

Reciprocal Grace:

The Vocabulary of Jewish Spiritual Direction

Howard Avruhm Addison

Introduction

Language plays a vital role in the Jewish understanding of reality. According to Genesis I God created the world through speech. Medieval Jewish philosophers referred to the human species as *Midaber*, creatures who speak. Jewish mystics view the name of each object and being as constituting its reality and essence.¹ Therefore, if we are to look for authentically Jewish models of spiritual direction, a good place to start is with the Hebrew words traditionally associated with this enterprise.

As found in all faith traditions, spiritual counsel dates back to the earliest stages of Judaism. Scripture reports instances affirming spiritual guidance as essential to the work of Prophet, *Navi*, and Priest, *Kohayn*.² Classical rabbinic sources allude to guides, known as a *Morei Derech* and the prime importance placed on acquiring a spiritual friend, called a *Chaver*.³

Two additional terms for spiritual guides have appeared during the last 250 years. The title *Mashgiach* or spiritual supervisor, arose within the context of the Lithuanian Yeshivah, based on the model established in the nineteenth century by Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin. Charged with the students' religious development, the *Mashgiach* often was the one who introduced the teachings of *Mussar*, the Moralism movement founded by Rabbi Israel Lipkin Salanter, into the Yeshivah. *Mashpia* is the name given to the spiritual prompter within Hasidic communities, who teaches and provides ongoing counsel both in support of the Rebbe and when the Rebbe is absent.

Traditionally, the *Mashgiach* and *Mashpia* have offered more authoritative, ritually prescriptive forms of counsel than we usually associate with modern Spiritual Direction. However, an examination of the Hebrew words that form the roots of their respective titles can give us insight into classical Jewish theology and its attendant conception of spiritual guidance.

The *Mashgiach*

As mentioned above, the word *mashgiach* is commonly translated as, "supervisor." However, if we look at the term and its associated enterprise, *hashgachah*, we find that both are derived from the verb that means, "to pay attention." Thus a true *Mashgiach* is not one who merely uncovers flaws and prescribes correctives, but one who is attentive and mindful. How so? We can cite two instances where the word *mashgiach* first appears in the Babylonian Talmud:

Are the utensils of one ignorant of the Law (*am ha-aretz*) pure or impure? He (Rabbi Joshua) replied, "Impure...but if you tell him so, will he pay attention (*MASHGIACH*) to you? He'll reply, 'mine are pure-- yours are impure.'" BT Hagigah 22b

Rabbi Nathan said, " It (the verse "he has despised God's word") applies to those who pay no attention (*MASHGIACH*) to the Mishna..."BT Sanhedrin 99a

The first quotation discusses how to guide those unacquainted with the intricacies of Jewish law. Rather than putting them on the defensive, those who offer guidance need to be attentive and speak sensitively, lest their counsel provoke only resentment. The second source speaks of the need for guides to be mindful of current needs and the resulting evolution of tradition. Rabbi Nathan declared that anyone then who would derive Jewish practice solely from Scripture without paying attention to Rabbi Judah the Prince's guide to Jewish law and observance, the Mishna (codified circa 200 C E), was not to be considered as faithful, but as one who disdains God's ongoing revelation.

Medieval Jewish philosophy began to speak of God as the ultimate *Mashgiach*. Debates raged over whether God's *hashgachah*, Divine Providence, provides only general direction to the universe as a whole or supervises every aspect of each human life. The following two passages however, imply that God might not be the immediate cause of everything that befalls us. Instead the Source of Life is portrayed as ever mindful of us, the One whose omnipresence never leaves us totally abandoned or bereft:

A person must examine those opinions that strengthen the heart's complete trust in God. The first concept is to know clearly that God shows mercy to humanity beyond that shown by any other comforter. God pays attention (*MASHGIACH*) to humanity in both hidden and revealed ways.

Orchot Tzadikim, Gate 9

How does one acquire Reverence? By contemplating two truths: The first is that the blessed *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) is found everywhere in the world and pays attention (*MASHGIACH*) to all things small and great. Nothing is hidden from God's eyes. Rabbi Moshe Chayim Luzzato, *The Path Of The Upright (Mesilat Yesharim)*, 25: Italy, 18th-century

These sources indicate that as the divine *Mashgiach*, God's loving, attentive presence is everywhere. Therefore, to be a human *Mashgiach*, the guide must also be attentive and present. Through prayer or chant or meditation or through lighting a candle a "sacred container," a contemplative space free of physical and emotional distractions must be created. Then through attentive, "holy" listening might the guide help the seeker recognize the Loving Presence as it unfolds in the great and small details, in the revealed and hidden patterns of the seeker's life.

The Mashpia

The word *mashpia* is derived from the word *shepha*, which means, "to overflow" or "to pour abundantly." Literally a *mashpia* is a channel or a conduit, a tube or pipe through which liquid flows. In

kabbalistic terminology, *shepha* refers to the divine radiant energy of the unknowable, limitless Divine (*Ayn Sof*) that overflows and enlivens the configuration of God's personality, the Tree of Life (*Etz Chayyim*) and then brings vitality and blessing as it pours down upon our world.

Judah Loew of Prague (d.1609), philosopher, talmudist and legendary creator of the humanoid *Golem*, conceived of God as the ultimate *Mashpia*, Who conveys goodness to the world. It then becomes the godly task of the righteous to place themselves consciously within the stream of blessing and channel divine goodness and guidance to others according to their needs. Both the human *mashpia* and the one receiving the guidance will find themselves transformed by the experience.

. . .**It is the way** of the Blessed One to convey (*LIHASHPIA*) wholeness.... And permission is given to those who receive it to do as they please. What do the righteous do? They channel (*MASHPIA*) that goodness. *The Eternity of Israel (Netzach Yisrael)*, 25

Concerning the receiving of Torah... it was given to Moses because he was prepared for it. Therefore the Torah was given exclusively to Moses who, because of his generous spirit, was a channel (*MASHPIA*) to others. Thereby Moses conveyed (*LIHASHPIA*) Torah's guidance to Israel exactly as its psyche needed. *The Splendor of Israel (Tiferet Yisrael)*, 49

... The essence of Torah guidance is derived when one acts as its channel (*MASHPIA*) to others...those who receive the greatest wholeness do so through acting as a channel (*SheMASHPIA*) for others and thereby actualize their Torah. This act of serving as another's Torah's channel completely actualizes them and brings them Supernal wholeness... When one channels Torah to another it represents something new and is thus considered as if the channel (*MASHPIA*) had personally fashioned it and thereby completely attained the level of Universal Intellect by conveying to and actualizing another. In this way a person actualizes complete wholeness unlike anything that could be attained by studying on one's own. *Eternal Pathways (Netivot Olam)*, 7&8

Rabbi Loew teaches us that to be a true guide like Moses, one needs preparation, a generous spirit and the sensitivity to facilitate individual seekers to grow in the Spirit in ways best suited to them. The last selection also highlights the transformations that can occur in the guide through the direction process. Rabbi Loew's younger contemporary, the moralist and mystic, Isaiah Horowitz (d.1630), cited an additional way that the seeker might serve as a "gift" to the guide. He portrayed divine creativity and grace as being inherently reciprocal. From the very outset of time, taught Rabbi Horowitz, divine creativity was marked by the interplay of opposites that transformed each other.

... **With six movements.** And behold the existence of Time only occurs through the First Day, which was born of the first movement. It was born with 24 hours divided into two periods, with each of the 12 hours being included in the other 12. For the channel (*MASHPIA*) becomes the receptor (*MiKABEL*) and the receptor becomes the channel, the front becomes the back and the back the front, the left becomes the right and the right the left. Accordingly, because the movements (that created Time) only attained wholeness through the 24 hours, the 12 hours of day and the 12 hours of night are considered as equals (completing each other). *The Two Tablets of the Covenant (Shnay Luchot HaBrit), Hullin, Perek Torah Or, 47*

As the guidance encounter increasingly reveals the hidden Creator of all, a mysterious dynamic unfolds. Many a spiritual director has sensed this paradoxical reality -- the guide also derives guidance, the seeker also guides and each is indispensable in forming a grace-filled, creative whole.

In It for God

What lessons might contemporary Spiritual Direction draw from the Hebrew terms *Mashgiach* and *Mashpia*? The first is Judaism's challenge to godly action, here embodied in the call to sacred attention. As God is attentive to each detail that unfolds in this world so we are summoned to be attentive to the external events and inner movements that unfold in our seekers' lives and in our lives as

their guides. While we cannot fix their brokenness, we can help them be mindful of God's caring, continuing presence as they experience moments of consolation, desolation and the interstices that lie between. By mirroring God's loving attention through our attention to their unique sensibilities and God's unfolding revelation as refracted through our own traditions, we can create that "sacred container" through which the divine can be manifest in the great and small, in the revealed and hidden aspects of life.

A second and perhaps more uniquely Jewish insight is the reciprocal nature of grace that can be revealed through the spiritual guidance process. By channeling the flow of grace and guidance to another, we recognize that guide and seeker will both convey and receive blessing and both will be transformed by the experience.

However, as this further quote from Isaiah Horowitz indicates, the third partner in the relationship, God, is also transformed through the direction encounter:

... because the human is created in the image of God, human actions channel (*MASHPIA*) additional divine radiant energy (*SHEPHA*) to the Supernal (worlds) that are configured according to that same likeness. A Conceptual Key (*Maphtaychot LaInyanim*)

Playing upon the kabbalistic notion that what transpires respectively in the divine and earthly spheres effect each other, Rabbi Horowitz conceived of grace as a flow emanating from the divine, descending to earth and then, through human agency, being rerouted back to its source to help strengthen the divine itself. Because human reality reflects the image of the divine, each represents but half of the equation needed to complete the circuit of blessing and life. Unlike the Christian notion that grace is an unearned gift God bestows upon us, the Jewish concept is that human action is indispensable not only to the flow of grace, but also to the actualization of God Godself!⁴

This audacious teaching has some radical implications for the work of spiritual direction. Despite its various formulations and guises, the main question of spiritual direction has been, “where was God in this for you?” Based on the conception that grace flows but one way, this question summons the seeker to look for the providential that might underlie the seemingly coincidental in his or her life. If, however, grace is reciprocal, then the following question must also be posed: “Where were you in this for God?” This complementary query can add a whole new dimension to the practice of spiritual direction and the way our seekers see themselves. The following is a case in point.

Sy is an accountant who lives in the Southeastern United States. After enduring years of dysfunctional marriage to a gambling addict, Sy moved from his family home and began divorce proceedings. Having shielded his teenage children from knowing of their mother’s addiction, Sy bore the brunt of his son and daughter’s anger over the breakup. At a spiritual direction session, Sy spoke of his hurt and his attempts to rebuild his life. He described a recent graduation party he had attended as the date of the graduate’s mother, herself a divorcee. Even though he played no role in the demise of his date’s marriage, he found his attempts at greeting the graduate’s father, a long-time acquaintance, cavalierly rebuffed.

Faced with the realities of divorce and the web of small town life, Sy lamented his rather “knotty situation.” When asked about his feelings at being rebuffed, Sy was finally able to access the profound sense of hurt and loss he’d been experiencing. He sensed God’s presence with him as he walked in this “Valley of the Shadow, “ as his old life was dying and his new life was yet to be born. However, when asked where he might have been for God during this transition time, his mood seemed to lift. He realized that his overture to the graduate’s father, might have been more than a pleasantry, it might have been a godly, liberating act. “ Who knows? Maybe my greeting helped begin God’s process of loosening the knots that are so painfully binding us to each other.”⁵

God's Partners

Classical Judaism has long understood the reciprocal nature of our relationship with God. The term *Brit*, Covenant, used to describe God's relationship with Abraham and his descendants and the Revelation to Israel on Mt Sinai, implies a mutual set of responsibilities and benefits that flow both to humanity and to God as a result of our relationship. The talmudic sages called upon us to act in *Imitatio Dei* ("..as God is merciful, so shall you be merciful") and to remember that we are God's partners in the work of creation.⁶

When it comes to the practice of spiritual direction, Jewish tradition summons us to these same tasks. To be a *Mashgiach* means that just as God is attentive and present, so must we be attentive and present. To be a *Mashpia* is not only to channel God's guidance and grace to others – it represents our role as conduits channeling our seekers and ourselves to realize our part in both actualizing divine grace on earth and in channeling it back to God.

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References

1. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Quadrangle, 1974) pp. 23-6
2. On the role of Prophet as offering intercessory prayer and guidance on the Sabbath and New Moon, see Genesis 20:1-7 and II Kings 4:17-23. On the clumsy adventures of Eli the High Priest as a spiritual guide see I Samuel 1: 9-17 & 3:1-10

3. For Moses as the model of a *Moreh Derech* see Exodus Rabbah 12. On the importance and function of a *Chaver* see *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, 8
4. Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press,1988) Ch 8
5. Adapted from a group supervision session of Lev Shomea February, 2003 residency that occurred at Elat Chayyim Spiritual Retreat Center in Accord, New York. The names, location and some details of the session have been altered for the sake of privacy.
6. See Howard Addison, *Shutafu: Partners with God* (New York: United Synagogue Press,1991)