

Berur: How Do You Know If It's God?

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I. Divine Inquiry

... and she went to inquire of God. And God said...Genesis 25:22-3

After 19 prayerful, tearstained years our mother Rebecca finally conceived. Growing larger each day the joy of her impending motherhood became tainted. Two competing forces seemed to be wrestling within her, tearing her apart physically and emotionally. Wracked with pain and existential doubt she cried, "If this be the case than why do I exist?" Moved by distress and an intimation that something larger was at play, Rebecca went "*I'drosh et Adonai*--to inquire of God."

But what does it mean, "to inquire of God?" Three classical biblical commentators offered different insights into this curious phrase. Abraham ibn Ezra (d.1164) claims that Rebecca sought divine guidance from a prophet, probably her father-in-law Abraham who was still alive at the time. Solomon ben Isaac (d.1105) popularly known as Rashi, states that Rebecca searched for divine counsel at the Beyt Midrash, the mythical House of Study, of Shem, Noah's son.¹ A final interpretation was asserted by Moses ben Nachman (d.1270), more commonly referred to as Nachmanides or Ramban. Citing verses from scripture Ramban indicates that the term "to inquire of God" means to pray.² Thus, when faced with radical feelings of discomfort, Rebecca prayed and then paid attention as divine guidance manifest in her consciousness, revealing the potential implications of her difficult pregnancy.

More than competing commentary on a single verse these interpretations represent three classical Jewish approaches to discerning God's word, each with its own

warrant from the Torah. The path described by Ibn Ezra is well known from biblical times: when seeking divine guidance ask a prophet. Deuteronomy 18 cites God's promise to raise up prophets after Moses who would speak God's word to the people. Although our tradition claims that, as a means of determining normative Jewish practice, prophecy ceased in the early Second temple with the death of Malachi, classical Jewish sources still speak of gaining insight through other levels of divine inspiration.³

The avenue described by Rashi is that of normative rabbinic Judaism: if you want divine guidance you will find it in the *Beyt HaMidrash*, the House of Study. Deuteronomy 33 states that the Torah Moses commanded us is "the heritage of the congregation of Jacob." To find God's word is to immerse oneself in that heritage, the teachings and observances of our people, that these might guide our personal and communal lives. Thus *l'drosh et Adonai*, the "inquiring of God," cited in Genesis is realized as *l'drosh et Torat Adonai* (Ezra 7:10), as studying, interpreting, and applying the insights and dicta of Torah. And if a particular matter is too difficult to discern, Deuteronomy 17 bids us to go to a Jewish legal authority, a halachic decisor, who will instruct us as to the Torah, the divine guidance, we should fulfill.

The third path, cited by Ramban, does not begin with external authority, be it a person or text. Instead God's word becomes manifest through feeling and cognition, prayer, contemplation and inner discernment. This path, though not recognizable to some as authentically Jewish, does have substantial grounding in our tradition. Deuteronomy 30 states that God's word is not external to us, but "within our mouths and hearts to enact it." Psalm 40 speaks of coming before God with a "Scroll inscribed upon me" and "Your Torah implanted in my viscera." Here *l'drosh et Adonai*, "inquiry of God," involves

prayer and attentive silence so the "Interior Torah" might rise from our innermost being to the level of articulation that we may act according to its wisdom.

II. Seeking God Today

The approach cited above by Rashi has remained predominant since the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Those within the contemporary Hasidic and Sephardic communities may still seek divine guidance from wonder working rabbis with ascribed prophetic powers. However normative Judaism continues to place near exclusive emphasis on Torah, Halachah, and communal authority as the arbiters of God's will. Faced with religious inquiries, Orthodox rabbis prescribe a *p'sak halachah*, an appropriate, binding legal imperative; cognizant of Halachah, many liberal rabbis suggest guidance based on the wisdom and examples gleaned from traditional practice and lore. Although disagreeing on the authority of Jewish law, both share a sense that the sacred is primarily conveyed to the individual by Torah and/or Halachah, as mediated through the collective experiences of the Jewish people. While taking into account the concrete reality of the individual seeking counsel, neither explore the experiences or the inner life of the seeker as valid co- indicators of divine guidance.

In this era of growing spiritual hunger and the desire for a more personal connection to the Holy, many contemporary Jews wonder why God directly guided our biblical ancestors but seems consigned to silence or echoes today. Even those committed to normative halachic practice recognize that Jewish law might not cover some of the most important aspects of our lives. Halachah describes in minute detail how a divorce

document, a *get*, should be written. It offers little guidance however as to whether, even in the face of overt abuse, it is the time for my partner and I to divorce. If Psalm 23 promises us a divine immediacy beyond the application of communal norms, that God "guides me" and "stands by me," how shall we sense that Presence and intuit its guidance?

The contemporary practice of Jewish Spiritual Direction seeks to answer that question, in part, by recapturing the sense of divine inquiry explicated by the Ramban. Any authentic model of Jewish spiritual guidance must begin with Torah. However, there is a definite strain in our tradition which indicates that the Torah might address each of us differently in our own particularity and uniqueness:

(((Set as extract))) When the divine spoke to each heard according to his/her capacity. Thus David said, "YHVH's voice comes in strength" (Psalm 29); not in "Divine strength" but in the strength to be heard by each [listening] individual. Thus the Blessed Holy One said to them: It is not that these you hear are many different voices; know that I am the One [from Whom it all derives]. "I, YHVH [the Source of All Being], am your [individual] God⁴ (*Pesikta d'Rav Kahana* 12:27)

However this leads to an irreducible dilemma. If the path of divine inquiry, as interpreted by Rashi, can lead to an externally imposed formalism, that proposed by Ramban can devolve into sheer subjectivity. How can we know that the voice we intuit is God's? Might it not be an expression of our own desires or a self-serving rationalization? Perhaps we're simply deluded? Even among biblical prophets only Moses is said to have received direct, unambiguous divine instruction. The rest of us need a process to help

distinguish between the authentic and the delusional, between true guidance and wish projection. In the world of spiritual direction this process is known as discernment.

III The Language of Discernment

To better grasp how Judaism understands discernment it will be helpful to look at some classical Hebrew terms used to denote this process. Foremost among these are *Berur* and *Mishkal HaHasidut*.⁵

The etymology of *Berur* stems from the process of smelting metal. **Bor**, meaning potash or lye, was used to help purge the dross so that only the pure, strong metal element would remain. *Bar* or *barah* in biblical Hebrew connotes that which is pure, lucent or clear.⁶ As we shall see rabbinic texts use the word to indicate choices that lead to integrity.

The Kabbalists gave the term *Berur* a new theosophical twist. Their basic understanding of our physical world is that everything and every situation is an admixture of spirit and the physical, of *netzotzot*, divine sparks that form the essence and life force of everything, encased in and obscured by *kelipot*, shells of matter and bodily desire. Thus *Berur* is a process of clarification and extraction, of recognizing and freeing the sacred embedded in the mundane husks of everyday busy-ness as well as in the darker shells of our compulsions and self-serving choices. On a deeper level *Berur* calls us to acknowledge the potential sanctity present even in the *kelipot* themselves, for “no place is devoid of the Divine Presence.”⁷ Therefore *Berur* both clarifies the path to personal sanctity and aids in the ultimate redemption of our world. Isaiah Horowitz, a seventeenth century moralist and mystic writes:

((Set as extract)) Before Adam sinned and the shells (*kelipot*) were revealed they existed in potentia like the dregs that are interlaced with the wine while both are contained

within the prior actuality of the grape. When Adam sinned the light was hidden, the shells were actualized, revealed and dispersed... The ascending level of our perception should be to discern (*l'barair*) the inward (*netzotzot*) from the externals (*kelipot*), to consume and be nourished by the inner and to discard the shells. But in the future, that which is as dark as night will shine as brightly as day. *Torah Or*, The Light of Torah, on Genesis, *Parshat Chaye Sarah* (((**End extract**)))

In his eighteenth century moralist text, *Mesilat Yesharim*, The Path of the Upright, Moshe Chayim Luzzatto offered insight and guidance to those wishing to pursue a holy life. Chapter twenty prescribes a discernment process called *Mishkal HaHasidut* for those who have embarked upon the path of spiritual refinement. The word *Mishkal*, Scale, summons images of a person carefully weighing all relevant external factors, inner dynamics, traditional wisdom and religious imperatives until perfect balance is achieved. *Hasidut*, Saintliness, connotes a level of spiritual trust, intentionality and behavior that go beyond perfunctory observance and the baseline requirements of Jewish law. For Luzzatto, *Mishkal HaHasidut* is a process of prayerful analysis and consideration whose initial motivation and ultimate goal are the same: heightened God consciousness and pious, loving conduct.

It is important to note that discernment is not just a matter of disparate choices. Rather it is an attentive way of living. Thus the Hasidic master, Mordechai Yosef Lainer of Ishitza (d.1854) distinguished between two radically different religious personalities. The first he associated with the character of Joseph, who withstood Mrs Potiphar's advances in Egypt, and his son, Ephraim, leader of ancient Israel's Ten Northern Tribes. In line with Rashi's interpretation of the Rebecca story, this type seeks God through the dictates of the *Beyt Midrash*, zealously follows the letter of Jewish law and may castigate those who don't.

Counter-posed is the integrated, redemptive personality of “Judah,” leader of the Southern Tribes, forebear of King David and the Messiah. In words that amplify the Ramban's approach, the Isbitzer wrote:

(((Set as extract))) The root of life for Judah is to look to the Blessed God regarding the course of every action. Even though he sees where the judgment (applicable precedent in Jewish Law) leans, still he looks to the Blessed God to see the depth of the truth of the matter. ...not to act in a way that is simply habitual. Even though yesterday he acted in such a way, yet today he doesn't want to rely on his former response, only that the Blessed God should illuminate God's will into him anew *Mei HaShiloach*, The Living Waters, *Parshat VaYeshev* **(((End extract)))**

Going beyond the notion that we each receive Torah differently, the Isbitzer asserts that we each might receive our own Torah differently from one day to the next. External circumstances change, the nature of our relationships change and we change. What seemed obvious yesterday might not be today. Therefore “Judah” will not merely rely on halachic precedent, but will prayerfully place each deliberation before God to seek deeper insight and divine confirmation before acting.

IV The Discernment Process

How might we, who lack the immediate divine awareness of a “Judah,” place our deliberation before God? What may be construed as legitimate markers of sacred illumination? As mentioned above chapter twenty of *Mesilat Yesharim* describes a three-phased process, which I offer here with some elucidation from the other classic and contemporary Jewish spiritual sources:

A. *Timimut HaMahshavah* Prayerful Purity of Intention

“...that one's heart might be upright”

Since the boundary between valid self interest and harmful self-centeredness is thin and porous, discerning God's will must begin with the dedication to achieve *Timimut Lev*, a simple purity of heart untainted by self serving motives. One's sole desire must be *la-asot nahat ruach l'phanav yitbarach*, to comport oneself in a manner pleasing to the Blessed One as a devoted child would seek to please an honored, beloved parent.

The following *kavanot*, meditations, can help prayerfully open our intention to actualize *Timimut Lev*. They can be recited aloud, repeated mantra-like to oneself or chanted slowly and quietly in English or Hebrew:

- Show me Your way, O God, teach me Your path, guide me in Your truth

Drachechah Adonai hodee-aynee, orchotecha lamdaynee; hadreechaynee ba-ameetechah Psalms 25:4- 5

- Let Thy will be my will, that my will be Thy will

aseh ritzono ritzoncha ...sheya-aseh ritzoncha kirtzono
Pirke Avot, The Ethics of the Fathers 2:4

- I act from no intention other than to please the Creator of Blessed Name

La-asot nahat ruach laBoray baruch Sh'mo

Tzavaat HaRibash, The Testament of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, ch 46

B. Iyun Analysis

“.... analyze one's actions that they be brought into conformity with the purpose (of pleasing God)”

If the goal of discernment is to choose that which is ”pleasing to God,” the prophet Micah offered three behavioral criteria to help us judge what this might mean:

It has been told to you O' Man what is good and what YHVH requires of you. To **act justly** (*Asot Mishpat*), to **love kindly** (*Ahavat Hesed*) and to **walk modestly** (*Hatznaya Lechet*) with your God. (Micah 6:8)

The following twentieth century commentary provides insight into Micah's message:

In regard to justice it is sufficient to carry out its behests; but in regard to mercy the deed alone is insufficient, even when done from a clear sense of duty. Love is an essential accompaniment of every kind deed of mercy (Hermann Cohen d 1918)...to walk humbly...In fellowship and communion with Gd: not ostentatiously but with inward devotion and noiseless acts of love (Max Margolis, d. 1932) ... *Tziniyut* denotes modesty, decency, chastity, personal holiness, purity. J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, p. 684-5 n

How can we discern if an option might be pleasing to God? By considering its effects on our behavior. First, will it lead us to be more just, to act with greater fairness, integrity, honesty and equity? Will it promote faithfulness to our legal, financial and moral obligations, particularly if we feel called to withdraw from a relationship or previous commitment? Second, will it impel us to greater acts compassion and charity, performed not begrudgingly, but with grace and care? Third, will it lead to greater humility and modesty, to less ostentation, vulgarity and acquisitiveness, to live more simply and purely? Such are the behavioral markers that can help us discern whether our “actions are pleasing to the Creator,” *oseh nahat ruach la Boray baruch Shemo*.

As we know, however, balancing justice, compassion and humility is not always simple. In the real world these virtues can be at odds with one another, making it difficult to know which course of action to choose. The extent of this difficulty is highlighted by a

rabbinic tale concerning a criminal who sought refuge from a Roman legion. Having traced their prey to a nearby town, the Romans demanded he be handed over or else they would burn the town and its inhabitants. The dictates of Jewish law allowed the resident rabbi, Yehoshua ben Levi, to surrender the criminal and save innocent lives. Having done so, however, his revelatory visitations by Elijah the Prophet temporarily ceased. When Elijah finally reappeared the rabbi was perplexed.

“Had I been asked to hand over random, innocent individuals I would have refused and suffered martyrdom. Here the law was clear.”

“True,” replied Elijah, “you acted according to *mishpat*, the letter of justice. But in what way was *hesed*, pious kindness served? Maybe you should have found another way.” adapted from *Bereshit Rabba* 94:9

At moments when principles conflict, the accumulated wisdom of Torah can prove invaluable to the discernment process, attuning our minds and souls to hear God's voice amid the static of current circumstance. Therefore the Baal Shem Tov stated: Something may come your way and you may not know whether to pursue it or not. If you've studied Torah that day, you will be able to discern your course of action from the material that you learned. (*Tzavaat HaRibash, The Testament of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, ch 31*)

C *Bitachon* Trust In God

“...cast one's lading with God...”

If Justice, Kindness and Humility are the behavioral markers of discernment, what might the affective markers be? What are the “soul states” that might confirm if our actions are pleasing to God? In chapter twenty Luzzatto quotes Psalm 86 when referring to one who has successfully navigated the aspects of *Mishkal HaHasidut*:

Fortunate is the person whose strength is in You...**good** will not be withheld from those who walk with integrity (Psalms 86:6&12).

While not explicitly defining there the “good” to which he's referring, Luzzatto did give an indication of what he meant in his Introduction to *Mesilat Yesharim*. Based on Deuteronomy 10:12&13 he lists those traits which God “commands you today for your **good**.” These include: Awe, Walking in God's Ways, Love and Wholeheartedness.

- **Awe** The Hebrew word *Yirah*, connotes reverence, wonder and fear. Rather than the dread of punishment it is a sense of finitude in the presence of majesty, of personal smallness and surprise, a recognition that one could not have arrived at a given conclusion or insight unaided. Almost every guide and seeker have experienced in a session that moment when reflection and prayer lead to an insight or a connection that takes our breath away, when bursting with gratitude we say, “this didn't come from us alone; let's give thanks to God!” Other times one might even burst into tears when realizing that one is being called to give up a behavior, a job, a position of status or even a relationship that has provided security, comfort and identity in the past. As Schneur Zalman of Liady, the founder of Chabad Hasidism noted, these tears of trembling and renunciation are, however, the prelude to even greater joy that comes with drawing closer to God.⁸
- **Love** *Ahavah* impels us to instinctively want to please God the way a child wishes to please an honored parent. Conversely, one naturally recoils from the thought of disappointing God through unworthy action. Feelings of enthusiasm and deep, abundant

joy, even if preceded by tears of renunciation, are reflections of choosing that which is “pleasing to God.”

- **Walking in God's Ways** *Halichah B'drachav* includes all of the behavioral elements entailed in Micah's dictum. But even more than outwardly effecting what we do, they affect the state of our souls. Not only do we act more justly, we feel instinctively alert to matters of integrity and equity. Injustice, dishonesty and indifference seem inherently repugnant. Not only do we perform charitable acts gracefully, we feel expansively able to give and receive love. Feeling humble and modest as we consciously cleave to God (*devekut*), our tolerance for vulgarity, excess and for ostentation, even in matters of religious observance, proportionately shrinks.
- **Wholeheartedness** *Shelemut HaLev* allows one to give oneself over completely to the discerned course of action. It is marked by simultaneous feelings of certainty and surrender, of freedom from resistance or hesitation, of conscious awareness, not mere habituation. With feet firmly planted on the right course, one will successfully navigate this next stage of life's journey with God's help, despite any apparent difficulty. Luzzatto alternatively refers to *Bitachon* as *Mashlich Yehavo al Adonai*, Casting One's Lading with God. Having borne the cargo of our external reality, feelings, deliberations, attentiveness and clarification before God, we now feel divinely assisted in bearing what might be a heavy but precious burden. With a new sense of lightness we feel accompanied and supported as we embark on our path.

Bitachon, trust in God's guidance, is therefore marked by feelings of wonder, awe, reverence, surprise, humility in the face of majesty, joy, enthusiasm, integrity, love,

modesty, sureness, support and *devekut*, cleaving to God. Conversely, feelings of self inflation, sadness, anger, hostility, boredom, antipathy, hesitance, uncertainty and disconnection might well be signs of what the Psalmist referred to as *To-ay Levav*, Errant Heart, “they who do not know my ways.”(Psalm 95) In Deuteronomy 30:19 God places before us life and blessing, death and curse. God's call is that we “choose life,” that which is life-giving, through which we grow in integrity, love and humility, and that which enlivens rather than deadens our souls.

D Hazarah

The Return Loop

Though not formally included as an aspect of *Mishkal HaHasidut*, Luzzatto states in chapter twenty, “an act should not be judged by the first impression that it makes on the mind.” Discernment involves a repeating cycle of prayer and intentionality, attention to external consequences and inner affect, “trying on” provisional choices and testing the results. As such discernment emerges gradually as distinguished from snap decisions and the desire for instant resolution.

Among the reasons for a gradual discernment process is our penchant for self-deception. A decision might initially evoke within us the joyous, enthusiastic feelings of *Bitachon*. The Isbitzer warned that these moments born of *Gadlut*, spiritual expansiveness and exuberance, warrant *Berur*. (*Mei HaShiloach, Living Waters, Parshat VaYigash*) Is the joy I'm feeling emanating from my desire to please God or to please myself? Affectively it is crucial to note whether the buoyancy we experience is also accompanied by the other feelings of *Bitachon*: wonder, reverence, integrity and humility in the face of Majesty. If not then chances are what we are feeling is closer to self-inflation than to *Bitachon*. On a practical level the Baal Shem Tov counseled: when discerning a course of action, mentally

strip it of every shred of profit, pleasure or self- satisfaction (*hana-ah*). If that path still seems to be right, then pursue it. (*Toldot Yaakov Yosef, VaYikra*)

Another reason for gradual discernment is the way our quirks of ego can contaminate even the most purely motivated acts. Overflowing with devotion you might decide to expand your observance of kashrut as a means of coming closer to God. If over the next months you find that perfectionism is robbing the observance of all joy, leaving anger and disconnection in its wake, then you need further *Berur*. What is driving me to be more punctilious than the Halachah requires? Am I serving God or just providing a religious cover for my own compulsions? The Baal Shem Tov imaged the Yetzer HaRa as a cat burglar. If you think you've overwhelmed it with zeal or scared it away by stringencies you always run the risk of it sneaking back where and when you least expect it. Better, he said, to capture it and keep it under observation over time to more fully recognize its potential impact.⁹

Conversely there are situations that require difficult, even wrenching first steps but whose ultimate outcome will be for good. You might continually avoid hurtful issues in the workplace or at home, thinking it's more loving or humble to be patient and keep the peace. The thought of confrontation feels as painful as death. However, as time goes by a pattern may reveal itself. Due to pent up frustrations and new irritants, situations that could have been resolved become untenable. Rather than actually keeping the peace, you express your discontents indirectly through passive-aggressive behavior, sarcasm, or even withdrawing from what were otherwise positive relationships. By recognizing these self subverting tendencies over time, you might discern that it is actually more "life giving" to take the hard step and confront issues head-on, to recognize, as Shneur Zalman of Liady taught

above, that needed resolution can lead to more lasting, “God pleasing” joy even when its path leads initially through tears of consternation.

V. *Barah*: Pure, Lucent, Clear

Among the main corollaries of Jewish covenantal theology is the notion that we humans are God’s partners in the work of creation. This principle can well be applied to the work of discernment. The sections above described the human elements of the *Berur* equation: purifying our intentions, scrutinizing our deeds, noticing changes in our affect, monitoring the consequences of our choices over time, all done in prayerful openness to God. However, as the Isbitzer taught, “...the Blessed God warns Israel to always be in a state of *Kedushah* (Sanctity) and thus always ready, expecting at all times the salvation of the Blessed God Who will illumine their eyes...” (*Mei HaShiloach*, Living Waters, *Parshat Kedoshim*) Having done our work we prayerfully offer our efforts, our intentions, even our confusion to God and, like our Mother Rebecca, hopefully wait for God’s guidance to break through. Sometimes soberly, sometimes with broken hearts we echo the sentiments of Eliezer Azikri’s love poem to God, *Yedid Nefesh*, “ God, these are the desires of my heart; You are the desire of my heart; be merciful and don’t hide.”¹⁰ Then we await God’s guidance, knowing that the moment can’t be manufactured, yet trusting in scripture’s promise, “those who hopefully wait for God find their energy transformed.” (Isaiah 40:31) Perhaps the most important rabbinic statement on discernment is found in the second chapter of *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers:

Rabbi (Judah the Prince) said: What is the straight path (*derech ha-yashar*) that one should discern (*she-yabor bo*): that which is beautiful (*tiferet*) to the one who enacts it and is recognized as beautiful (lit. brings one beauty) from (other) human beings (*ha-adam*).

While offering a fairly deliberative interpretation to this passage, Judah Loew of Prague actually intimated how each word of this aphorism can help us recognize when a flash of insight might be true divine illumination. (*Derech Chaim*, The Way of Life, Ch 2) He points out that in response to most life situations we can undertake several alternative paths with full integrity. More problematically the power of rationalization is so strong that at times we can justify almost anything to ourselves. Therefore true guidance is more than *hagun*, honest; it is *yashar*, straight, not *m'ukam*, crooked or bent. Like Okham's Razor it cuts through the Gordian knot of both our well-intentioned yet circuitous designs and our more self-serving, even devious schemes. In addition this "straight path" is not something we have formulated or designed; it is something we discern, *she-yabor bo*. Like the desert well from which Hagar quenched her son Ishmael's thirst (Genesis 21) its wisdom was always there but obscured by external circumstance and/or our own inner conflicts. Suddenly a flash of illumination smelts away the dross and the insight revealed is *barah*: pure, lucent and clear.

Beyond the assent of our speculative and moral reason, the "straight path" evokes a deep, aesthetic sense of appreciation within ourselves and others. Devoid of self-serving motives and the desire for acclaim, it is acknowledged as life enhancing and enlivening, even when requiring difficult sacrifices. When seen through the lens of our full humanity (*ha-adam*) instead of the narrow scope of our creaturely concern for self-preservation (*ha-briyot*), this path is recognized as *tiferet*, beautiful, that which later Kabbalists understood to be the point of symmetry and perfect connection among all divine traits, the figurative "heart-space" of God. If, as Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, we should approach our lives as works of art, then walking the "straight path" will ennoble our own lives and may offer a model for others to appreciate and emulate.

An example of this dynamic is found in the deliberations of a woman charged with the ongoing care of her aged mother.

For fifteen years a daughter had managed her Alzheimer's stricken mother's affairs, ensuring that the mother could continue to live in her own home with the finest around the clock care. Given her mother's relative physical health and the longevity of her illness, the daughter could foresee that the combined family resources would not allow the status quo to continue indefinitely. She consulted financial advisors and researched fine private and institutional living options, many of which she could have chosen with full integrity. She also prayed a great deal. In the midst of her exploration and planning the daughter went on retreat. During group spiritual direction, a voice broke into her consciousness, cutting through the thicket of her dilemma: Care for your mother as she would have cared for you. Reduced to tears she immediately discerned that in its commanding beauty and simplicity this was the *derech ha-yashar*, the "straight path." of divine guidance. While this flash of illumination neither rendered her previous investigations vain nor obviated the need for careful planning it gave her a touchstone to guide her efforts. Above any financial or logistical concerns every decision about her mother's future would have to pass a single litmus test: would it provide her mother with the kind of attentive, loving care that her mother would have provided if she, the daughter, had been incapacitated and defenseless.

V. When Observing the Mitzvah Isn't the Most Godly Choice

Among the marks of *Bitachon* that Luzzatto derived from Deuteronomy 10:13 is the commitment to observe all of God's commandments. However he and other Jewish spiritual

teachers pointed to those occasions when deviating from halachic convention might be more pleasing to God. Already embodied in the system of Halachah is the notion of *Pikuach Nefesh*, that one may disregard any mitzvah to save a life, except acts of public idolatry, incest and adultery or murder. Some Hasidic masters however pointed to Yael, wife of Hever, who seduced then killed Sisera, a Canaanite general who had attacked Israel during the period of the Judges, to indicate that one might even transgress those bounds if it means saving the Jewish people.¹¹

Luzatto also indicated that what often passes for halachic observance are really additional strictures that go beyond what halachah requires. In chapter twenty he counsels that if such punctiliousness leads to strife and hard feelings it is better to forgo exaggerated piety. His wisdom is exemplified by the story of a highly observant Jew who had been recently widowed. Invited by his brother to come for a Shabbat the widower arrived with his suitcase and a bag containing a chicken from the only kosher butcher in town he trusted. His brother refused to serve that chicken because he only trusted a different butcher. At a time that called for comfort and togetherness the two brothers ate dinner at the same home that *Erev Shabbat*, one at the table with his wife, the other from a bag on the porch by himself.

While these responses to dire emergencies or additional stringencies might seem obvious to many, there are other times when the path to discernment might point towards potentially more dangerous territory. This is especially true in our time when choice and individual autonomy reign supreme, when only a relative few take the parameters of halachah seriously. When a disregard for the validity of external norms is combined with our human

propensity for rationalization, one can begin to slide down a slippery slope that can justify almost anything by labeling it “God's will.”

One such set of circumstances is what the Baal Shem Tov calls “the semblance of transgression.” While the act being considered might not in itself be a sin, the trappings of the act can be seductive and lead to misinterpretation. Such was the case of an extremely devout father who had a ne'er-do-well son. Despite the father's best efforts the son only showed passion for one thing, playing poker. At his wits end the father finally asked his son to teach him how to play. Surprised the son agreed and soon the father began accompanying him to his games. When asked by friends how a devout Jew could enter such profane environs, the father replied, “I'd go to Hell itself to save my son.” Through their gambling excursions the father was able to build a new rapport with his son, which in turn provided the son with a bridge back to a more responsible, productive life. Although gambling is not totally forbidden by Jewish law, given the risk of financial loss, gambling addiction and possible association with unsavory characters, the father's path certainly was wrought with danger. Only ongoing discernment combined with strength of purpose and character allowed him, with God's help, to bring his son towards him rather than the other way around.

Beyond the “semblance of transgression” there might be times when answering a higher spiritual or moral call might summon us outside the bounds of convention or *halachah*. Such instances of apparent antinomianism recur in the bible, including Judah's fulfillment of the levirate marriage with his daughter-in-law, Tamar (Genesis 38) and Boaz's marriage to the Moabite woman, Ruth (Ruth 4). Both of these seem to violate scriptural law (Leviticus 18:15 & Deuteronomy 23:4) and yet these two unions set the stage for the birth of King David, forebear of the Messiah. How might we distinguish

between: a sacred response that recognizes both the general validity of religious law and its inability to subsume all imperatives of the divine; and an urge to fulfill our inner desires that can devolve into uninhibited libertinism? Although not presented in a systematic manner, the Isbitzer did prescribe *berurim*, acetic-like, discernment practices, to aid us when we face what have been called “insuperable urges.”

- Particularly when faced with untoward sexual involvement distance yourself from the situation by ten degrees of separation. The Isbitzer implies that this is what the Simeonite prince, Zimri, did before entering into what seemed to be illicit sexual relations with the Midianite princess, Cozbi, whom Lurianic sources claim was his hidden soul-mate. *Mei HaShiloach, Living Waters, Parshat Pinchas*
- When discerning the purity of a given option, consider its potential benefits, losses and impact on the honor of oneself, the community and God. This mirrors the statement of Rabbi Judah the Prince in Pirke Avot, chapter 2, that discernment is found at the intersection of that which is beautiful to oneself, others and, by extension, God. *Mei HaShiloach, Living Waters, Parshat Kedoshim*
- During moments of exaltation if not actual self inflation the following four steps might be undertaken to assess the purity of one’s motives
 1. Similar to Buddhist prescription, remember that life and its desires are ephemeral. Question whether it’s worthwhile to engage in what might well be personally defiling and provide but fleeting enjoyment
 2. Study Torah. Its teachings might offer salvation from untoward craving or insight into legitimate ways to fulfill one’s desires.
 3. As a hedge against arrogance and the illusion of human self- sufficiency, recite the Shema. This is a reminder that all is interconnected and in the hands of the One true

God. The Isbitzer cites a statement in the Talmud indicating that at the end of time God will invite the righteous into a circle dance. Some contemporary Jewish spiritual directors have suggested that when faced with an insuperable urge one should envision that urge surrounded either by the words of the Shema or by a circle of current and former righteous people whose wisdom and examples would be invited to help illumine this difficult situation¹²

4. If all these fail then envision the actual day of your death, an occasion where lust, and desire have no place. Looking back over your life consider if you'd like to be remembered as having committed the act you're considering *Mei HaShiloach, Parshat Vayigash*

Given the Isbitzer's deterministic theology he contended that if one's desire remained after all of these practices then "this must be from God and will endure."¹³ While few of us would be willing to make such a categorical assertion, we can be fairly sure that after such intensive discernment practice and its concurrent elapse of time, this issue which continues to call us "outside the lines" must run deep and demands further exploration. Even if the pursuit of "doing justly, loving kindly and walking humbly" might, heaven forbid, lead us to act wrongly beyond the accepted norms, we can still find hope in a God for Whom "nothing is too wondrous" (Genesis 18:14), Who can ultimately write straight with the crooked lines of our lives.

VI God is Guiding Me

How do we know if it's God? The truth is that we can't. Discernment is much like sailing a boat. Initially the wind fills your sails only to die down somewhere midcourse.

You then need to tack, adjust your bearings to regain the wind and then repeat the process through calm and storm until your “zig-zag” route successfully leads you to harbor.

Consider Abraham`s situation in the *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac. Initially he is sure that God`s word, “take him up to the sacrifice” (Genesis 22:2) meant that Isaac was to be sacrificed. During the journey to Mt Moriah Abraham first responds to Isaac`s enquiry concerning the absence of a sacrificial lamb and later hears an angelic voice of restraint as he lifts the knife over his son. Seeing a ram caught in the thicket, Abraham finally discerned that it was not God`s will that he sacrifice his son on the mountain, but that he and his son worship God upon the mountain by together sacrificing the ram.

Like the journey of the *Akedah*, the process of *Berur* is filled with uncertainty. It also reinforces a truism that my co-editor, Barbara Breitman, wisely and repeatedly affirms: God`s time and ours aren`t the same. Yet despite the perils and sacrifice, discernment over time can be a transformative, sanctifying experience, as the following vignette shows.

After several years of marriage, Sherry`s husband informed her that their relationship was through. Given that they had two small children, she implored him to join her in counseling. However months of futile therapy sessions and sleeping in separate rooms led Sherry to realize that her husband's decision was irrevocable. “Should I stay or should I go? That is the question.”

Each morning Sherry quietly recited Psalm 25, “Show me Your way...” as a prelude to meditation. As a trained Jewish educator, traditional Jewish sources began to break into Sherry`s consciousness. First she heard, “*Shev v'al ta-aseh*” a Jewish legal dictum to “sit still and not act.” Although it would have been less painful for her to leave, Sherry remained at home. While her husband was consumed by work and enrollment in a

professional training, Sherry adjusted her schedule, spent more time with their children and strengthened her relationship with their younger child.

After many weeks the message received during her meditation shifted. “*Ki krova yeshuati lavo...* – for My redemption is soon to come.” (Isaiah 56:1) “When?” Sherry would cry. However she gradually noticed fresh opportunities unfolding as she formed new friendships that held promise for her future.

Nearly a year and a half had elapsed since her husband's fateful announcement when Sherry heard different guidance as she meditated: “*Koom, lech, alay*, Arise, go forward and ascend.” Given that her husband was about to finish his training, Sherry realized that it was time to begin her life's next chapter. Sadly it would include divorce and the dissolution of that home. However, her transformed priorities and deepened relationships gave her a hopeful if not entirely clear vision of what might lie ahead. (((**End extract**)))

Can discernment become innate? While no one can live in exact alignment with God's will, the ongoing practice of discernment can help us develop ever-greater attentiveness and responsiveness to the divine. Through repetition we can internalize the steps of *Berur* until purifying our intentions, monitoring our affect, scrutinizing our acts and their consequences over time and “casting our lading with God” become a way of life. More cognizant of the nuances of God's voice emanating from our own “Interior Torah,” we, as the Isbitzer claimed of our Father Jacob, might also say: ...I am ever aware that the Blessed Holy One is guiding me.

Notes

1. Genesis Rabba 63
2. Psalms 34:5
3. Among the terms used for this level of divine revelation are: *Gilui Shechinah* (Revelation through the Divine Presence), *Gilui Eliyahu* (Revelation from Elijah), *Ruach HaKodesh* (Revelation through the Holy Spirit) and *Bat Kol* (A Heavenly Voice)
4. The word *Elohecha*, “your God” in the first of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2) is formulated in the second person singular.
5. Other terms used to connote discernment are: *Habdalah*, “separating” the sacred from the profane and mundane, and; *Habchanah*, “testing,” which implies making careful distinctions between different aspects of a situation and distinguishing between the authentic and the false
6. Francis Brown, S R Driver and C A Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1968) p.140-1
7. This insight is most often cited in Aramaic (*Leyt atar panui minei*) and attributed to its kabbalistic source, Tikunei Zohar 122b. However its Hebrew precursor (*Ayn makom she-ayn bo Shechinah*) is found in connection with God’s appearance to Moses in a lowly, burning thorn bush (Exodus Rabba 2:5) and seems axiomatic to normative rabbinic theology,

8. Shneur Zalman of Liady, *Tanya*, Ch 26 in Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism* (New York: Yeshivah University Press, 1999) p. 392-3
9. From *Lekutim Yekarim* in Isaiah and Joshua Devorks ed, *Tractate Avot with the Commentaries of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov* (Heb) (Jerusalem: Institute for Mishnaic Research, 1988) p 91
10. There are two different *girsat*-ot, versions, of the concluding phrase to the *Yedid Nefesh's* third stanza. The one most commonly found in Ashkenazi prayer books, "*Eleh chamdah libi*," means "These are the desires of my heart." That found in Sephardi siddurim and considered by many to be Azikri's original is "*Eli machmad libi ...My God is the desire of my heart.*"
11. Rabbi Zadok ha-Kohen of Lublin in Lamm, op cit. p. 593
12. This observation was offered by a group of Jewish spiritual directors who had attended a class I taught on this material during a Jewish Spiritual Direction Advance Practice Seminar held at Elat Chayyim, The Jewish Retreat Center, in Accord, NY in July, 2005
13. On the deterministic theology of Mordechai Yosef Lainer of Ishitza see Shaul Magid, *Hasidism on the Margin* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003) Ch 4

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