

# Infinite Meaning

Life in the religious sense is about meaning and purpose, not just ordinary meaning, but infinite meaning, not just ordinary meaning, but Divine meaning. Meaning is something always with us. Heschel tells us:

Human being is never sheer being; it is always involved in meaning. The dimension of meaning is as indigenous to his being human as the dimension of space is to stars and stones. Just as man occupies a position in space, so has he a status in what may be called metaphorically a dimension of meaning. He is involved even when unaware of it. He may be creative or destructive; he cannot live outside it. Human being is either coming into meaning or betraying it. The concern for meaning, the gist of all creative efforts, is not self-imposed; it is a necessity of his being.<sup>1</sup>

It is about infinite meaning that we read in Genesis.

*With a beginning God created the heaven and the earth. The earth was unformed and void. Darkness was over the surface of the deep and the spirit of God was hovering over the water. God said:*

*Let there be light.*

*And there was light. God saw how good the light was, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, **One Day**.*<sup>2</sup>

*With a beginning* means in each of our circumstances. *Heaven* means the place of essence, the place of meaning. *Earth* means the vessel that can hold meaning. But meaning is not necessarily already within it. That is why the earth was unformed and void. Absence of meaning is darkness.<sup>3</sup> The spirit of God is a symbol for that which calls forth. And we are given the image of darkness being juxtaposed to the spirit of God.

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<sup>1</sup>Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1968, p50-51.

<sup>2</sup>*Genesis* 1:1-5.

<sup>3</sup>For darkness חושך, connotes obstacle, חשך. “These are the dark and confusing moments of life when a person feels God is hidden from him.” Rebbe Nachman, *Likutey Moharan, Vol X*, Breslov Research Institute, Jerusalem, 1993, p55.

- *Darkness was over the surface of the deep,*
  - that which we do not yet understand can be a carrier of meaning,
- *and the spirit of God was hovering over the water,*
  - that which we understand to be a carrier of meaning.

What is the difference between the deep and the water? We call something deep before we understand how it is a holder of meaning. We call something water after we understand how it is a holder of meaning.

And what happens in this juxtaposition of darkness and the Spirit of God, the Spirit of God which calls forth? God says: *Let there be light*. God calls forth into being the light that always is. That is, the sacred meaning that always is shall come into existence. And indeed sacred meaning comes into existence. Sacred meaning, Divine Purpose, is called good.

Then God separates the light from the darkness. This is not a separation within the sacred meaning that always is. Rather, the separation tells us that within sacred meaning is light and darkness: light, that which we experience as sacred meaning, and darkness, that which we do not understand as sacred meaning.

Now sacred meaning is infinite meaning, meaning that goes beyond me, myself and I. Divine Purpose may not be my purpose and when it is not, I will undoubtedly be led to suffer. Divine purpose is always good. But its goodness cannot be measured by my feelings of pleasantness or unpleasantness, Neither can it be measured by my sense of whether the suffering I am experiencing at the current moment is deserved or undeserved. Its goodness can only be measured by the opportunity it gives me to think, feel, say, and act in a way by which I can more fully receive the goodness that God is constantly giving me. Sometimes those opportunities come in a way of stress and pain. Sometimes those opportunities come in a way of joy and happiness.

There is a significant difference between finite meaning and infinite meaning. Finite meaning is always particularized and limited to me, myself, and I. Infinite meaning is not so limited. Infinite meaning goes beyond me, myself, and I. It is freedom that comes with infinite meaning. Infinite meaning can hold within itself a unity of what appears to be opposites. Indeed from the viewpoint of finite meaning the opposites are opposites. But from the viewpoint of infinite meaning it is only the appearance that is in diversity because the appearance is always and necessarily interpreted through finite

meaning. From the point of view of infinite meaning there is yet something more beyond the appearance, there is always an essential and active divine unity.

Finite meaning is a thought we comprehend; infinite meaning is a thought that comprehends us; finite meaning we absorb; infinite meaning we encounter. Finite meaning has clarity; infinite meaning has depth. Finite meaning we comprehend with analytical reason; to infinite meaning we respond in awe. Infinite meaning is uncomfortable, not compatible with our categories. It is not to be grasped as though it were something in the world which appeared before us. Rather it is that in which the world appears to us. It is not an object – not a self-subsistent timeless idea or value; it is a presence.<sup>4</sup>

*God called the light Day and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, **One Day**.* This means that these notions of sacred meaning that we experience as sacred meaning and that which we do not understand as sacred meaning are part of the same unit, the **One Day**. The **One Day** is a higher level unit of sacred meaning. It begins with evening, the onset of darkness, the onset of the absence of meaning. It ends with the morning, the onset of the light of the sun, the entrance into our consciousness of our experience of sacred meaning, a meaning which always is. This experience is the experience of the Divine presence.

In our experience of the Divine presence there is wonder and radical amazement.

Wonder, or radical amazement, is a way of going beyond what is given in thing and thought, refusing to take anything for granted, to regard anything as final. It is our honest response to the grandeur and mystery of reality, our confrontation with that which transcends the given.<sup>5</sup>

The essence of being human is value, value involved in human being.  
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The problem of man is occasioned by our coming upon a conflict or contradiction between existence and expectation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1968, p78.

<sup>5</sup>Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1968, p78-79.

<sup>6</sup>Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1968, p12.

Our darkness is the contradiction between the circumstances of our existence and our expectations and desires for the circumstances of our existence. The light is revealed when in the face of these circumstances we experience the sacred meaning that is within them. If sacred meaning was in each moment openly and uniformly seeable in all our circumstances it would not be sacred meaning. For sacredness, as holiness, is that which must stand in its context as being separate from the profane. If everything were statically sacred, our consciousness could not hold, know, or experience any sacred meaning.

Thus our task is an active one. For however meaningful or good it is what we do or however meaningful or good our relationships might be now, the moment that we have lived through the level of sacred meaning we had previously understood, the darkness will come upon us.

All terms of living tend to become stale. Inner renewal is a vital necessity.<sup>7</sup>

The task is not actualization of potentiality but understanding, acknowledging, answering, going beyond the status quo.<sup>8</sup>

Life lived as an event is a drama. Life reduced to a process becomes vegetation. The awareness of life as a drama comes about as a result of knowing that one has a part to play, of realizing that the self is unprecedented and of refusing to regard existence as a waste.<sup>9</sup>

Thus our task is to reveal the light when we find ourselves in darkness, and to always know that there is always light to be revealed regardless how difficult or grim our circumstances may be. And we are always capable of so revealing the light.

In the more traditional religious terminology, the encounter with infinite meaning is our encounter with the holy.

The root meaning of the concept of “the holy” in the holy language is separation: it implies the apartness and remoteness of something. The holy is that which is out of bounds, untouchable, and altogether beyond grasp; it cannot be understood or even defined, being so totally unlike anything else. To be holy is, in essence, to be distinctly other.

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<sup>7</sup>Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1968, p40.

<sup>8</sup>Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1968, p40.

<sup>9</sup>Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1968, p44.

There is much in the world that may be great, good, noble, or beautiful without necessarily comprising any part of the essence of the holy, for the holy is beyond qualification. In fact, it cannot be described in any way other than by the very highest of all designations – that is, as “holy.” The designation itself is the repudiation of all other names and titles.<sup>10</sup>

In order to understand the holy, a distinction has to be made between that which is holy and that which is profane. This distinction causes an immediate inconsistency with respect to the immanence of God. For it suggests that the holy is apart and remote, distinctly other from the ordinary. But the ordinary is indeed holy. The immanence of God, which is surely holy, is that which comes to us in the everyday. And the everyday is not remote from us.

Here we learn that the everyday is holy because it is the carrier of the holy. The apart and separate aspect of holy is exactly the distinction between the carrier and that which is carried. That which is carried is apart and separate from the carrier. The carrier in and of itself is not holy. The carrier when it does not carry the holy is not holy. The carrier is holy only when it carries the holy.

The immanence of God is that which the everyday carries. The transcendence of God is that which is yet beyond being carried. The immanence and the transcendence are One. And this is the reason why

the only one who can be called holy is God; and the Holy One, Blessed be He, the Highest and the Holy One, is unlike all else, being immeasurably remote, elevated, and transcendent. Nevertheless, we do speak of the dissemination of holiness over the world, over all the worlds, according to their levels and even over this world of ours, in all its constituent parts – time, place, and soul. And, in fact, we are even able to increase our receptivity to holiness by opening ourselves to its influence.<sup>11</sup>

And by opening ourselves to its influence, we can do things in a holy manner. Rabbi Schneerson explains:

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<sup>10</sup>Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, Jason Aronson Inc., New Jersey, 1992, p69.

<sup>11</sup>Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, Jason Aronson Inc., New Jersey, 1992, p69-70.

When something is done in a holy manner, the thing itself is not considered as an entity for itself; rather, it is totally given over to its motivating intention: “To establish a dwelling place for God in the lower world.” ... These efforts bring about the revelation of the Shechina (God’s presence) in the world.<sup>12</sup>

Heschel tells us that:

To the biblical man was given the understanding that beyond all mystery is meaning. God is neither plain meaning nor mystery. God is meaning that transcends mystery, meaning that mystery alludes to, meaning that speaks through mystery.

The mystery is not a synonym for the unknown, but rather a term for a meaning which stands in relation to God.

Being is a mystery, being is concealment, but there is meaning beyond the mystery. The meaning beyond the mystery seeks to come to expression. The destiny of human being is to articulate what is concealed. The divine seeks to be disclosed in the human.<sup>13</sup>

So our smile or good thought is the way we disclose the Divine. Our frown or bad thought is the way we hide the Divine, both from ourselves and to those whom we frown. To disclose the Divine, we must be transparent to the transcendent. Rather than block the transcendent, we must let that which is transcending flow through us.

From our point of view, when we encounter the frown someone else is giving us, we will sense an obstacle, a difficulty. But because we let the transcending flow through us, we know that God is hidden in this obstacle. And we know that it is our mission to reveal what is in hiding. And by such revelation, we can draw nearer to God.

Rebbe Nachman teaches us that

one who is wise will be able to find God within the obstacles themselves. For the truth is that there are no obstacles whatsoever in the world. In the very force of the obstacles themselves, God is hidden. Thus, specifically through the obstacles themselves one is able to draw closer to the Holy One, for God is hidden there.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Menachem Schneerson, *Sichos In English*, Sichos In English, Vol 3, Brooklyn, 1979, 131-132.

<sup>13</sup>Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1968, p76-77.

<sup>14</sup>Rebbe Nachman, *Likutey Moharan, Vol X*, Breslov Research Institute, Jerusalem, 1993, p57-59.

We live in a rhythm of successively encountering God's hiddenness and then revealing what appeared to be concealed. The rhythm is the encounter of the obstacle or limitation within us and then our transcendence of it.

In Ezekiel's prophecy of the Divine Chariot, the *Chayot* – the vital forces of creation, the “angels” – are described as “running and returning.”

*And the living creatures were running and returning like the appearance of a flash of lightning.*<sup>15</sup>

They rise up in yearning to transcend their limitations as created beings and to merge in unity with their Creator: they “run out” of themselves. But then they “return” to themselves and their separate existence, because it is the will of God that they should continue to be independent creatures.

So it is with human beings. We may have moments of self-transcendence and intimate closeness with God – “running.” Nevertheless, they are always temporary. God's will is that as long as we remain in this world, these moments of merging with God should be followed by a “return” into ourselves and our everyday states of mind. Our purpose in this world is to transcend ourselves and attain closeness to God of our own free will. It would go counter to this purpose if God simply did this for us. We have to “return” to our separate selves in order to continue with our work, until the time comes for us to leave this world.<sup>16</sup>

Sometimes our obstacles, our difficulties, our sufferings, our confusions, and limitations, seem overwhelming. We wonder how can we transcend them.

People often imagine that the barriers they experience in their efforts to come close to God are so great that they will never be able to overcome them. But the truth is that God only sends people difficulties that are within their capacity to overcome, if they fight with enough determination. All obstacles, whether external or internal, are sent by God. Every impediment is therefore a veil for God Himself. In reality there is no obstacle at all.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>*Ezekiel*, 1:14.

<sup>16</sup>Avarham Greenbaum, *Under The Table and How to Get Up*, Tsohar Publishing, Jerusalem, 1991, p162-163.

<sup>17</sup>Avarham Greenbaum, *Under The Table and How to Get Up*, Tsohar Publishing, Jerusalem, 1991, p193.

King David tells his son Solomon:

*Be strong and courageous and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you.*<sup>18</sup>

And what is the work?

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your everything.<sup>19</sup> And these words which I command you this day shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently unto your children, speaking of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes. And you shalt write them upon the door posts of your house and upon your gates.<sup>20</sup>

“With all your everything” means without any restrictions, beyond your limitations, with unbound feeling.<sup>21</sup> How can we love beyond our limitations? Is it not the case that our limitations bound us?

How can we be asked to serve God with an unmeasured commitment? Rabbi Schneerson teaches that

the Torah is not asking that the soul expire in passionate yearning. What Torah expects is that we go beyond our nature, break our normal patterns of service to God.<sup>22</sup>

So at any time, we operate within a set of limitations. Beyond limitations means that we are spiritually capable of moving the limitations that currently bound us. It means that we must be constantly in a mode of moving and extending our limitations out thereby enabling us to reach higher and higher levels of closeness to God.

Rabbi Schneerson further teaches that

The verse

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<sup>18</sup>*I Chronicles* 28:20.

<sup>19</sup>We have translated the word **כָּל־דְּבָרְךָ** by everything. The usual translation is might.

<sup>20</sup>*Deuteronomy* 6:4-9.

<sup>21</sup>Menachem Schneerson, *Sichos In English*, Vol 3, (Brooklyn NY: Sichos In English, 1979), p153.

<sup>22</sup>Menachem Schneerson, *Sichos In English*, Vol 3, (Brooklyn, NY: Sichos In English, 1979), p77.



*And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,  
with all your soul and with all your might.*

refers to two general types of service. “With all your heart” and “with all your soul” is service bound by limitations; “with all your might” is service that transcends limitations. And since, whenever the Shema is recited, the entire verse is said (and not divided into two), it is clear that one’s service must simultaneously be “with all your heart, with all your soul” and “with all your might.” That is, the service of “with all your might” must penetrate the service of “with all your heart, with all your soul,” similar to the idea that *newness* (service transcending limitations) must penetrate regular, routine service.<sup>23</sup>

The work is to love<sup>24</sup> God. To love God means to be engaged in and to encounter sacred meaning. The only way this happens is when we are conscious that there is more to everything we see than what is seen. By maintaining this consciousness we can transcend limitations. This is what it means to have these words which God commands in our heart. As God commands so it is our will.<sup>25</sup> There is more to everything we see than what is seen. There is yet something of greater essence behind it, deeper than it. There is yet something of greater essence that is the animating and vitalizing spirituality of it. Leaving open that there is something yet beyond the appearance of things leaves ourselves open to receive the infinite. This is what leaves room for God and thereby makes it possible for us to transcend the limitations in wherever or whatever we are.

Furthermore, we are commanded that this teaching is to be shared. It must be diligently taught to our children. Now our children are produced by our procreation. Here children means not only the children that are produced by our procreation, but our children means all that we creatively produce. Creatively produce does not mean here the inanimate objects of creative work. Rather it means the living relationships we participate in with those in our circles. Each day we spend time in a relationship, that relationship is the child we produce. And whether there seems to be nothing happening or changing, which is when we sit in our house, or whether the relationship is actively alive, which is when we walk by the way, or whether the relationship

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<sup>23</sup>Menachem Schneerson, *Sichos In English*, Sichos In English, Vol 13, Brooklyn NY, 1982, p161.

<sup>24</sup>כֶּתֶר of חֶסֶד.

<sup>25</sup>כֶּתֶר of כֶּתֶר.

is in the process of being suspended, which is when we lie down, or whether the relationship is in the process of being activated, which is when we rise up, there is yet something of greater essence involved than we are able to put into conceptual form.

Even when we produce objects by the work of our hand or when we see the objects that others produce by the work of the hand there is yet something of greater essence involved. Thus these words must be bound on our hands and must be in the foremost of our minds with purely physical things.

What we do with our hands constitutes the everyday, the ordinary. The everyday is the carrier of the immanence of God. In addition to the tefillin which are bound on our hands, to bind them for a sign upon our hands means that we should always be doing the everyday while being conscious of the holiness it carries. In addition to the head tefillin which are frontlets between our eyes, to be frontlets between our eyes means that we should always have it in our consciousness that the immanence of God is carried by the everyday that we encounter. It means that we should always be seeing the holy in the everyday. It means that we should always keep our third eye open to receive the sacred.

And the last verse of this paragraph is in some sense the most informative. It says that these words must be on the doorposts of our house and upon our gates. The doorposts of our house is the entranceway to where we live, the crown jewel of what we are. This is our will.<sup>26</sup> The gates of our house is the entranceway to our land. Land refers to our consciousness. The entranceway to our land is the entranceway to our consciousness. The entranceway to our consciousness is the border. So the verse is telling us that at the border of our will, at the border of our consciousness, there is yet something more. This means that what we understood to be border is not border. The border has yet borders beyond the border. Even though we might act as if we cannot go beyond the border we see as border, the border can be moved for there is yet border beyond, we have yet land beyond the land enclosed by the border! The limitation is therefore with our mind.<sup>27</sup>

Goldsmith tells us that

Freedom comes only when we can break through the limitations of our mind, when we do not try to pin everything down to a meaning or confine every statement to meaning the same thing always. Words

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<sup>26</sup> כְּתָר of כְּתָר.

<sup>27</sup> כְּתָר of בִּינָה.

sometimes seem to be contradictory, but that is because they mean one thing today, and something different tomorrow, when they are used in different ways.<sup>28</sup>

And we acknowledge this going beyond, this freedom, by our awe.<sup>29</sup>

Man's true fulfillment depends upon communion with that which transcends him. ...

All we have is a sense of awe and radical amazement in the face of a mystery that staggers our ability to sense it. ...

Awe is more than an emotion; it is a way of understanding, insight into a meaning greater than ourselves. The beginning of awe is wonder, and the beginning of wisdom is awe.

Awe is an intuition<sup>30</sup> for the dignity of all things, a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something supreme. Awe is a sense for the transcendence, for the reference everywhere to mystery beyond all things. It enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal. What we cannot comprehend by analysis, we become aware of in awe.<sup>31</sup>

We are open to the experience of awe because we have faith *emunah*, אמונה.<sup>32</sup>

Emunah is founded on our deepest intuitive sense that there is something grand and wondrous about life. Emunah is an acceptance of the superior wisdom of the Torah without asking for proofs. It is an affirmation of God and a willingness to reach out to Him on every level of our being: in our thoughts, feelings, words and actions.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Joel Goldsmith, *A Parenthesis In Eternity*, Harper and Row, 1986, p20.

<sup>29</sup>כְּתָר of נְבוּרָה.

<sup>30</sup>חִכְמָה of כְּתָר.

<sup>31</sup>Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1968, p87-89.

<sup>32</sup>כְּתָר of כְּתָר.

<sup>33</sup>Avarham Greenbaum, *Under The Table and How to Get Up*, Tsohar Publishing, Jerusalem, 1991, p13.

By our willing faith we become open to receive the holy.

In his great vision Isaiah perceives the voice of the seraphim even before he hears the voice of the Lord. What is it that the seraphim reveal?

*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory.*<sup>34</sup>

Holy, holy, holy – indicate the transcendence and distance of God. The whole earth is full of His glory – the immanence or presence of God. The outwardness of the world communiates something of the indwelling greatness of God.

The glory is neither an aesthetic nor a physical quality. It is sensed in grandeur,<sup>35</sup> but it is more than grandeur. It is *a presence or the effulgence of a presence*.

The whole earth is full of His glory, but we do not perceive it; it is within our reach but beyond our grasp. And still it is not entirely unknown to us.<sup>36</sup>

And because it is not entirely unknown to us and because we encounter its presence, we can celebrate.<sup>37</sup>

Celebration is a confrontation, giving attention to the transcendent meaning of one's actions.

Celebration is an act of expressing respect or reverence for that which one needs or honors. In modern usage, the term suggests demonstrations, often public demonstrations, of joy and festivity, such as singing, shouting, speechmaking, feasting, and the like. Yet what I mean is not outward ceremony and public demonstration, but rather inward appreciation, lending spiritual form to everyday acts. Its essence is to call attention to the sublime or solemn aspects of living, to rise above the confines of consumption.

To celebrate is to share in a greater joy, to participate in an eternal drama. In acts of consumption the intention is to please our own

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<sup>34</sup> *Isaiah* 6:3.

<sup>35</sup> כְּתָר of תְּפִאֲרוֹת.

<sup>36</sup> Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1968, p89-90.

<sup>37</sup> נִצְחָה of כְּתָר.

selves; in acts of celebration the intention is to extol God, the spirit, the source of blessing. ...

To celebrate is to invoke His presence concealed in His absence.<sup>38</sup>

So this is how we come to serve God with joy. This service is with feeling and deed.<sup>39</sup>

... it is written, “The precepts of God bring joy to the heart,” and this study should lead to deed, an increase in the performance of *mitzvos behiddur*, in a careful<sup>40</sup> and beautiful manner.

From “serving God with joy,” we should proceed to spreading joy and happiness in the most literal sense, making efforts that the members of one’s household and similarly, all of those with whom one comes in contact, experience greater joy. And this will lead to the ultimate joy, the coming of the Redemption.<sup>41</sup>

*And now, O Israel, what is it that the Lord your God demands of you? It is to revere the Lord your God, to walk only in His paths, to love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, keeping the Lord’s commandments and laws, which I enjoin upon you today, for your good.*<sup>42</sup>

As King David tells his son Solomon,

*Know the God of your father, and serve Him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing soul, for the Lord searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will be found by you. But if you forsake Him, He will reject you forever.*<sup>43</sup>

What does it mean that we will be rejected forever? It means that if in some circumstance we do not reach the level of the **One Day** consciousness,

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<sup>38</sup>Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1968, p117.

<sup>39</sup>בְּתֵר מְלִכּוּת.

<sup>40</sup>יְסוּד of בְּתֵר.

<sup>41</sup>Menachem Schneerson, *Sichos in English, Vol 51*, Sichos in English, Brooklyn, 1992, p238.

<sup>42</sup>*Deuteronomy* 10:12-13.

<sup>43</sup>*Chronicles* 28:9.

that possibility of the **One Day** is lost to us forever. For sure there will be other opportunities, but the one we miss is missed forever. So the message is that we should strive to never miss any opportunity for the **One Day** experience.