

This is the Path

Twelve Step in a Jewish Context

g b a
w h
d f j z
by ay
y

Rabbi Rami Shapiro

This is the Path

© 2005 by Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro.

All rights reserved. Any part of this manual may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or any retrieval system, without the written permission of the author as long as credit is given to the author and mention is made of the Gerushin Workshop for which this manual was created.

1 INTRODUCTION

Then your Guide will no more be ignored, and your eyes will watch your Guide, and whenever you deviate to the right or to the left, your ears will heed the command from behind you: "This is the path, follow it!" - Isaiah 30:20-21

Over the past few years, I have come into contact with ever greater numbers of Jews involved in Twelve Step Programs. I am always eager to listen to the spiritual trials these people undergo and am amazed at and inspired by their courage. Often, as the conversation deepens, a common concern emerges that reveals a sense of uneasiness. For many Twelve Step participants, despite the success of their labors, the Twelve Steps somehow strike them as un-Jewish.

For many participants, the spiritual element of the Twelve Steps has a decidedly Christian flavor. There may be a number of reasons for this, not the least of which is the fact that churches often provide the setting for meetings. In addition, the people

leading the meetings and providing the prayers are, more often than not, not well-versed in Judaism. Often, the meeting will use The Lord's Prayer, a reading which, while it never mentions the fact that the Lord in question is Jesus, falls outside the comfort zone for most Jews. A third element of discomfort may come from the decidedly God-oriented nature of the Twelve Steps themselves. We are seeking to surrender our lives to God: to "Let go, and let God." This notion of surrender seems to many Jews to be alien to Jewish life and thought.

It isn't. Nothing in the Twelve Steps is inherently un-Jewish. On the contrary, the Twelve Steps can be used in conjunction with traditional Jewish practice to enrich one's life as a Jew.

The goal of this booklet is to place each of the steps in a Jewish context, and to encourage you to experiment with them. My aim is to demonstrate that not only does each step fit Judaism, but the practice of that step might very well deepen your Judaism and further open you up to the richness of Jewish spirituality. These emails, then, are not only for people already involved in Twelve Step programs, but for anyone interested in using the Twelve Step approach to enrich his or her own spirituality.

Let me end this introduction with a prayer:

Each Step in Peace

We call upon the Source of Life, the
Fountain of all Being- the Power that
binds us to eternity and fills time and
space with holiness, to guide our
every step that our journey be toward
peace.

May we begin our travels in peace:
peace of mind, peace of heart,
peace of body and spirit; and may
our fear of tomorrow be
transformed through such peace
into a curiosity for the new that
each moment of our journey
become for us an opportunity to
learn and to share.

May the peace with which we begin sustain us in
peace throughout our travels that we might return
back home in peace as well.

May our way be free of
accident and danger, from
all affliction and strife.

May we bring peace and laughter
to those we meet that they might
count our meeting as a blessing.

May our deeds be blessed with strength,
guided by justice, tempered with mercy
and emboldened with wisdom.

May all we meet greet us
with grace, kindness and
compassion,

and may we greet them with the same.

May our prayer be a reminder to us as the days pass that we not forget our mission: to make our lives vehicles of blessing and joy.

Blessed are those who take up the Path and greet all beings with kindness.

2 SPIRITUAL GROWTH

We must proceed step by step with regard to ethical development, as though climbing a ladder. We should not jump ahead to a step for which we are unprepared. In so doing, we will lose everything, for we will surely fall.

- Hayyim Nahman Bialik

What do we mean by spiritual growth?

The answers to this question are as numerous as the people articulating it. Yet when we seek an answer within the classical thought of the Jewish people, we can formulate a fairly clear response. Within the context of Jewish thought, spiritual growth is the never-ending improvement of our character. According to the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797), "One's entire service of God is contingent upon the improvement of one's character traits." But why should this be? Doesn't this confuse the spiritual with the temporal?

The distinction between these two is false. This world, our world, is imbued with holiness. This world, our world, with all its pain and suffering is the very world in which redemption, enlightenment, and awakening take place. We are not seeking to escape the everyday, but to hallow it. We do this by cleansing ourselves of the negative behaviors that keep us from encountering the world-and all beings in it-with a sense of awe, wonder, kindness, and compassion.

The prophet Jeremiah points to the heart of the Jewish understanding of spiritual awakening when he says,

*Let those who rejoice, rejoice only in this:
That they understand and know Me. For
I am YHVH who practices kindness,
justice and righteousness in the earth.
For in these do I delight. (Jeremiah
9:23)*

Spiritual growth is growth in holiness. Holiness consists of understanding divinity, knowing divinity, and acting divinely. Understanding divinity, we grasp intellectually that all life is sacred. Knowing divinity, we intuit and feel beyond any shadow of a doubt the Divine Unity animating all diversity. Acting divinely, we take the norms of God as our own, acting in a godly manner: promoting kindness, justice, and righteousness. No break exists between mind, heart, and action; each is a necessary part of spiritual growth, and until all are harmonized and in sync, there can be no awakening.

The real import of the Jewish notion of spirituality is the belief that the individual is holy. From the beginning, we are created in God's image, after God's likeness (Genesis 1:26). From the beginning, we are cast in the mold of divinity. We need not

change from one state of being to another; we need only recognize what we already are. Jewish spiritual growth is, in fact, a misnomer: there is no growth, if by growth we mean becoming something other than we are. There is only a growing awareness of who we already are. I am the likeness of God, I am holy; I am and you are and Life is. It is as if we had a mirror and dropped it in the mud. The mirror is still intact but it no longer reflects the world around it. We don't have to redesign the mirror; all we need do is remove the mud. Creation is a wondrous mirror reflecting the holiness of Reality. We have covered it with mud, the mud of desire, fear, greed and alienation. It is time to cleanse the mirror and see what truly Is.

Cleansing the mirror is what Judaism is all about. We do this by correcting muddy behavior. The mitzvot, the commandments of Jewish life, are the way we Jews cleanse the mirror. In and of themselves, they provide a powerful and holy life-way. They are not supplanted by the Twelve Steps; indeed, they go far beyond them. Yet they can be augmented by a careful implementation of the Twelve Steps.

Originally developed by Bill Wilson and Bob Smith, the Twelve Steps form the foundation for Alcoholics Anonymous. Over the years, they have been adapted and applied to a number of groups dealing with substance abuse from the perspective of both the abuser and his or her family members. In addition, they have been used to formulate life-enhancing practices for a variety of groups dealing with non-abuse issues that nonetheless seem to inhibit the full flowering of the human person.

Given my desire to broaden the base of the Twelve Steps by placing them in a Jewish context, it will be the latter approach I shall employ here: recasting the Twelve Steps to provide us with a road map for spiritual growth, whether or not we are plagued by specific substance abuse concerns.

Because I am trying to maintain the integrity of the original Twelve-Step formula, I will leave the wording of the steps unchanged, with two important exceptions. The first has to do with the First Step's reference to alcohol. The second has to do with our understanding of the word "God." While you may choose to read the First Step with a specific issue in mind, for our purposes here I will refer only to the absence of spiritual awakening. What plagues us on a deeper level is not alcohol or narcotics, but a general sense of dis-ease, a spiritual malaise arising from our addiction to the mud of alienation and separateness that blinds us to the Divine Unity linking man, woman, nature and God. For the purposes of this essay, our addiction will not be to one substance or another, but to the illusion of separation that haunts our every waking moment.

My second "change" is really a matter of interpretation. Drawing upon the anthropomorphic language of the Bible, most Twelve Step formulae refer to God as a male deity separate from creation. While this is a legitimate theological position, it is not necessarily the highest Jewish formulation of Reality. For us, God is neither male nor female; neither inside nor outside; neither here nor there. God is the Unnamable Reality that we encounter in the infinite diversity of creation.

When Moses seeks to fathom God's essence by asking to know the divine Name, God replies, "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh," a cryptic use of the Hebrew word "to be" that implies eternity and which I render into the vernacular as "That Which Is Happening Now."

God, as I understand God and as I interpret the word "God" throughout this book, is the totality of what Is at any given Moment. To encounter God, one has only to open oneself to the moment. One has to let go of all notions of time and enter eternity as it is manifest Now. One has to abandon all notions of self and the desires and angers that define one's self and encounter just What Is. One does not have to change into something one is not yet; one simply has to be what one already is: the image and likeness of God.

Given this understanding of God, we can see why Judaism does not adhere to a literal split between the spiritual and the ordinary. The ordinary is the spiritual; the spiritual is the ordinary. Everyday life is holy; holiness is everyday life. With all its pain and suffering, with all its joy and triumph, ordinary life is holy. Growing spiritually does not eliminate suffering; it simply puts it in a greater context. Growing spiritually does not erase pain; it simply allows us to encounter it fully, respond to it clearly, without the excess baggage of "if only" and "why me." Judaism does not allow us to "escape" into a "better world." We cannot pretend to things other than they are; we can only accept what is given and respond.

But as long as the mirror is muddied, we cannot respond with holiness. The mud blinds us to Unity, leaving us with the seemingly overpowering and fundamentally incorrect notion that

creation is a hostile mix of isolated and isolating beings at war with each other, with themselves, with nature. Action based on

11

12 Steps in a Jewish Context

this illusion deepens the mud and empowers the illusion. What we need is a new way of seeing and doing based on Reality as it is, not as we imagine it to be. What we need do is stop those behaviors that add to the suffering of life. What we need do is begin developing those character traits that reflect holiness and promote harmony. And what are these? The prophet Jeremiah told us: kindness, justice and righteousness. So let us begin now, one step at a time.

3 THE TWELVE STEPS

In everything we do, we are commanded to pursue the righteous and good path with all our might, and in all our dealings with others, to behave with kindness and compassion, as we know from our Torah that this is the way of God, and this is God's will concerning all human beings, in order that they may merit attainment of divine goodness, for God desires loving kindness. Concerning this Torah says: And you shall walk in God's ways, the entire thought being that we shall train our souls to pursue these good deeds and these noble traits.

- Moses Maimonides

Step One

WE ADMIT WE ARE POWERLESS OVER OUR SEPARATION FROM GOD- THAT OUR LIVES HAVE BECOME UNMANAGEABLE.

Step Two

WE BELIEVE THAT A POWER GREATER THAN OURSELVES CAN RESTORE US TO SANITY.

Step Three

WE MAKE A DECISION TO TURN OUR WILL AND OUR LIVES OVER TO THE CARE OF GOD AS WE UNDERSTOOD GOD.

Step Four

WE MAKE A SEARCHING AND FEARLESS MORAL INVENTORY OF OURSELVES.

Step Five

WE ADMIT TO GOD, TO OURSELVES AND TO ANOTHER HUMAN BEING THE EXACT NATURE OF OUR WRONGS.

Step Six

WE ARE ENTIRELY READY TO HAVE GOD REMOVE ALL THESE DEFECTS OF CHARACTER.

Step Seven

WE HUMBLY ASK GOD TO REMOVE OUR SHORTCOMINGS.

Step Eight

WE MAKE A LIST OF ALL PERSONS WE HAVE HARMED AND BECOME WILLING TO MAKE AMENDS TO THEM ALL.

Step Nine

WE MAKE DIRECT AMENDS TO SUCH PEOPLE
WHEREVER POSSIBLE, EXCEPT WHEN TO DO SO

14

12 Steps in a Jewish Context

WOULD INJURE THEM OR OTHERS.

Step Ten

WE CONTINUE TO TAKE PERSONAL INVENTORY AND,
WHEN WE ARE WRONG, PROMPTLY ADMIT IT.

Step Eleven

WE SEEK THROUGH PRAYER AND MEDITATION TO
IMPROVE OUR CONSCIOUS CONTACT WITH GOD AS
WE UNDERSTOOD GOD, PRAYING ONLY FOR
KNOWLEDGE OF GOD'S WILL FOR US AND THE POWER
TO CARRY THAT OUT.

Step Twelve

HAVING HAD A SPIRITUAL AWAKENING AS THE
RESULT OF THESE STEPS, WE TRY TO CARRY THIS
MESSAGE TO OTHERS, AND TO PRACTICE THESE
PRINCIPLES IN ALL OUR AFFAIRS.

4 STEP ONE

WE ADMITTED WE WERE POWERLESS OVER THE EFFECTS OF OUR SEPARATION FROM GOD-THAT OUR LIVES HAD BECOME UNMANAGEABLE.

The first step toward wisdom is the wonder of God.

- Proverbs 9:10

Accepting the full impact of Step One is the key to the success of every Twelve-Step process. It shouldn't be surprising, therefore, that this step is also the most difficult.

We don't want to admit that we are not in control of our own life. After all, if we cannot control our own life, what can we control? Oh, we can see how others are out of control-how they abuse themselves, their loved ones. But they are not us. If there are changes to be made, we can make them by deciding to make them. We can remake our lives according to our will. The day we can't do that is the day we might as well stop living.

Yet what do we really control? Can we control our thoughts? We can introduce this or that notion into our minds, but if we are honest and take the time to become aware of our thinking, we will discover that thoughts just seem to arise of their own accord. Certainly, this is true of thoughts we would rather not entertain. If we could control our thoughts, we would be able to keep out negative thoughts and think only of joyous things. Yet negative thinking goes on whether we wish it to or not.

The same is true of feelings. They arise of their own accord and are not controllable directly by our will. If they were, we would be a lot happier, banishing painful feelings as soon as they arose. But we can't. Feelings come and go, and we really have no control over them.

What about behavior? This certainly is controllable. No one can make us do something we choose not to do. Yet there is such a thing as coercion, and there are behaviors we would rather not engage in that we seem to fall into habitually. While we can see how ultimately behavior may be controllable, certainly in our lives as we live them now, control is not a word that applies.

Nor does it apply to our environment. We cannot control other people: they often do things that surprise, frustrate, and infuriate us. They never seem to do what we expect. And it is not just them; from day to day, nothing ever turns out exactly as we know it should and wish it would. In short, if we look carefully, we are not in control. And yet we act as if we were in control.

So much of our behavior is a habituated attempt to make life turn out the way we desire. Yet it rarely does. In fact, the more we try

to control life, the more we seem to mess things up. Yet we cannot seem to stop trying. So in this very real sense, our lives

17

12 Steps in a Jewish Context

are unmanageable: We are not in control. But what does this have to do with separation from God?

Moses Maimonides, in his Introduction to *Pirke Avot*, says that bad character traits are partitions separating us from the Divine. How so? Remember that God is the Totality of What Is Happening Now. God envelops us, and our environment, in a Greater Unity. To experience God-to discover our True Self, which is an intimate expression of God-we must embrace our environment fully, without any sense of alienation. We must see that you and I are one, that self and nature are one, that self and other are one, and that this One is God. We can do this only through behavior that is unifying, holy, and unspoiled by self-conceit and addiction to selfish desire. Bad character traits and their resulting behaviors lock us into ways of encountering the world that are not holy, not unifying. On the contrary, they are isolating, alienating, and harmful to us and all around us.

Step One tells us that our fundamental problem is separation from God. We refuse to see what Is and act as if what we wish were true were in fact true. And what do we wish were true? That we are in charge; that we are in control; that we are God in the sense of being all-powerful over you and the world. That is what we want, for that is the only way we can extract from the world the objects of our desire. Rather than recognize the Truth that God is playing us, we play God, seeking to control everything for our own ends.

It is this egocentric behavior that separates us from God. The more we seek to control Life, the more alienated from Life we become.

Or so it appears. In fact, we cannot really be separated from God at all, for God is the Totality of What Is Happening Now. We are a part of God, whether we realize it or not. What

18

12 Steps in a Jewish Context

our egocentricity actually separates us from is our awareness of our unity with God.

When we see that it is our egos that separate us from God, we have taken our first step toward awakening. King Solomon wrote: One who trusts the self is a fool, but one who walks in wisdom is kept safe (Proverbs 28:26). The more we trust our isolated, dualistic, and fearful egocentric view of the world, the more we suffer at the hands of our behavior. Wisdom, the awareness of Self as God in extension, lies upon a different road.

It is time to walk on.

5 STEP TWO

STEP TWO: CAME TO BELIEVE THAT A POWER GREATER THAN OURSELVES COULD RESTORE US TO SANITY.

Where does God dwell? Wherever we let God in.

- The Kotzker Rebbe

Sanity is seeing ourselves as a part of the Whole. Insanity is imagining ourselves to be apart from it. Step Two places us on the road toward sanity by beginning to open us up to our True Selves as an extension of the Whole, of God.

It is one thing to define God into existence-after all, something is happening now, and if God is That Which Is Happening Now, then God exists-and quite another to encounter in this God a salvatory power that can restore us to sanity. Yet without this conviction, there will be no deep surrender of the ego to the True Self. And without such surrender, there will be no healing. So

how do we come to believe in this greater power?

We look. We look for signs. We look for wonders. We look for miracles. Where do we look? To the ordinary, to the everyday, to the simple things that happen to us day to day. "This whole world is a cloak for the lowest rung of holiness, for its feet, as it were. As it is written: And the earth is my footstool. God limits the godliness of infinity and narrows it down to the focus of the material world in which humankind exists. And there God assigns each of us our thought and word and deed according to the day, the place and the person, and hides therein the signs to lead us to divine service" (Martin Buber, *Ten Rungs, Hasidic Sayings*, Schocken Books, New York, New York, 1962, p. 22).

Every thought, every deed, every place is a sign waiting for us to decipher it. And what does the sign reveal? That which is to be done in that place at that moment. We are Life's vehicles for accomplishing things moment to moment, place by place. We are each of us is-God's eyes, God's hands, God's Way of making Holiness manifest throughout the universe.

When we are in the grip of habit, however, we do not look to see what must be done in the present; we only react, based on what we have already done in the past. We react from the past; indeed, that is what habitual behavior is: reactions to past experiences forever replayed in the present. At one time, such action may have been appropriate, but when habituated and removed from what is happening at the moment, such behavior is, more often than not, an inappropriate response to the current situation. The key to living authentically is encountering the present. We cannot do that while we are locked in the past through our habitual behavior. To

break with habit is to break with the past and to see clearly what is happening now. What is the most

21

12 Steps in a Jewish Context

ingrained habit of all? The habit of seeing life through an egocentric "I."

We are habituated from earliest childhood to become separate and autonomous beings. This is necessary for our survival, to be sure, but it can-and often does-become obsessive. The "I" is necessary but not sufficient to authentic living. It has a rightful and limited place in the scheme of things, but when it seeks to overstep its limitations, to play God rather than recognize that God is playing it, then it becomes problematic, isolating us from Reality. Thus, the Hasidic understanding of Deuteronomy 5:5: I stood between God and you. The "I" stands between God and us.

Whenever we say "I," we separate ourselves from God and the World. But this separation is an illusion of our own making. To remove the illusion and take down the wall of separation, we must sacrifice the false supremacy of the ego.

The "I" that seems to take center stage is a temporary manifestation of God's infinite and eternal creativity. It has no real being outside of God; nothing does. It (and everything else) is God in extension, just as a wave is the ocean in extension. Just as the ocean recycles the water from one wave to use in producing an infinite number of other waves without ever reproducing the same wave, so God recycles all the energies of universe to rebirth over and over without ever repeating "me."

Knowing this helps us understand our relationship to everything else. We are made up of energies that have existed for millions of

years. Who knows what other beings have shared the energies we have inherited? When we say "I" or "me" or "mine", are we not also saying "they" and "them" and "theirs"? We don't even belong to "me"; we are "them"! Given this, is there anything that

22

12 Steps in a Jewish Context

is alien from us or anything from which we are apart? No. If we are careful in our observation, if we look deeply enough, we discover that we are everything and everything is us. To uncover this truth is to recover our sanity.

6 STEP THREE

MADE A DECISION TO TURN OUR WILL AND OUR LIVES
OVER TO THE CARE OF GOD AS WE UNDERSTOOD GOD.

*YHVH is near to all who call upon the Eternal; to all who call
upon the Eternal in truth.*

- Psalms 145:18

What does surrender to God mean?

In the Book of Psalms, we read, "How long shall I take counsel in myself, having sorrow in my heart by day" (Psalms 13:3). Martin Buber interprets this to mean that as long as we seek counsel, wisdom, and solace by turning inward to our own ego, we cannot help but be plagued by sorrow. "Only when I know of no further counsel that can help me, and I give up taking counsel and know of no other help but God, will help be vouchsafed me" (Martin Buber, *Ten Rungs*, p. 20).

Only when we have exhausted all attempts to help ourselves do we turn to God. Why only then? For most of us, God is too abstract to be relied upon fully. We may give lip service to God, but we know we are not certain about whether God exists. Even if God does exist, we question whether God cares about us enough to help. So, we try everything else first. It is only when we are at a total loss as to what to do that, we suddenly drop the egotistical notion that we can do anything at all and discover what really needs to be done.

The prophet Isaiah said in God's name, "I am YHVH your God who teaches you for your benefit; who leads you by the way you will go" (Isaiah 48:17). Commenting on this passage, the tenth century Jewish sage Rashi suggests that when we surrender our will to the Divine, we will discover that the path we then choose to follow is the path that leads to awakening and fulfillment.

To fully understand the importance of this insight, we must move into it slowly. We are dealing with the true nature of choice and freedom, and what we will find is most different from what we are taught to believe. For most of us, freedom and autonomy depend upon our ability to choose for ourselves what it is we will do. Freedom and choice go hand in hand. But for our rabbis and sages, freedom is other than willful choice. Freedom is a choiceless awareness of what is and what must be done.

We began our discussion of the Twelve Steps with the discovery that we are not in control of our lives. Our thoughts and feelings simply arise unbidden into our awareness. We do not choose to feel hurt or angry or sad or joyful; it just happens. We cannot turn off our emotions or shut out unwanted thoughts; we cannot control

what goes on inside our heads and we have little more success with what goes on with our bodies. Our behavior, while

25

12 Steps in a Jewish Context

always our responsibility, is often at the whim of habit. And habit, by definition, is behavior we do not consciously control. Our sages recognized the nature of our inner and outer lives and did not imagine that freedom could be tied to willful choice. We do not choose our thoughts, our feelings, or much of our behavior-in what sense can we be free?

Freedom is choiceless awareness. When we awaken to Reality, when we see What Is Happening Now, we see what needs to be done. What needs to be done is never in opposition to Reality; it grows out of it. In this sense, it is choiceless. But doesn't this put us at the whim of our environment? We are not in charge; we are only responding to what is happening?

Yes, this is so. This will not make sense to us until we awake from the illusion of control; until we see that we are not in charge; until we can set aside the "I" of ego and see the world through the eye of God.

When we do awaken, when we do see, when we do surrender the "I," we discover that we are what is happening now, we are the environment, and that doing what must be done is the true act of freedom and liberation, growing as it does out of Reality rather than illusion. When we see clearly and know what is to be done, we are beyond choice. Yes, we can willfully refrain from acting, but only if we shut our eyes to Reality. The only choice we have is between seeing and not seeing. And once we have seen, we cannot but do.

We are truly free when we are free from the ego's will. We are truly free when we are free from the false notion of self and the hostile world in which self-imagines itself. True freedom is being alive to what Is, alive to What Is Happening Now within, around,

26

12 Steps in a Jewish Context

and through us. Such awareness brings with it a clarity of knowing that leaves us without choice as to which action is the right one. We know intuitively what is happening and where we fit in and what is required of us at this moment. The prophet Isaiah is telling us to let God, the totality of What Is Happening Now, become our guide, our teacher. When we set aside the willful drama of our ego-centered self and look into what is really happening, Reality shows us who we are (a part of the happening) and what we need to do.

But the ego cannot choose to surrender. This is a very important point. Ego cannot abdicate its reign; it has to be overthrown. What overthrows ego? Reality. Only when we have exhausted all self-centered attempts at making things better will we turn to Reality and begin to accept what Is. This is surrendering to God. Surrender is the giving up of what should, could, or might be and an honest embracing of what Is.

Surrender is not an admission of defeat. Surrender is the way of the survivor. Rabbi Akiva once explained how he survived a shipwreck: "To each wave that approached me, I bent my head" (*Yevamot* 121a). What is true for shipwrecked rabbis is true for all of us. When the waves of life come crashing upon us, we have several options. We can stand and 'take it on the chin,' having the wave knock us about and leave us sputtering for air. We can swim wildly in an attempt to escape the wave, having it catch us when our backs are turned. Or we can face it fully, watch it carefully,

and at just the right moment bend our heads, surrender, and have the wave wash over us. Akiva chose the latter. So should we.

Bending to the moment is the key to surrender, and surrender is the key to Step Three. What happens when we surrender to Reality? First, there is a great liberation: "I am not in charge. I don't have to have the answers. I don't have to change. I've surrendered all this to God, let God do it for me." Second, there is a great silence. Having dropped all the needless chatter of the mind judging this or that behavior, ranting about this or that thought or feeling, attacking oneself, criticizing others, and so on, we are embraced by a deep silence. There is no chatter. We are still. Except for the nagging notion that we are supposed to hear something. A voice or something. God. And we don't.

This is the ego's last trick. "O. K, I'll surrender. There, all quiet. So where is this revelation that is supposed to heal me?" There is no voice. Only silence. If we can stay with the silence, the ego is caught in its last game and let's go fully. With that letting go comes an even deeper quiet. And with that deeper silence comes clarity. We suddenly know what we have to do.

This seeing is a gift. We do not will it. We do not imagine it. We do not control it. It is, and we simply stay with it. This is what the Bible means when it says, "YHVH is with you while you are with YHVH" (II Chronicles 15:2). When we enter into that deep silence, we discover God, YHVH, and we know that we are that Reality. We are YHVH and YHVH is us-not in any smallminded, egocentric sense, but in the cosmic unity of ocean and wave. And

when we discover the oceanic aspect of our being, we discover the courage and the power to move forward on the road to recovery.

28

12 Steps in a Jewish Context

7 STEP FOUR

MADE A SEARCHING AND FEARLESS MORAL
INVENTORY OF OURSELVES.

Let us examine our ways and test them.

- Lamentations 3:40

As difficult as the first three steps may have been, Step Four is more so. Steps One, Two, and Three prepared us for Step Four, and it is here that the real work of teshuvah, "turning," begins. We have admitted our inability to control our lives. We have recognized a power greater than our own operating in the Universe. We have surrendered our will to that power, that we

might clearly see what Is and know what is to be done. Now we must do it.

But why a moral inventory? If we have surrendered, are we not now cleansed and free of our past? Are we not somehow born again? With true surrender comes a sense of overwhelming joy.

When we first recognize the divine within and around us, we are overwhelmed with wonder. We are indeed new. But this unconditional awareness, this knowing of the whole, cannot be maintained for long. The old demands, the old habits, the old realities begin to creep back in. They must be weeded out carefully, methodically, and forever.

We have seen Reality. Now we must bring what we have seen to bear on our ordinary lives. The most powerful way to accomplish this is by working through our own character. In the mid-1800s, under the direction of Rabbi Israel Salanter, Judaism experienced a spiritual revival called Musar. Musar practice centered around the honest evaluation of character traits and on the never-ending struggle to refine them toward holiness. Through honest evaluation, we begin to see the darker side of ourselves and learn that it is not the fault of others that we behave as we do. We discover that we contain both a *yetzer hatov*, an inclination toward goodness, and a *yetzer harah*, an inclination toward evil.

Our yetzer tov sees the world as a network of interdependent systems, each in harmony with all others; the yetzer tov reveals connections, commonalities, and shared divinity. Our yetzer rah sees the world as an alien and hostile place, a place of fearsome

war and dreadful isolation. The world is as the world is; how we see it depends upon which of our inclinations is dominant.

Once upon a time, a great rabbi was granted a boon. He wished to visit Hell and Heaven to see for himself what occurred there. As he peered into Hell, he saw people seated at a great banquet. Foods of every kind were piled high in lavish array. The table, six feet wide and miles long, groaned beneath the weight of this wonderful feast. Yet as he watched, the rabbi saw that no one

30

12 Steps in a Jewish Context

was eating. On the contrary, the people were starving! How so? They were forced to use forks and knives six feet long; there was no way they could raise a full fork to their mouths-their arms were not long enough to turn the fork to their mouths. In the midst of plenty, they went hungry.

The rabbi left Hell and journeyed to Heaven. Here, too, people sat at a lavish banquet table six feet wide and infinitely long. Here, too, the utensils were six feet long, too long to allow one to feed oneself. But here no one went hungry, for in Heaven, each person had learned to feed his or her neighbor across the table.

So it is with us. We are sitting at a banquet. If we insist upon feeding ourselves alone, if we insist upon isolation and egocentric behavior, we starve even in the midst of plenty. But if we give up the ego and feed the other, we ourselves are fed. Heaven or Hell, the banquet is the same. The difference is in how we handle it.

Step Four puts us firmly on the path toward Heaven: the path of doing for others, the path of unity and reconciliation. It does so by getting us to see all sides of ourselves. We cannot hide behind the notion that we are totally evil and unable to change or the notion

that we are good already and under no obligation to change. Step Four doesn't even mention change. It deals only with looking.

So look. And list.

It is vitally important that we write down our inventory in as specific a manner as possible. Just reviewing things in our minds allows us too many loopholes. Write down the who, what, when, and where of each item. But not the Why. Why is an excuse and

a judgment. We need neither. All we need to do is look and list. This is a slow and time-consuming process. There is no need to rush. Take up one character trait at a time and examine it fully. Take anger, for example. When do you feel angry? At whom? What do you do with this anger? List specific cases in detail. Get to know the anger well and objectively. In time you will recognize it as it arises. You will be able to label it ("Ah, there's an angry feeling") and thus distance yourself from it so that it does not dictate your behavior.

Only this intimate knowledge of our character will allow us to become free of habitual and hurtful responses to Life and thus able to take up the challenge of living our life as it was meant to be: "Know and consider the fact that you are unique in the world, and that no one like you has ever been. For if someone like you had already been, there would be no reason for you to be in this world. Actually, everyone is something new in this world, and here you must perfect your particular being, for because it is still imperfect the coming of the Messiah is delayed!" (Martin Buber, *Ten Rungs*, p. 109).

8 STEP FIVE

ADMITTED TO GOD, TO OURSELVES AND TO ANOTHER HUMAN BEING THE EXACT NATURE OF OUR WRONGS.

Reprove the wise and they will love you.

- Proverbs 9:8

Step Four was an exercise in deep introspection, but the success of the enterprise is always suspect. Thus, the necessity for Step Five: a multi-level articulation of our failings.

What does it mean to admit our wrongs to God? We find an answer in the Psalms: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.... Then I acknowledged my sin to You and did not cover up my iniquity. I said: 'I will confess my transgressions to YHVH' and You forgave the guilt of my sin" (Psalms 32:3-5).

"When I kept silent," I suffered all day long. What does it mean to keep silent? To deny the reality of our failings and misdeeds. To imagine that we did what we did because we had good reason. To excuse ourselves. To lie to ourselves. It is this lie that crushes us. We cannot lie to ourselves. Somewhere we know the truth and suffer for our refusal to admit it. Maintaining the lie saps us of our strength. We become so fearful of being found out that we spend all our time covering up. This is exhausting and unproductive. When we keep silent, we lose the will to live and simply groan under the weight of our own guilt and fear. We imagine that this weight is caused by God, that it is God's "hand." But it is not God weighing upon us. God does not single us out for retribution. We have simply set ourselves up for suffering.

It can be compared to a child who sticks a finger in an electrical socket and receives a shock. Did the socket single that person out for pain? No, the socket simply did what sockets are supposed to do: transmit energy to whatever is inserted into them. The socket doesn't know a finger from a plug. The child was not singled out for punishment; the child placed herself in harm's way.

Our misdeeds do not attract God's wrath to us. Our misdeeds simply put us in a relation to Life that is painful. It is simply a matter of cause and effect. But we want to believe that it is God's hand. That way we can blame the suffering on God. God is doing this to me! But it is not so. We suffer from the weight of our own sins, nothing more, nothing less.

What happens when we acknowledge our sins and admit our wrongdoings? We no longer cover up iniquity, and we no longer

need to maintain the facade of goodness. We no longer need to lie. We cannot be blackmailed by our own guilt when the sin is

no longer a secret. The weight is lifted because the lie is ended: "You forgave the guilt of my sin."

Look carefully at what the Psalmist is saying. You forgave the guilt of my sin, not the sin itself. This is a very important distinction. We cannot undo what has been done. We cannot erase the pain we have caused. Just because we admit to hurtful behavior does not release us from responsibility for that behavior. We are relieved of the guilt of what we have done, but not of the obligation to set it right (more on this in Step Six).

Having admitted our failings to God, why repeat them to ourselves? Did we not hear them already? Did we not write them down in detail? A biblical proverb brings us some understanding of this phase of Step Five: "If you have played the fool and exalted yourself, or if you have planned evil, clap your hand over your mouth!" (Proverbs 30:32).

The Bible commentator Ibn Ezra teaches that clapping a hand over the mouth means catching ourselves in the act and ceasing from moving forward in it. In other words, as soon as we hear what we are saying and recognize its base nature, we are to catch ourselves, bring attention to bear on ourselves and what we are doing, and cease from any negative action. As applied to Step Five, we are talking about hearing aloud our sins and recognizing them for what they are.

Hearing makes them more concrete. There is something about confessing aloud that brings home the reality of what we have

done and what we are capable of doing. Having heard our tendency toward sin, we will better be able to recognize it as it arises in the future and thus more quickly and effectively "clap our hand over our mouth."

While these two phases of Step Five are serious, time-consuming, and painful, they pale in comparison to the third phase: confession to another human being. To Jews, this may appear most alien. Judaism does not seem to institutionalize confession or place much stock in it. But this is far from the truth: "Who confesses and forsakes shall obtain mercy." (Proverbs 28:13). "To confess one's sins is to honor the Holy One." (*Sanhedrin* 43b). "If anything, discreditable be in you, be the first to tell it." (*Baba Kamma* 92b).

Confession is a powerful tool for self-cleansing, and when used in connection with introspection, it can remove the limitations of introspection. Rabbi Israel Salanter, while arguing for the importance of introspection, a process he defines as "searching each and every human action," nevertheless warns us of its limitations: "Most of the time people view themselves mistakenly. They recognize neither their deficiencies nor their unworthy character traits" (Rabbi Salanter, as quoted in Hillel Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, KTAV, New York, 1982, p.37).

To offset the limitations of introspection, Rabbi Israel suggests that we examine ourselves "not only in solitude but also in conjunction with others. The hazards of self-deception can be materially reduced when an intimate friend points out our unworthy deeds and character traits ..." (*Salanter*, p. 37). Rabbi Israel advises the Musar practitioner to acquire a close friend with whom to associate continually.

Having a trusted friend to whom you can reveal your darkest shadow is vital to the success of this process. Great care should be taken in finding such a friend. Do not go about it lightly. Confidentiality is crucial, as is an ability to listen without bias.

The role of the friend is to mirror back the reality of our deeds, not to exaggerate or rationalize them. We want neither a prosecuting attorney nor a counsel for the defense. We want a loving friend who will listen and share and reflect ourselves back to ourselves so that we might clap a hand over our mouth and break free of these hellish habits of thought, word, and deed.

9 STEP SIX

WERE ENTIRELY READY TO HAVE GOD REMOVE ALL THESE DEFECTS OF CHARACTER.

Salvation is attained not by belief in metaphysical dogma, but solely by love of God expressed in action.

- Crescas, Or Adonai, c.1400

Step Six appears at first glance to be totally unnecessary. After all, we have just struggled with a most painful admission of misdeeds; we have owned up to the lie that has haunted us for a lifetime, all for the purpose of freeing ourselves from the behaviors that perpetuate our sense of isolation, anger, and pain. Isn't it obvious we are ready to have these things taken from us?

Not necessarily. Remember that these behaviors arise from a mindset that has defined us all our lives. It is not that we set out to be deliberately hurtful people. Rather, in our attempt to survive in a world filled with pain and suffering, we developed

habits of heart, mind, and behavior that sought to minimize our suffering. Our problem is that what seemed to work in the past no longer works now. Our behaviors are out of sync with reality. They aren't protecting us, they are hurting us. If we would live well, we must free ourselves from them. But if we do, what is left?

After all, this is us we are talking about. This is the way we think, the way we act, the way we survive day to day. If that goes, what happens to us? It is one thing to talk about it, even to confess it, but to let it go? Do you see the danger here? Our habits define us, they set us apart as unique individuals. If this is what we are, at least we are that! If that is removed, what are we? Where are we? How will we survive?

This is why Step Six is so important. It is here we begin to wrestle with the fear of letting go. No matter how destructive the behavior may be, it is familiar. Better to suffer with what we know than to subject ourselves to the unknown.

Step Six is a very fearful phase of our growth process. But what is it we really fear? Most of us assume that our fear is fear of the unknown. But this is not the case at all. The very notion of fear of the unknown is mistaken. What is unknown cannot be feared. Rather, we project onto the blank screen of the unknown the already known and allow ourselves to fear that.

Look into this and see for yourself. What do you fear? Think about it, make a list if you like. Can you think of something unknown? Can you write down something you cannot name? No. We fear what we know. Or the loss of what we know. And that is the point.

The real fear of Step Six is the loss of self, the loss of ego so closely identified as it is with the very character traits and behaviors we are seeking to let go. What we fear is death. Not the death of the body (though we may certainly fear that as well), but the death of the ego, the death of the "I," the death of everything I associate with me, no matter how awful it may sound when in the throes of Step Five.

Step Six is, in a very real sense, a deeper replaying of Steps One, Two, and Three. When we began the Twelve-Step process, we made some intellectual discoveries about the true nature of Reality. We discovered that ego is not immortal; that God is That Which Is Happening Now, and that I am a part of That. We discovered that ego's refusal to see itself as anything but the center of the universe is the cause of our distorted worldview that generates so much anger, frustration, and pain. We discovered that in fact there is no separateness, that we are connected to Nature and to God as a wave is connected to the ocean. We did all this with our minds. Now we are asked to act upon this with our bodies. It is one thing to play with ideas; it is another to act as if those ideas were real.

That is exactly what we must do. If we are to awaken to God, we must act in Reality. Our behavior must be in harmony with What Is, even if our minds are not so sure. Despite our doubts, despite our fear, we must let go of hurtful habits and live as if we were the wave, as if there is an ocean. But how?

There is a Hasidic teaching that may help us here. "Every lock has its key which fits into and opens it. But there are strong thieves who know how to open locks without keys. They break the lock.

So every mystery in the world can be unriddled by the particular kind of meditation fitted to it. But God loves the thief

40

12 Steps in a Jewish Context

who breaks the lock open: I mean, one who breaks one's heart for God" (Martin Buber, *Ten Rungs*, p.17).

How does this apply to our dilemma?

Every lock has a key: we could spend much time searching for just the right meditation that will open our hearts to the true self, the oceanic self that grasps the Reality of God as That Which Is Happening Now. But we don't have the time. We need to move now. We need to free ourselves now. To worry about right methods is a means of avoiding what really has to be done. So our action must be to break the lock. We won't erase the fear before we move on. We won't wait until we feel like waking to Reality; we will just wake up.

But isn't this more frightening still? Yes, it is breaking the heart for God. Breaking the heart by tossing everything to the wind and moving on. It is true surrender. We give ourselves up. We surrender. There is nothing we can do to make ourselves other than we are, and what we are is painful to us and to those who know us. We cannot imagine a "me" free from all the definitions of self we have collected over the years. We cannot imagine being in the world in a new way. We cannot see what we will be, for what we will be is so different from the habits of mind that blind us. So we give up the notion of imagining what will be and simply surrender to what is. We abandon the need to know the future and simply take up the challenge of the present. That is true surrender. We are ready. So God, take us from us and let's see What Is.

10 STEP SEVEN

HUMBLY ASKED GOD TO REMOVE OUR SHORTCOMINGS.

I wait for Your salvation.

- Genesis 49:18

To understand the significance of Step Seven in a Jewish context, we must first review the basic assumptions upon which our investigation of the Twelve Steps rests: the notion of change and the role of ego.

Regardless of how it sounds, the Twelve Steps are not about changing ourselves into something we are not, but rather awakening to that which we already are. We cannot change, there is no ideal "me" toward which we can struggle. The very heart of the Twelve-Step process suggests that we are powerless to change, that no amount of self-struggle will be sufficient to attain our goal.

Why? Because self-struggle is at the heart of our problem. Self-struggle is the cause of our malaise, and the cause cannot also be the cure.

Be careful. This not saying that there is nothing we can do; the Twelve Steps require us to do much. All it is saying is that our doing is matched-indeed, exceeded-by the doings of God. As we manage one small step toward God, God takes one giant step toward us. The Twelve Steps do not free us from the obligation to act; they just remind us that by our actions alone, we are powerless to succeed. Why? Because we cannot act without ego, and ego is at the heart of our dilemma.

Let's look at this more closely. The spiritual awakening that comes through the successful practice of the Twelve Steps is not the creation of a better "I". The spiritual awakening is simply waking up to who I truly am. The ego creates the "I" in order to function successfully in this world. It is necessary, but it is not sufficient. We cannot function without ego.

Without a sense of "I", we could not feed or clothe ourselves, we could not provide ourselves with shelter or companionship. Without an ego, we could not live. This is what Rabbi Hillel means when he says, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" (*Pirke Avot* 1:14). The ego has an important role to play. It devises the traits and the behaviors that protect us, sustain us, and bring us much joy. But when the ego overreaches its rightful place in the psyche and imagines that it is the True Self, it distorts its perception of Reality and bases its behavior on an erroneous set of

premises about life that bring us much unnecessary sorrow and grief.

Life in and of itself contains both joy and tragedy. Reality, with all its happiness, also includes pain, old age, suffering, and death. But the ego, seeking to avoid the natural grief of living and to monopolize the joy, erects barriers around itself that in

43

12 Steps in a Jewish Context

fact keep out the natural joys of living and multiply the grief a thousand-fold. The extent to which the ego isolates itself from others, from nature, from life in hopes of minimizing pain and maximizing happiness is the extent to which just the opposite is achieved.

The Twelve Steps are not about punishing ego or eradicating it. We need ego, but we don't need the walls ego has erected in its mad flight from Reality and the natural suffering Reality contains. What we seek to do through the Twelve Steps is surrender the ego to Reality, to God, allowing it to return to its rightful place in the psyche and opening it and ourselves to the Reality of the oceanic self that is our true nature.

This is the paradox of the Jewish Way. On the one hand, we are unique expressions of God. Never before has there been a creation quite like you or me. We are unique, and our purpose in being here is to fulfill that uniqueness within the life situation in which we find ourselves moment to moment. We are here to do what only each of us can do. To love as only you can love. To hurt as only you can hurt. To rejoice as only you can rejoice. To suffer as only you can suffer. And in bringing your uniqueness to bear on your world, you bring some healing to that world. The expression of

uniqueness is the task of ego. It is a worthy and wonderful role for this part of ourselves to play. But it is not the whole story.

In addition to ego, there is the oceanic self, the deeper appreciation of ourselves as an extension of the Whole, of Nature, of God. Just as each wave of an ocean is unique, never having existed before, and yet all waves are nothing but ocean in extension, so you and I are unique and yet nothing more than God in extension. The Twelve Steps depend upon and promote

44

12 Steps in a Jewish Context

our awakening to this "nothing more."

Note closely what was just said: depend upon and promote. To do these Twelve Steps, we must awaken to this "nothing more." And once we have awakened to this "nothing more," we no longer need the Twelve Steps. What is implied here? Simply this: that to do the Steps well is to embody and awaken to the Reality in which they rest and toward which they point.

The doing is the being. We are not mastering new techniques that will change us into the oceanic self. We are the oceanic self. We don't have to change. We don't have to become. We don't have to struggle. We have only to let go the illusory notions of ego and ego-dominated isolation and suffering and wake up to the unity that is our everyday Reality. This is why, over and over again, the Twelve Steps lead us to the point of surrender. Surrender is the letting go of illusion.

The shortcomings we have identified are rooted in our false and egocentric worldview. The ego cannot will itself to do other than it does. That would, from its point of view, be suicidal. And, except

in cases of extreme isolation, suicide is the last thing the ego craves. We cannot bully ourselves into being someone else. We can only surrender to that which we already are.

We have taken this long review to set the stage for Step Seven. In and of itself, Step Seven is quite clear: Humbly ask God, as we understand God, to remove the shortcomings we have identified. The key and the trap to Step Seven is the notion of humility.

What is humility? It is not a sense of overwhelming guilt that arises from admitting our failings. This is guilt, not humility. In

the Jewish tradition, humility is the awareness that "I" am nothing but dust-the awareness that our ego-centered self is not our true nature, but only one facet of a greater Self that is not "me" but the cosmic "You". Humility is awakening to the oceanic and to the ego as a temporary expression of the oceanic. Humility arises when the ego returns to its place. Humility comes when we recognize the temporal nature of the "I", when we accept our own transience and mortality-not in some offhanded, "Oh, of course I will die someday" manner, but in a profound and real sense, dying day to day, moment to moment.

This is the Hasidic interpretation of Psalm 118:17 where it says: "I shall not die but live." "In order to really live, we must first give ourselves to death. But when we have done so, we discover that we are not to die, we are to live" (Martin Buber, *Ten Rungs*, p.53). Giving ourselves to death means giving the ego over to God. By developing the Witness, the observing self, we can see clearly the limitations and the genius of ego, allowing ego to slip effortlessly back into its vital role as wave while awakening the whole self to its oceanic nature. In the beginning, the ego fears such a seeing. It

imagines that to see is to die. And in a way it is, for the ego dies to the grand delusion of isolation and separateness. But as illusion fades, Reality shines through, and with that Truth comes a greater vision and joy than any the ego can muster.

46

12 Steps in a Jewish Context

11 STEP EIGHT

MADE A LIST OF ALL PERSONS WE HAD HARMED, AND
BECAME WILLING TO MAKE AMENDS TO THEM ALL.

Great is repentance: it turns sin into incentives for right conduct.

- Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish

Step Eight comes as somewhat of a surprise. "After all," we might argue, "if we have successfully completed Step Seven, our failings have been lifted from us. The bright light of Reality has melted the ice castle in which ego had imprisoned us, and now we are free to roam the countryside and embrace life in all its forms. Why not forget the past, let it go? Why, having just awakened to the Reality of our oceanic Self, must we return to the ego-centered world of making amends?"

The work of the Twelve Steps is not about escape. On the contrary, through the power of the Twelve Steps, we clarify our obligations and more courageously carry out our responsibilities.

"O.K., let's focus on the present and the future, then. We understand now that we have a responsibility toward others and toward life. We understand that we are not other than the world and that its peace depends upon our doing peacefully. But we cannot change the past; why dwell upon it? Won't this simply drag us back into the morass of what was rather than what is?"

At the very beginning of our investigation of the Twelve Steps, we talked about the Jewish sense of God as That Which Is Happening Now; Past, Present, and Future are illusory categories we use to break apart the Now. There is no Past. There is no Future. Indeed, even the Present is not real, for as soon as we label it, it is past. There is only the totality of time expressed in this timeless moment, Now. This is what it means to call God eternal. Eternity is timeless. And the only timelessness there is, is Now.

When Hillel exclaims, "If not Now, when?" (*Pirke Avot* 1:14), he is saying that if we do not awaken Now, act Now, live Now, then

we shall never awaken or act or live, for Now is all there is. And living Now is living with God, for God is That Which Is Happening Now.

How does this answer the skittish ego, eager to end the process before we get to Steps Eight and Nine? Because there is only Now, everything we have ever done is present Now. Our inventory of failings and character shortcomings was an inventory of the Now. Making a list of people we have hurt is not delving into the past; it is excavating the layers of the Now. These deeds are present in us Now, still.

We cannot turn back the clock. We cannot go back and remake history. We cannot undo what we have done or pretend that it is past. When we take inventory of whom we have hurt, we are taking inventory of the Now. Step Eight is not a return to the past; it is a deepening of our understanding of the Now. That is why it must be done.

So take stock. As with Step Four, make your inventory a detailed one. Go slowly. Take your time. It is always Now. Take care to list who, what, when, and where. Forget about Why. Justified or unjustified, intentionally or unintentionally, the energies were loosed, the hurt was caused. Asking "Why?" invites excuses, and we are not interested in excuses.

It might be a help to have some order to your inventory. Begin with your mother. Think back to when you were a child: what did you do that caused her pain? Be as specific as you can, recalling the

setting as well as the deed. Move through your personal history in groups of years: one to five, six to twelve, your teens, your twenties, and so on. When you have finished with Mother, take up Father, and then siblings. When you begin to work on friends, begin with those closest to you now, and only later take up friendships long cold with the passing of time.

You may find that the list grows and grows and seems to have no end. In truth, there is no end; we can always know ourselves better. But even with the first notation, the list generates work to be done, and that is the topic of our next step, Step Nine.

12 STEP NINE

MADE DIRECT AMENDS TO SUCH PEOPLE WHEREVER POSSIBLE, EXCEPT WHEN TO DO SO WOULD INJURE THEM OR OTHERS.

Great is repentance: it brings healing to the world.

- Rabbi Hama ben Hanina

Step Nine is familiar to Jews as the practice of *selikhot*, forgiveness. We are commanded to approach those we have hurt and seek their forgiveness. We do this not only with people to whom we knowingly caused harm or needless suffering, but also with others to whom we cannot imagine having caused any pain. In this way, *selikhot* reminds us of our infinite connections through the net of Universe. No matter how removed one knot may be from another, all are connected and each is responsible for the integrity of the whole.

Because of this, the practice of *selikhot* involves us in seeking forgiveness not only from friends and acquaintances, but also from strangers. As a religious practice, *selikhot* is most powerfully carried out during the weeks leading up to the High Holy Days and during the Days of Awe themselves, which are traditionally associated with cleansing and renewal. Because *selikhot* includes strangers, it goes beyond the boundaries of Step Nine, while nonetheless placing the step firmly in the Jewish tradition. It is our obligation to make amends, to set things right as best we can.

What is our goal as we carry out Step Nine? Our first response is likely to be "forgiveness." We want the person we have injured to forgive us. We imagine that the act of forgiveness will free us from past deeds and heal any guilt we may harbor because of it. But

forgiveness is not the true goal. Forgiveness in this sense is simply the ego trying to wiggle out of the consequences of its actions. Think about this for a moment. When you have hurt someone and you know it, how do you feel? Sad, sorry, ashamed? Yes, that is part of it. What else? Afraid? Isn't that also part of it? Look carefully and see for yourself. When we hurt another, even inadvertently, we fear the consequences. We are afraid of what might happen to us. What else? What about anger? Look and see if you do not also feel angry at the person for feeling hurt. Angry at the person for making you feel guilty over their feeling hurt.

When we seek forgiveness, we seek to be free of our own pain and guilt. Is this not so? When I hurt you and I get you to say you forgive me, how do I feel? Relieved! I'm free of the guilt! I'm O.K.! How do you feel? I don't know, and in the moment of my liberation, I don't care! And there's the rub.

The power of *selikhot*, the power of Step Nine, is not forgiveness. If this comes, fine, but it isn't the point. The point is confrontation. The point is having the courage to realize that other people matter and that we have to confront them and make amends. This is why the rabbis say that the act of doing *selikhot* is more important than the results. Whether or not the other person forgives us is secondary to our having confronted the person in the first place.

What matters is our owning up to our responsibilities toward that person, not having that person free us from guilt by saying "I forgive you." What matters is that we do what we can to set things straight. If we can undo the damage of a slander or a robbery, we must do it. If we can correct an error, we must correct it. And if we cannot influence for the good the evil we have done, at least we

can take care never to repeat that evil again. And, of course, we can apologize.

The point of Step Nine is not forgiveness but reconnecting. In our efforts to confront and correct, we have to repair and remember our connectedness to all beings.

What is the biggest block to repairing and making amends? The anger we feel toward the person we have wronged. "After all, why should I have to put myself in even more emotional jeopardy by having to make amends? Why can't she just get over it, for God's sake?" Isn't this part of what runs through our minds? This anger at the other for making us feel bad because of their hurt? The turn-of-the-century Jewish philosopher Joseph Jacobs wrote, "the highest and most difficult of all moral lessons [is] to forgive those we have injured" (*Jewish Ideals*, 1895). He is right.

How do we accomplish this? We don't know how to forgive. We don't know how to tackle this obstacle to making amends. We are sure, to take up the Hasidic metaphor of the thief and the lock, that there is a key to the lock of this anger. There is a meditation that will open the anger to the light of healing. But God loves the strong thief: the thief who breaks the lock without waiting for the key. God loves the person willing to break the heart and put himself on the line without the comfort of having the key in hand.

This is what Step Nine demands of us. Without knowing what will happen in advance, we put ourselves on the line and seek to make amends with those we have hurt.

Step Nine carries with it a very important caveat. We are to confront and make amends only with those people who would not be further hurt by our trying to do so. This is very wise and also very dangerous.

Wise in the sense that we should not harm others in our drive to heal, and dangerous in that it gives us a way out of having to confront people at all. "This would cause her too much pain; this would hurt him all over again-I won't bring it up." Where these statements are in fact true, keep silent. Quietly make what amends you can without recreating the pain in the other person's mind and heart. But where these statements are not true, then confrontation is the path to follow.

How to tell when the cure would hurt more than the disease? Sit with the problem and look into it deeply. Don't judge, just look. And you will see the truth of the matter.

So far we have been speaking of Step Nine as if we operate in a vacuum. We don't. Many of the painful behaviors we are involved in are part of a larger play of forces involving not only ourselves as the person causing the hurt, but others as desirous of being hurt. Again, we must move carefully here, going into the matter slowly. This idea does not relieve us of responsibility for our actions or of the obligation to make amends. It only suggests that sometimes it takes two to tango. The other person is not always the passive victim of our abuse. The abused and the abuser often play out a complicated drama of incredible emotional complexity, and in some way, each comes to depend upon the other for the expected, if painful, behavior. Confronting self and other and dropping that

expected behavior can cause the other person a great deal of anxiety. They may fear for themselves, having depended upon us and our predictable evil for so long.

We play a much-needed role in their own attempt to maintain their own egocentricity. In whatever role they have cast themselves, our ceasing to play the game may threaten their very psychic survival. Thus, the response to our making amends may be tremendous anger: "How dare you change on me! How dare you end the game without my approval! You can't change, and I'll prove it. I'll do everything I can to reinstate that behavior. You'll see." They are right: we can't change. And if we try, they will catch us and return us to our negative habits. The Twelve Step process is not about change, but about surrender. We are not becoming someone else; we are discovering who we already are. It is vital that we keep this in mind at times like this. Surrender means we don't fight the other's attitude. We accept it, do what we can, and move on.

That is all we can ask of ourselves with Step Nine. Having noted with whom we must seek to make amends, we do so, knowing full well that they may not accept us or our overture. It is not for us to presume to know what will happen or to judge what others should do. It is for us only to admit our failings and do what we can to repair the damage we have done and see that we cause no more.

13 STEP TEN

CONTINUED TO TAKE PERSONAL INVENTORY AND WHEN WE WERE WRONG, PROMPTLY ADMITTED IT.

Spiritually complete people must be ever mindful of their character, weighing deeds and examining character traits daily.

- Moses Maimonides

With the successful completion of the first nine steps of our journey comes a great rush of excitement—a feeling of being reborn, of having a great weight lifted from our shoulders, a euphoria of sorts that promises us a life of happiness. The feeling lies. Spiritual practice is a never-ending struggle.

Earlier we noted how Rabbi Akiva survived a shipwreck: "When a wave came," he said, "I bowed my head." We have bowed before the waves; we have learned to let them wash over us and then to stand up once they have passed. But if we think this last wave was the last wave, we are in for a shock. There is no last

wave, there is only the next wave. If we divert our attention even for a moment, we will find ourselves knocked down and in trouble. We can never divert our attention. On the contrary, the key to living spiritually is to pay attention Now.

Are we ever free of the habits we seek to break? There are some who say yes, that once we have broken the cycle of behavior a few times, we are no longer in its clutches. Having freed ourselves from this habit, we can now turn our attention to another. We may find that a habit, when we shine the bright light of honest reflection upon it, can be put aside, but as soon as that light is dimmed, however, back comes our habitual way of doing things. If we let down our guard, we slip back into old patterns of living we had thought gone forever.

As long as we seek to break habits, we in fact perpetuate them. After all, we cannot break what we do not have. In this way of thinking, breaking is the flip side of maintaining, and the two will forever go hand in hand. Let's say we are compulsive eaters. Without even thinking about it, we run to the refrigerator to find solace and sanity. Of course, all we find in the end is self-revulsion and guilt, but, as the experts will tell us, the motivation for eating is not self-hate but the quest, albeit misdirected, for solace and self-worth. It is not our goal that is wrong, but only the means by which we seek to achieve it.

Now let's imagine that we are following a Twelve-Step Program and we surrender our eating habits to God. This requires, among the many other things we have already discussed, that we look objectively at ourselves and our environment. As we watch

ourselves running to the refrigerator, what happens? Do we suddenly find the strength to stop? Probably not.

What happens is that we see what we are doing and we stop. Willfully? Well, it doesn't feel willful. It is as if the need to eat suddenly passes. By mentally stepping back and watching what it is we are doing, we begin to free ourselves from the compulsive nature of that act. As the compulsive aspect of our behavior lessens, we are able to notice other things we could be doing instead- constructive things, things that will in fact enhance our struggle for self-worth and not further weaken it. This is what our tradition means when it teaches us "to turn from evil and do good" (Psalm 34:12).

Do not imagine that we can break our habits; all we can do is turn from them, do something else, and let the habits break of their own accord. In this way, we suddenly find-through no effort of our own-that the habit is not binding: that the drink, the food, the sex, the stealing, the gambling is no longer necessary. It is not that we willfully refrain from the bad habit, but that we no longer find the act compelling. There is something else to do. Not something that simply distracts us, though this may be true in the beginning, but something that really needs to be done. Great or small, there is always something that needs doing if we attend to life with the fullness of our minds.

14 STEP ELEVEN

SOUGHT THROUGH PRAYER AND MEDITATION TO
IMPROVE OUR CONSCIOUS CONTACT WITH GOD AS
WE UNDERSTOOD GOD, PRAYING ONLY FOR
KNOWLEDGE OF GOD'S WILL FOR US AND THE POWER
TO CARRY THAT OUT.

*In your heart, which measures no larger than your hand, you can
comprehend the world and its entire essence.*

- Rabbi Israel Salanter

God is Reality— That Which Is Happening Now. God cannot be defined, packaged, boxed, or studied, for to do so would imply that we could separate ourselves from God and look at It objectively. We cannot separate from God any more than a wave can separate from the ocean. God is both too intimate and too awesome for us to reduce to neat systems of belief or dogma. This is why we Jews have always spoken of God as the Unspeakable.

The name YHVH, the highest rendering of God in the Jewish tradition, is unpronounceable. It is a non-sense word, an anti-word, a word that points beyond words and toward encounter. YHVH is a word that reminds us that words alone are insufficient; action, doing for God, doing godly deeds, mitzvot is more important than speaking godly words.

YHVH requires us to live without answers, without isms, without the comfort of dogma and belief. Thus: Do not seek to understand death-grieve when a loved one dies, and die when it is your turn to do so. Do not try to understand why that one has more money than you-live within your means and recognize that whatever you have is a gift. Do not try to understand why there is suffering in the world-just suffer when it is your turn and comfort others when it is theirs. Do not try to understand why there are starving people in the world-just feed them. Do not try to understand why there are naked people in the world-just clothe them. Do not try to understand why there are homeless people in the world-just shelter them. Later, when bellies are full, clothing is available, and shelter is secure-then there will be time for talk and theory. Now there is time only for action.

Knowing YHVH means knowing that we do not know and doing anyway. Knowing YHVH means putting aside all our intellectual conceit and lending a helping hand. When Step Eleven urges us to come into ever deeper contact with God, it does not mean to remove us from the everyday world. On the contrary, from a Jewish perspective, God is found only in the everyday. As the prophet Micah taught us: By doing justly and loving mercy, we will learn to walk humbly with God (Micah

Meaning what? Simply this: Action is at the root of humility. The truly humble person is one who does what needs to be done. Nothing is ever beneath the station of the humble. The truly humble person is not one who walks around with chin to chest, avoiding the eyes of others. This is not humility. The humble person meets the eyes of others, seeing in them reflections of God, knowing that each is a center of Infinity, each is worthy of life and love and caring-as is the humble person herself. The humble person does not lower himself before others, but raises both self and other to the plane of divine equality. When in the Book of Leviticus it says, "Love your neighbor as yourself," it means that when we love, we realize that our neighbor is ourself. This is the humility that comes when we increase our awareness of our connection to God, for the closer we are to God, the godlier our behavior toward others.

How do we accomplish Step Eleven? Through prayer and meditation, to be sure. And also, through humility and action. By acting godly (rather than God-like), we will discover the One who is both self and neighbor. A story about the nineteenth century sage Rabbi Akiva Eger illustrates this Step most wonderfully. Rabbi Akiva was traveling with Rabbi Yaakov to the city of Lissa, Poland, to attend a gathering of Torah sages. When they arrived, the sages gathered around their carriage and in a display of honor, unhitched the horses and began themselves to pull the carriage toward the inn. Rabbi Akiva, certain that the honor was being bestowed upon Rabbi Yaakov, hopped out of the carriage and joined the other sages in pulling it through town. Rabbi Yaakov, certain that the honor was meant for Rabbi Akiva did the same.

After a while, the sages realized that they were pulling an empty carriage. They took it to the barn and walked to the inn together.

Through meditation and prayer, we can realize that the carriage is empty-that there is no high or low, no good or evil- only Reality that needs attending. Through humble action, we can get ourselves out of the carriage, surrender the last vestiges of a bloated and abusive ego, and begin to walk together with all living things in celebration of Life and in pursuit of peace.

15 STEP TWELVE

HAVING HAD A SPIRITUAL AWAKENING AS THE RESULT OF THESE STEPS, WE TRIED TO CARRY THIS MESSAGE TO OTHERS, AND TO PRACTICE THESE PRINCIPLES IN ALL OUR AFFAIRS.

Salvation is attained not by belief in metaphysical dogma, but solely by love of God expressed in action.

- Crescas, Or Adonai, c.1400

Our journey is complete, and we have gone nowhere. We have arrived only to discover we were already there. We haven't changed, we haven't grown—we have awakened; awakened to our true nature as children of God, holy beings. And, having awakened, we are startled to see so many people still asleep. We have an obligation to the sleepers, and meeting that obligation is the message of Step Twelve.

So what shall we do? Run around shaking people awake? "Hey, wake up! Look around! Don't you see what you're missing, what you're doing? What's the matter with you?" Or shall we preach to those who do not believe? "What, do you think I'm lying? Don't you see how I have changed?"

And argue with those who disagree? "Hey, I don't have to put up with this garbage from you. Forget it! You want to stay the same, then stay the same; it's no business of mine. I'm outta here."

Or shall we coyly wait for them to come to us saying: "I can see that you are new person. How did you do it? Teach me; I, too, want to change"? All these approaches are traps, for they separate us from the community, elevate us above the others, and erode the humility we sought with Step Eleven.

When we are truly humble, we realize that our opinions about what is best for another must be set aside. We cannot rescue others or take up their burden; we have enough trouble managing our own lives, let alone seeking to run the life of someone else. All we can do, all we need to do, is act godly toward all. If we model godliness, others may learn from us. Our obligation is to model, not to meddle.

Too often, when we have experienced some sense of awakening, we leap into the carriage of Rabbi Akiva and expect people to lead us through town as heroes. When they don't, we become angry. When we become angry, we try to change things, and when we try to change things, we fall back into old habits and all is lost.

The Twelfth Step is not about changing things, but about living the Reality to which we have awakened and doing what must be done moment to moment. Does this mean we are never to mention what we have experienced?

Not at all. When it is appropriate, what needs to be done is to share your experience. But do not impose your will upon the moment; simply attend to what is happening and you will know if now is the time to speak. By getting out of the carriage and walking with the people, you will know what needs to be done, for you are and always will be one of them, one of us.

When we do speak of our experience, we must speak simply, plainly. We should not become involved in theory or argument. We must speak from the heart about what we know to be so from experience. Others may accept or reject what we say but cannot argue with it. After all, I cannot argue with your experience; I can only seek to validate it with my own or ignore it altogether.

Through it all, it is vital to maintain our humility. Humility allows us to connect with others as equals, to recognize that when we meet, we meet as two waves arising from a single Ocean. Our humility also reveals the true beneficiary of our talk ourselves.

No one will be healed because of us. No one will awaken because we awoke. We speak as a means of pointing the way so another may follow, and we speak to remind ourselves of the way we have come and the need to maintain the integrity of our path. By speaking to others, we review ourselves. And the more we review,

the stronger grows our commitment to maintaining and deepening our level of wakefulness.

But talk is only part of the Twelfth Step. Moses Maimonides was once asked by a student how to go about securing good character traits. Maimonides replied, "Perform those deeds that follow from such traits over and over again until the actions become second nature to you. Then those traits, too, shall become second nature" (*Mishneh Torah, De'ot 1:7*).

In another text, Maimonides wrote, "A person will not attain fine character traits as a result of the performance of one great deed, but rather as a result of the performance of numerous good deeds. Good character will be attained through frequent repetition of good deeds" (*Commentary to Pirke Avot, 3:15*).

The emphasis is on action, the frequent repetition of good deeds. Doing good deeds is not always convenient. Doing good deeds is not always in accord with the feelings of the moment. There will be times when the last thing we feel like doing is the good deed that must be done. And we will do it anyway; this is the strength of the 12-Step traveler. We must accept and surrender our feelings, not fight them. The ego has a right to feel whatever it feels; neither we nor it can control the ebb and flow of feelings. We accept this and get on with doing what must be done, for that, in fact, is why we were born and how we must live out our lives one day at a time.

Each of us is God's way of doing what must be done. Nothing special and yet absolutely vital. Now you know. Now get on with it, one day at a time.

16 THE TEST

When you come to serve God, prepare yourself for temptation.

- Ben Sira 2:1

There is a wonderful Hasidic teaching called The Test: "Why is the sacrifice of Isaac considered so glorious? After all, at the time of this test, Abraham had already reached a high rung of holiness, and so it was no wonder that he immediately did as God asked him!

"When we are tested, all achievements and all holiness are taken from us. Stripped of everything we have attained, we stand face to face with God who is putting us to the test" (Martin Buber, *Ten Rungs*, p. 72). This question can be asked of all of us. Have we not

struggled to reach this level of spiritual awakening? Have we not attained a high rung of holiness? Have we not already passed the test?

This itself is the final test. The test of our humility. The test of our honesty. If we have learned anything at all, we have learned that there are no rungs-not only in the sense that there is nowhere to go, that God and Eternity are present right Here and right Now, but also in the sense that when the test comes, we are as we were: as vulnerable to failure as ever.

The test is each and every moment. We are forever invited back into our habitual ways of behavior. We are forever invited to seek comfort in old patterns of thought and feeling. How do we know when we pass the test? When we recognize the opportunity to return to old habits and refrain from doing so. And the opportunity arises day by day. We will, of course, make mistakes; we are human, after all. And we can correct our mistakes. No mistake is forever. No victory either. The test and the challenge are moment to moment.

When we are tested, we are stripped of all we know and think we know, of all we have attained intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. When we are tested, we stand naked before Reality. Only when we surrender our successes as well as our failures will we stand with God and pass the test.

Throughout our Twelve Steps, we have learned to surrender our failings, our habits, our negativity. The final test, the never ending

test, requires that we surrender what we imagine we have attained. This is true humility: we surrender even the notion of humility. We become utterly ordinary, for it is the utterly ordinary that is in fact the totally miraculous.

Working through the Twelve Steps is an arduous undertaking. All who attempt it and stay with it deserve to be called heroes. But heroes or not, we are all waves of God's ocean. Heroes or

not, we all deserve the basic respect and dignity due every being. "Remember," Rabbi Sholomo used to teach, "the worst thing that can befall us is to forget that we are the children of God."

Rabbi Rami

Rabbi Rami Shapiro is an award-winning poet and essayist, whose liturgical writings are used in prayer services throughout North America. Rabbi Rami is a graduate of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion and holds a doctoral degree in religious studies from Union Graduate School. A congregational rabbi for 20 years, Rabbi Shapiro currently directs the One River Foundation (www.one-river.org), a not-for-profit educational center for the study of the world's religions. His books include:

The Prophets, Annotated and Explained, Skylight Paths

Open Secrets, Monkfish

Hasidic Tales, Annotated and Explained, Skylight Paths

The Wisdom of Solomon, Bell Tower/Random House

The Way of Solomon, Harper San Francisco

Minyan, Bell Tower/Random House

Rabbi Rami travels and teaches throughout North America. If you would like to bring him to your community as a scholar-in-residence, or to run workshops or retreats, please contact him through his web site www.rabbirami.com/.

This is the Path

12-Step in a Jewish Context

www.rabbirami.com

