.

1 *Maharal, Tiferet Yisrael*, chap. 3.

The same is true about angels. Although much more spiritual than animals, angels cannot grow spiritually. The prophet Zechariah contrasts the angels with man. Angels are creatures that stand, while man walks.² Angels praise God standing with their feet together, in a position of no movement and no growth, because that is what they were created to do.³

In a way, angels and animals are actually very similar. Angels see God so clearly that they have no option but to cleave to God. Animals are so moved by their instinct that they are pre-programmed to do God's will. The former's intelligence and clarity are their instinct; the latter's instinct is their clarity and intelligence.⁴

But man is different. Man cannot find redemption by simply being. Man is called *adam* from the word *adamah*, which means "ground." Just like the ground has to produce its potential by yielding its crops and fruits, so too, man's very name reflects the idea that he starts out as all-potential.⁵

To be human is to grow. Man needs to give birth to himself, again and again.⁶

ADAM—THE POTENTIAL BEING

We humans have an almost infinite soul. This means we can be growing our entire lives, always discovering new aspects of ourselves. And if we could, we should. To be human is to sense the gulf between the "is" and the "ought"; between what we have already become and our as-yet-unfulfilled potential. We really should not be calling ourselves human beings, but rather human becomings.

2 Zechariah 3:7; Isaiah 6:2 also describes one category of angels, the *seraphim*, as standing.

3 *Beit Elohim of the Mabit*, chap. 5.

4 Rabbi Alexander Safran, *The Kabbalah: Law and Mysticism in the Jewish Tradition* (Feldheim).

5 *Maharal, Tiferet Yisrael*, chap. 3. Hence, the creation of the body of man is uniquely called "dust from the earth" (Genesis 2:7), even though all living beings were similarly created; *Maharal*, *ibid*.

6 *Maharal, Gur Aryeh*, Genesis 6:15.

At the end of creation, the Torah states, “God saw everything that He had created and it was “very good” (*tov me’od*).⁷ A more accurate defini-

*It is only in the
spirit that we excel
as uniquely human.*

tion of *me’od* is “more and more.”⁸ The Hebrew letters of this word *me’od* (מֵאֹד) are the same letters as *adam* (אָדָם), man.⁹ The essence of being human is this ability to continuously fulfill our potential—to become more and more.

GREATNESS IS NOT AN INSIDERS CLUB

There is no special club to becoming spiritually great. It is a system that is open equally to all. You don’t have to have any degrees or be a rabbi or rebbetzin. Illustrious lineage does not guarantee greatness.

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Moses dreamt that his sons would succeed him, but Joshua was greater and therefore took the reins of leadership.¹⁰ Over the last two thousand years, the children of the greatest rabbis who became the greatest rabbis of the next generation were the exception rather than the rule. As

the Sages put it, a *mamzer*¹¹ who becomes a wise man is greater than a High Priest who remains ignorant.¹²

The “crown of Torah” is available to all.¹³ Anyone can learn Torah and become a wise person. Anyone who applies that Torah can become righteous. There are no favorites, elites, or hierarchy of access.

And there is no age. There is no one who can say that they have missed the boat, that had they been younger, they would have considered embracing Judaism. Abraham was already a mature seventy-five years old when God told him to make a completely new beginning: “Go from your

7 Genesis 1:31; see the *Ramban* ad loc.

8 Rabbi Moshe Shapiro.

9 In Hebrew, the letters for both are *mem*, *aleph*, and *dalet*.

10 *Rashi*, Numbers 27:16.

11 A *mamzer* is born of his married mother’s incestuous or adulterous relationship with another.

12 Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Talmud Torah 3:2 (based on Talmud, Tractate *Horayot* 13a).

13 *Ibid.* 3:1.

land, from the place of your birth, from the house of your father.” At an age that many of us are settling into retirement homes and touring Alaska, Abraham was just beginning the part of his life that the Torah writes about.¹⁴ As Warwick Schiller said, “You can learn new things at any time in your life if you are willing to be a beginner.”

We know from the midrashic literature that Abraham had been growing since he was three years old when he first started believing in God.¹⁵ We know that he had already actively confronted his idolatrous surroundings, risking his life. And yet, it is as if God is telling him, “You are just beginning. Now you are ready to go.” Until then, the Torah only makes passing mention of Abraham. The most dramatic moments of Abraham’s life—his circumcision, his encounter with the angels, and the near-sacrifice of Isaac—were way ahead of him.¹⁶

God’s words to Abraham are really *Lech Lecha*, “Go to yourself.”¹⁷ Go discover yourself. Raise yourself above your egocentricity and go toward your purpose. Stop thinking within the narrow confines of your birthplace.¹⁸ Go to your potential!

GROWING INTO GREATNESS

To understand the Torah’s vision for man, let’s go back to Moses. Moses didn’t just become the Moses we know. He had to work hard over a long period of time to get there. He started out by being called an Egyptian man,¹⁹ and only much later was he called a man of God.²⁰

Moses’ growth began with him looking outward—from Pharaoh’s palace where he had been brought up²¹—and seeing the suffering of his enslaved brethren. He began to feel their pain. He would leave his

14 Genesis 12:1–4.

15 *Raavad*, glosses to *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry 1:3.

16 The first two incidents happened when Abraham was ninety-nine, the latter when he was a hundred.

17 Genesis 12:1. *Lech* means “go”; *lecha* means “to you” or “for you.”

18 *Rashi*, Genesis 15:5.

19 Exodus 2:19, by Yitro’s daughters.

20 Deuteronomy 33:1.

21 Exodus 2:5–10.

privileged existence of the palace and help the Jews achieve their quota of work for the day.²² Moses was becoming an other-centered person.

One day, Moses saw an Egyptian overlord hitting a Jewish slave.²³ Moses could bear it no longer. After determining that no future righteous person would come out of this Egyptian,²⁴ he killed him.²⁵ With this, Moses began not just helping but taking responsibility—the most important ingredient for any leader.

The very next day, he saw two Jews arguing.²⁶ Now, to save your fellow Jew from a hated Egyptian was one thing, but why get involved if two of your country-men are arguing? The good side and the bad side are no longer obvious. Not only that, but the previous day Moses had committed a capital offence. One would have thought that Moses would lay low, at least for a while.²⁷ Moses, however, took the next step in his growth. Other people's problems were his problems. And so, he intervened.

Word had gotten out about his slaying of the Egyptian, and so Moses had to flee the country.²⁸ He fled to a strange land, Midian.²⁹ Despite being a destitute refugee, Moses intervened once again to prevent injustice.

The male shepherds were chasing away the weaker female shepherds from the watering well.³⁰ Moses had every reason to believe this was none of his business. He was a stranger to the land, and, after all, he was in this foreign land because of his intervention in Egypt! But Moses could not look at injustice, even to strangers, and just turn the other

22 *Yalkut Shimoni*, chap. 2.

23 Exodus 2:11.

24 *Rashi*, *ibid.* This included a greatness in future generations as well. Although Moses was not yet a prophet, he may have received this insight through *ruach ha'kodesh*, the "holy spirit"—a level just below the level of prophecy.

25 Exodus 2:12.

26 *Ibid.*, v. 13.

27 *Yalkut Shimoni*, *ibid.*, as explained by the *Maharal*, *Gevurot Hashem*, chap. 18.

28 Exodus 2:14.

29 *Ibid.*, v. 15.

30 *Ibid.*, v. 16–17.

way.³¹ He helped the female shepherds and went even further: watering their sheep himself.³²

Then Moses took another step. He became a shepherd.³³ Looking after sheep in a desert was a new level of care—not one-time interventions but the thankless task of 24/7 care. It was only after that that God appointed him to save His people at the burning bush.

Greatness did not fall into his lap. It was a lifetime of work. And this was just the beginning.³⁴

NO ONE GETS TO DO IT ALL BY HIMSELF

Moses changed the course of history, and in so doing he seemed to transcend his own humanity. But the Torah stresses that, for all his unfathomable greatness, he was not so much different than us. He struggled and sometimes failed. He achieved mind-boggling levels of spirituality but ultimately died with still more to do. In the end, even the man who had brought God's Torah down to earth could not escape death. He desperately wanted to finish his mission by taking the Jewish People into Israel, but that was not to be.³⁵

The Torah ends with Moses' death.³⁶ Man is God's partner, but no one person will get to do it all. If that is sobering, it is also inspiring. We all get to play a part. We all really count. Moses made his contribution; you and I will make ours.

God instructed that Moses' life be written for eternity—not so that we would idolize him, but so that we would see what it looks like when one person follows God's plan for him. We must know that the purpose of the world requires something greater than any one of us, but we must also know that each one of us is vital for that plan. God whispers in our ear, and we must strive for the sublime.

31 Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed* 2:45. Caring for others with worthy acts of kindness, says Maimonides, is one of the pre-conditions for prophecy.

32 Exodus 2:19

33 Exodus 3:1.

34 *Chatam Sofer*, commentary on Chumash.

35 Deuteronomy 34:1–6.

36 *Ibid.*, v. 5–12.