

Radical Love, Radical Acceptance: Two Practices for Healing Anxiety, Shame and other Inner Demons

Every human encounters demons of the soul. For some stronger and some weaker, at certain times and moments more pressing and at others barely noticeable. Yet whether it is as mild as the discomfort of minor stress, slight anxiety or not feeling fully engaged in life or as painful as feelings of worthlessness, dread, numbness or depression these experiences are shared aspects of human life. The Hasidic tradition, in its psychologization of Kabbalah, applied Jewish wisdom to precisely these kinds of challenges, helping us discover paths to freedom and to rediscovering our genuine divine self. This article will introduce you to two practices from within the tradition of how to work with these challenging states in a way that can be healing and transformative. These practices, like many Hasidic practices and approaches, are grounded in the basic Hasidic insight that everything is divine. Both our very selves and, perhaps more surprisingly, even these difficult experiences are understood to be manifestations of divinity. It is through this switch of perspective, not intellectually, but in a felt concrete way, that liberation may be attained.

R. Dov Baer the Maggid of Mezhirech writes, “The principle is that all that a person sees and hears and all the occurrences which happen to him, they all come to awaken him.”¹ The question is how we might use our experiences, even the difficult ones, as paths to awakening. Our natural inclination when difficult experiences arise it to push them away, we understandably want to get rid of these unpleasant sensations. Yet, the Ba'al Shem Tov, Hasidism's founding teacher, explains, this strategy is doomed to fail:

It is the case that “enemies” which come to a person through the blemish [they have caused] in speech must be healed [*le-taknam*] in order to elevate them through the speech of prayer. And if not, if [they] reject them, more haters are made through thickness and corporeality... Therefore [a person] must pray on behalf of their enemies, to heal them and elevate them....”²

Paradoxically, if we fight against these states we simply feed and multiply them. The suffering worsens and we become more overwhelmed. Healing comes, instead, when we are willing to accept them and even extend compassion and love toward them, praying for their healing. This practice then is a practice of both radical love and radical acceptance, a willingness to turn toward our suffering with open arms and a loving heart. If, as the Hasidic masters claim, these experiences are in fact manifestations of divinity (though at times distorted or not fully revealed) then such acceptance and love may make a deep theological and psychological sense. Yet to do this, as the Maggid of Mezhirech explains in the continuation of the passage above, the practitioner must stop and notice the basic quality that lies underneath any particular difficult experience, dropping the story around some experience of anger, for instance, and instead attuning to the felt sense of that anger, and the fear or loss that may underlie it, in the body. To do this requires a willingness to look underneath the surface level of the experience

¹ Maggid Devarav L'Yaakov, 161, pp. 258-259.

² Keter Shem Tov, 75

and cherish the deep spiritual need at its core. We may be caught in anxiety, but we can turn to it and love it when we understand it is simply an attempt, though misguided and not fully developed, to help us feel a deep sense of safety.

The practice then is fairly direct though not always easy. To learn and internalize this practice more deeply, consistent practice and the guidance of an experienced teacher in a course, meditation group or retreat will be crucial. Yet you can start to practice on your own and I'll lead you through the practice in the accompanying video. When you encounter one of these difficult states, do the following:

- Stop
- Pay attention to your body and allow it to feel grounded and connected to the floor.
- Notice if there is anything pleasant in your experience, any qualities you appreciate about yourself, or any beloved people in the world that might help you feel supported or resourced in this courageous work
- Turn towards the difficult experience with as much compassion and love as you can.
- Ask yourself where you feel that experience in the body, while letting go of any story or narrative about the experience, and name the bodily sensations, their size, quality and texture and rest your attention there.
- Then invite that sensation in with as much love and compassion as possible. You are not inviting it in to take you over, but rather to have a hug, a cup of tea, or share a warm blanket. Use anything that might help you cultivate love and compassion towards this part such as:
 - Speaking to it with terms of endearment “come in honey, come on in sweetie”
 - Imagining it as a child, yourself as a small child, or any other image that gives rise to care and compassion.
 - Putting your hand on your heart or on the place of tension in the body.
- Finally soften into the sensation, offering it love and healing on the outbreath, praying for that difficulty with your body.

The second technique involves shifting our understanding of ourselves. R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, the Piaseczner Rebbe, teaches the following:

A parable of a prince who was sent by his father to a country of barbarians to bring them under the control of the king. And when he arrived there he went astray after them and learned their ways: to steal, rob, and do all manner of abominations, God forbid. His father sent messengers to reform him but he did not listen to them. They cursed him and struck him etc. but he did not listen to them as is the way of thieves who, for the most part, are not improved by being caught and beaten.

And the king was greatly troubled both concerning the cruel blows his son received and by the fact that they were not effective [in reforming his son]. And he sighed and said “will my son, God forbid, remain in his woundedness and his lowliness, despised and base?”

Then one of those who loved the king arose and said “I will go and try to reform him but not through the methods used by those who went before me. I do not want whips, straps and lashes for my way. On the contrary, all the palaces and delights which were the princes and that which remains for him will reform

his deeds. For they are neglected following the desolation they underwent when the prince was estranged from them, and we will restore [them] and clean and purify [them]. All the candles and lamps will be lit, the silver and gold vessels will be polished, and the windows and doorways will be thrown open so that their light will shine from afar. Give me only a telescope.”

He went to the prince who was carrying on amongst the ruffians and he gave him advice saying ‘leave this’ etc. etc. But he responded loudly and did not want [to accept his advice]. And he took the telescope and said to him “please look at that room, and the light, and all the good that is prepared for you when you do what I command.” And a different spirit entered him: “What! I am a prince! And before me is preserved and prepared such light, purity and brightness that I am almost blinded by the great light!” And he and his situation became scornful in his own eyes, so too with each element [of his life], until all the lowly desires and feelings vanished. And from then on he improved bit by bit and returned to the king.³

The prince, much like ourselves, gets lost, he forgets who he is and starts to act in ways that are not in alignment with his true nature. Criticism, shame, blows and judgment, just as with us, are not successful at creating any sense of transformation. Yet thankfully there is one wise counselor who knows the prince can be transformed if he is able to once again remember who he is, his goodness and luminosity. So too when we are caught in harmful patterns and painful feelings such as shame or worthlessness, we can transform by helping ourselves recall what the Hasidic teachers understand to be our true open, loving, good and luminous nature.

There are deep practices to help us see our divine nature and touch the openness, love and clarity that lies underneath our habitual patterns and challenging emotional states. Developing these practices will require more sustained practice and instruction than can be provided in this article and I encourage you to attend a Jewish mediation retreat, course or sitting group that can support you in cultivating this way of seeing yourself that R. Shapira teaches us. Here, I want to introduce a practice that can start to allow us to see our true nature. The instructions are simple:

- Stop
- Pay attention to your body and allow it to feel grounded and connected to the floor.
- Do any or all of the following to remind yourself of your basic goodness and luminosity (these practices are your telescope)
 - Recall a specific concrete helpful action that you have done.
 - Bring to mind a quality you cherish in yourself.
 - Picture yourself as a baby, smiling and full of joy. Notice your natural delight and goodness (just as all babies are naturally good and worthy of love).
 - Think of someone who loves you and imagine them telling you about your nature and who you are.
 - Touch into your basic virtuous desire for openness, peace, happiness and joy (like all human beings)
 - Consider the miracle of your existence, how unlikely it was that the specific circumstances (people, timing, location, relationships, history, etc.) which led to your creation arose.

³ R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, Rosh HaShanah 2nd Night 5691, pp. 227-231

- Remind yourself that you are held in God's love.
- When you rest your mind on any of these insights, allow whatever pleasant or good feelings arise to permeate your body. Marinate in these feelings and allow yourself to feel the sense of support and clarity they bring.

These understandings of the nature of ourselves and our experiences and these concrete practices of transformation can be practiced at any time and in any place. They can be taken as a formal practice, and indeed that training is crucial, but they can also importantly be used in the midst of life whenever they are necessary, sometimes for as little as a few seconds. For these ways of seeing ourselves to truly take hold and be transformational, we must practice them. I hope this wisdom from the Hasidic tradition can serve you as you continue to awaken to who you truly are.

Bio

Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels Ph.D. is the founder and executive director of Or HaLev: Center for Jewish Spirituality and Meditation (<http://orhalev.org/>) which offers online and physical Jewish meditation and spirituality courses, sitting groups and retreats. He has been studying and teaching meditation and Jewish spirituality for almost twenty five years. He received his Ph.D. in Jewish Studies from the University of Chicago and rabbinic ordination from Rabbi Daniel Landes, the Rosh Yeshivah of Pardes. He has taught and innovated programs in Jewish thought, mysticism, spiritual practices and meditation at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, Haifa University, Yeshivat Hadar and in a variety of settings around the world. He strives to integrate his study and practice and to help teach and live Judaism as a spiritual discipline.