

## Lesson One

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### Questions on the nature of God

*Paragraph 1 from the Introduction to the Zohar*

Rabbi Ashlag opens the *Introduction to the Zohar* with questions that touch us all. These are questions that concern the nature of reality and the purpose of our lives. The answers to these questions form the rest of this work.

In this first lesson we shall try and understand the questions that Rabbi Ashlag asks, just as they are. Although we might already have ideas concerning these issues, it is important to refrain from giving our own answers, as this interferes with our ability to relate to what Rabbi Ashlag is saying. A good approach to adopt is one of an open heart and an open mind, enabling us to truly hear what Rabbi Ashlag has to teach.

When we consider the questions Rabbi Ashlag is asking we first of all need to understand them in Rabbi Ashlag's own terms, only then can we look and see how they apply to ourselves. We begin with the first paragraph:

*Introduction to the Zohar* 1. In this *Introduction* I would like to clarify some seemingly simple matters. These are issues with which everyone is, to some extent, involved, and much ink has been spilled in the effort to clarify them. Despite this, we have not arrived at a sufficiently clear understanding of them.

The first question we would like to ask is, "What is our essence?"

What does Rabbi Ashlag mean by the word 'essence' (Hebrew: *mahut*)? Rabbi Ashlag defines the term 'essence' in his essay *Mavo l'Zohar* (Preface to the *Zohar*):

We need to study now the four different ways we use to think about things. These are: *a*) matter, *b*) form that is clothed in matter, *c*) abstract form, and *d*) essence.

I shall first explain them in connection with things that appear to the senses in this world. For example, when we talk about a warrior or a sincere person or a liar, we have: *a*) his matter, which is his body, *b*) the form that is clothed in his matter, which is his bravery, his truth, or his falsehood, *c*) abstract form; wherein one can abstract the idea of being brave, or of being true, or of being

false from the matter of the man, and understand these three forms, as they are in themselves, as abstract virtues, not clothed in any matter or body. That is, we may conceive of the qualities of bravery, of veracity, or of falsehood, and be able to discern in them positive or negative values when they are abstracted from any matter.

d) The essence of the man.

From this we can see that Rabbi Ashlag rules out the possibility that a person's essence is the body (matter); neither is it the personality (which would be the form, or combinations of form, that are en clothed within the body), nor does a person's essence consist of abstract qualities. So what is the essence of a person?

And you should know that as regards the fourth characteristic, which is the essence of the man as he is in himself without matter, we have no conception of it whatsoever. Our five senses and our imagination can only show us the actions of the essence but cannot reveal to us anything of the essence as it is in itself.

... Our own essence itself, or what it consists of, is completely unknown to us. I feel and know that I take up a place in the world. I am solid, I am hot, and I think, which are some manifestations of the actions of my essence, but if you were to ask me, "What is my essence, my Self from which all these manifestations come?" I would not know what to answer you. Behold! The Divine Providence has withheld from us the ability of conceiving of **any** essence. We are able to grasp only overt manifestations or images of actions, which come forth from essences.<sup>1</sup>

So when Rabbi Ashlag asks, "What is our essence?" he means: What is that aspect of ourselves that is completely unknown to ourselves, which we cannot sense directly, imagine or grasp intellectually, yet which causes outward manifestations of its presence?

At this stage Rabbi Ashlag is simply asking the question; his answers will emerge as we learn.

We proceed to his second question:

*Introduction to the Zohar*    1. (continued) Our second question is, "What is our role as part of the long chain of reality of which we are such little links?"

We need to consider two aspects to this question, 1) What is this long chain of reality? and 2) How are we links in it?

Rabbi Ashlag writes in his work *Hakdamah l'Panim Meior u'Masbirot* (Introduction to the Welcoming and Illuminating Revelations) that consequent to Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of Knowledge, the one eternal soul that was theirs in the Garden of Eden left them. Instead, this soul split up, becoming all the souls that make up the human community—past, present, and future—such that each of us forms a part of the one original eternal soul that God created and gave to Adam and Eve.

To understand the following excerpt from the *Hakdamah l'Panim Meior u'Masbirot* we need to know that the form of receiving for oneself alone, which we may term 'the ego', is a form of receiving that is not in holiness but separates us from the Creator. Concerning this we shall learn subsequently:

From this you may understand the severity of the consequence that followed the eating from the Tree of Knowledge, wherein all human beings became destined for mortality. This is the death, resulting from the eating, of which God forewarned Adam, "on the day that you eat from it you will surely die" (Gen. 2:17). The matter is, there was drawn into Adam's and Eve's limbs a huge form of receiving for oneself alone. This form of receiving came from the *Challal Panui* (empty space) that is the primal vessel of receiving.

This *Challal Panui* is the uncorrected vessel—it receives for itself alone—that came into being following the *Tzimtzum* (contraction, an initial event in the evolution of the spiritual worlds). Subsequent to the *Tzimtzum* the highest light cannot abide together with such a vessel, therefore, the eternal soul, which is described explicitly in the Scripture as, "and God blew into his nostrils the soul of life" (Gen. 2:7), had to leave Adam; the life of the human becoming temporal, dependent on a piece of bread.

This life is not eternal life. Unlike Adam's former life that was intended for himself alone, human life became, in comparison, like little sweat drops of life. That is to say, Adam's former life split into myriad droplets, such that every single drop is one part of his former life.

Thus comes about the matter of the sparks of souls that are shared out among the generations of the entire human community. All the generations of the human community until the last generation, which completes the purpose of creation, form an array of one great chain. In this way, the work of God, may the One be blessed, is not changed at all by the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, but that light of life, that was in its entirety in the first human, is now drawn out to

form a great continuous chain.

This great chain revolves unceasingly on the wheel of myriad forms until the end of the *tikkun* (the rectification of creation) because the works of God are, of necessity, living and enduring. And we go up in holiness and not down. Understand this very well. <sup>2</sup>

How does the knowledge that you are a part of the one eternal soul touch you personally? How does this knowledge affect the quality of your relationships with those who are close to you? How could it change your attitude towards those with whom you have difficulties? How does the knowledge that we are part of the one eternal soul apply to the way we see our generation? To the way we see the Jewish people? To our relationship with the whole of humanity?

This is an opportunity for you to consider yourself as a unique part of an ongoing chain. Take the time to write in your journal your thoughts or ideas on each of these questions.

Now consider what Rabbi Ashlag is implying when he states, “And we go up in holiness and not down.”

The next three questions that Rabbi Ashlag asks in the *Introduction to the Zohar* relate to the disparity that exists between the Creator, as being perfect and eternal, and our experience as imperfect created beings in this world.

*Introduction to the Zohar* 1. (continued) The third question concerns the paradox that when we look at ourselves we feel that we are defective or fallen to the extent that there can be none as despicable as ourselves. But when we look at the Creator who made us, then we find that we must really be creations of such high degree that there are none more praiseworthy than ourselves, since it has to be the case that from a perfect Creator only perfect works can issue.

This question contains a paradox in which there are two elements; one relates to our nature, the second relates to God’s nature.

If we look at ourselves we see our own imperfections, our negative tendencies both of body and emotions. We are not always in good health, we often feel depressed, we do things we feel ashamed of afterwards. Yet if we consider the Creator, who made us, as the ultimate of perfection, then since He made us it follows that we really are perfect beings—despite appearances and despite our own experience—because from a perfect Creator only perfect works could issue.

However, one could infer that God is not a perfect Creator as His works seem to be so imperfect. Although this is a logical possibility, it is not compatible with the perception of our Sages.

At this point we need to consider the fact that the *Tzaddik* (the Sage who has reached enlightenment) perceives the works of God, that is to say God's Providence, in a way that is totally different from the way the ordinary person perceives the world and its events. You may find the following discussion taken from *In the Shadow of the Ladder* (Mark and Yedidah Cohen) to be of help.

#### The Purpose of Creation

"God created the world in order to give pleasure to the created beings," states Rabbi Ashlag in the *Introduction to the Zohar*. This, he says, is the purpose of the creation. It is what we shall experience when the world is based on love.

We all have moments when we experience these words as having a ring of truth to them, but they do not resonate within us in our ordinary consciousness. We have only to look at our own suffering and the suffering of others to know that we are not receiving much pleasure. What can Rabbi Ashlag mean? How does he know that this is the Creator's purpose? He explains in his work *haHakdamah l'Talmud Eser haSefirot* (The Introduction to the Ten Sefirot) that our perception of how the One relates to us changes as we grow in our ability to give and to serve. The study of Kabbalah and its practice teach us how to give unconditionally. As we learn how to give, our perception of how God gives to us refines, grows, and changes.

The ultimate perception of Divine Providence is that of the *Tzaddik*, the enlightened master, who knows and experiences that God is Good and does good to all, unconditionally. It is through the perception of the *Tzaddik* that Rabbi Ashlag knows the purpose of creation. Despite the fact that God as the One is, in essence, unknowable, the *Tzaddik* experiences the light that emanates from God as being totally good, totally giving, and totally benevolent to all that is created.<sup>3</sup>

From this we see that it is our perception as ordinary people that is liable to mislead us as we do not have a true apprehension of the light of God.

Concerning our inability to comprehend the nature of God, the Ari (Rabbi Isaac Luria), the great Kabbalist, teaches in his work the *Etz Chayim* (Tree of Life):

Before the creation of the four worlds there is the *Ein Sof* (the Infinite). He and His Name are One, in a unity both wondrous and concealed, may the One be

blessed. Even the angels that are closest to Him have no conception of the *Ein Sof*, may the One be blessed, since there is no created intelligence that can conceive of the One as He is, as He has no place, no limit, and no name.<sup>4</sup>

If it is impossible for any created being to conceive of the Creator, how can even the *Tzaddik* comprehend Him? Even more so, how can he apprehend the One as being good and perfect? That which the *Tzaddik* perceives is actually of the light that emanates from the One, which is the manifestation of His actions, **but of the essence of God none of us have any conception.**

The knowledge that no one knows what the essence of God is can actually be freeing. Nowadays many people have distorted conceptions of God. These arise from poor previous teaching, cultural conditioning, and factors such as unconscious projections that we put on God, which stem from our childhood. The passages below, taken from the book *In the Shadow of the Ladder*, may be helpful in considering these issues:

#### The Term 'God'

Rabbi Ashlag usually uses the Hebrew word *haShem* (the Name) as referring to God. This is the colloquial term used in Hebrew writings, as well as in spoken Hebrew, as a substitute for the holy four-letter name of God, which is not pronounced. We have translated the term *haShem* as 'God', and this is its accepted translation in the English language. But this carries its own problems. Everyone comes to this work with previous ideas and conceptions carried over from their life-experiences and cultural conditioning, and these can influence our ideas of what God is and color what Rabbi Ashlag is actually saying.

The Ari states, "No thought can grasp the One." The One, in essence, is completely unknowable. No term, name, or attribute that we may ascribe to God can capture the essence of God in any way at all. In this sense, the term 'God' does not have any meaning as such. So, if you have negative connotations or feelings associated with the term 'God', as many of us may have, we suggest that you simply substitute a different term every time you come across the word 'God' in this book. You may find 'The Power of Love' or 'The Source of All', for example, to be more comfortable.<sup>5</sup>

#### Does God have a Gender?

Modern day sensitivity regarding not specifying a gender for God has helped us look closer at the language used in these texts which seem to be implying that God is a 'He'. Is Rabbi Ashlag simply using language from an older era or is a deeper meaning intended?

Male/female polarity is clearly expressed throughout the Kabbalah. The male, according to the language of the Kabbalah represents the attribute of giving. This stems from the simple biological fact that male-ness is expressed in nature through the capacity of giving seed to the female. Female-ness is expressed by the ability to receive seed from the male. This is as true of the plant and animal kingdoms as it is of the human.

God, referred to as 'He', is thus the Kabbalists' way of expressing that aspect of God which has the attribute of Giver. God referred to as 'She' is commonly termed the *Shechinah* and implies the One when displaying the attribute of Receiver.

Since most of the texts relate to the One as according to the attribute of Giver, Rabbi Ashlag usually refers to God as 'He'. Rabbi Ashlag uses the term *Shechinah* when God is displaying the attribute of Receiver, and then uses the female form 'She'. It is clear that Rabbi Ashlag is not implying that God has a gender. He states more than once that the essence of the One is unknowable. God as 'He', in the language of the Kabbalah, does not mean that God is a male. It refers to the One when exhibiting the quality of giving benefit. <sup>6</sup>

The fourth question in our text concerns the goodness of God. As the question points out, this is not at all obvious!

*Introduction to the Zohar* I. (continued) Our fourth question is, "According to our intellect, God must be good and do good, there being no higher good than that which God does. How, then, could the One create so many created beings who, right from the start, suffer and feel pain throughout all the days of their lives? Surely it is in the nature of the Good to do good or, at any rate, not to do so much harm!"

A question from the heart. A question we all ask.

Let yourself feel the pain within this question, identify with the pain in your own way, then write your feelings and your response to them in your notebook.

*Introduction to the Zohar* I. (continued) Our fifth question is, "How is it possible that an eternal Being, without a beginning or an end, could bring into existence created beings which are finite, die, and have an end?"

Since God created us, shouldn't we be eternal like the One?  
Are we like Him?

*Notes*

1. *Mavo l'Zohar, paragraphs 11-12*
2. *Hakdamah l'Panim Meiroi uMasbirot, paragraph 18*
3. *In the Shadow of the Ladder, page 7*
4. *Talmud Eser haSefirot, part 1, chapter 2*
5. *In the Shadow of the Ladder, page 5*
6. *In the Shadow of the Ladder, page 6*