

Thoughts on Spirituality, Prayer, Life and Death

[View PDF](#)



Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, born in Poland in 1924, arrived in New York in 1941 when his family fled Nazi Europe. He studied in New York and was ordained by the Lubavich Hassidic yeshiva. As he pursued his studies in psychology, religion, and spirituality, he broke away from Lubavich and ultimately became the father of the Jewish Renewal movement. This article appears in issue 9 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

What is the most significant thing that ever happened to you, and what did it teach you?

It doesn't work that way, because there are moments when one thing is significant and moments when something else is significant. For a man to be present at the birth of a child is an overwhelming thing. I've been present at the birth of my children, and it's really amazing. I think that's the greatest, deepest miracle because all other things have their space . . . Yet when I look back, every once in a while I make a list of high moments and start saying, "There were moments of love; there were moments of insight; there were moments of prayer." There were even moments of terror, almost like facing death, which made me say, "Aha! Now I understand what it's all about." But I'm still learning about spiritual and holy eldering. Most people don't know how to live the holy life after retirement. You see, popes have remained in the saddle and rabbis have remained in the saddle until they die. I would like to learn how to withdraw gradually from the active life and to spend the last years furthering my solitude with God. That's what I feel life has to teach me. I'm learning to let go of things that are not in my hands to change, learning to live with what, otherwise, would be increasing frustration when I get older.

Life is my teacher. Artificial intelligence is trying to do what natural intelligence is doing. Natural intelligence means that a naturally intelligent organism continues

to learn throughout life. Each situation provides a deeper learning, greater learning, a more profound learning. We're all going through a learning, so if I had to pick out one learning as the most significant, I'd say, "I can't; it's constant. The learning that is happening in life is constant because life is a teaching machine." From whom did I learn about life? I learned from life about life, by living life.

Socialized Meditation

Meditation is usually a solitary task. At times one feels that it may only be a solipsistic preoccupation. Much growth happens when meditation is socialized.

We learn from teachers. Here is an example from the Hassidic master, Reb Moshe Kobriner in a little town in Lithuania. People would come to him from all sides asking all sorts of questions. One day he was having his breakfast and all he has is some kasha (buckwheat cereal), and another man comes in and says, "Master, I have so many troubles."

"Blessed art Thou, O Lord, King of the Universe Who has made everything by Thy Word," said Reb Moshe Kobriner (and this was the proper blessing to make before one eats kasha.)

And the man said, "Master, didn't you hear me? I have so many troubles." And Reb Moshe said, "You know, your father once came to me with the same situation, and he heard me give this blessing that everything comes by His Word and he stopped complaining. Don't you hear?"

Not only with teachers can one enter into such shared meditation. When Buber taught us of the I- -Thou relationship, he spoke of healing through meeting. From my experiences in "socialized meditation" I am convinced that we need to move beyond transpersonal psychology to transpersonal sociology.

All of our conflict resolution efforts not yet managed to turn a recalcitrant person into a collaborating member of global society. The research in this area is vital to our survival. Look at the extremely sophisticated teamwork in technology that can produce a stealth bomber—and compare this to the primitive state of correcting societal dysfunction.

Cycles and Cycles

Prior to this cycle of world creation, there were other cycles of world creation. Holy sparks from those other cycles of world creation, when they were broken, lodged here. Our task is to find those sparks, gather them and bring them

together, and restore the balance in the cosmos—to enthrone God again. The Divine Crown, as it were, has gems missing, and in each physical act, we pick up a spark here, a spark there, and bring them together. When all sparks have been gathered, our tradition speaks about the coming of the Messiah. To me, this means something like global oneness, peace, and harmony.

When we become more conscious of the physical and at the same time aware of the highest spirituality, we'll have what I would call the Resurrection of the Dead. This resurrection happens together on a physical and spiritual level. The physical plane is our plane of observation, though everything that happens on a physical plane is not open to our observing. We don't see with our eyes what is happening between atoms, but if we were on the atomic level we would say, "Ah, this oxygen atom got married to two hydrogen atoms, and they made a water molecule!" We don't operate on that level of awareness. When I put a pot of water on the stove to cook, a lot of weddings take place between the oxygen from the air and the hydrogen that's in the gas, so water gets created. That's a level of observation, the sub-molecular level, that we don't see.

Now in our personal drama, on another level of observation, higher things are happening. Ultimately it takes a meditative leap into other dimensions to be able to see. There is a Latin phrase *sub specie aeternitatis*, under the aspect of eternity. It means to look down, to see what is happening in the temporal realm. Then we begin to see what Earth is about, what the planet is about, and what history is about from a much higher level. I believe we are just learning the beginnings of the holy psychotechnology, a spiritual psychotechnology that will allow us to get to such places as observing fine moments-or larger ones. Some people have had the larger experiences. Geniuses have had profound mountaintop experiences. I would say, "If they can see the Infinite, they can see the infinitesimal also, because awareness is up and down the scale." By and large, people haven't bothered to look at the infinitesimal. Now, with nanotechnologies becoming important, people are beginning to concentrate on those things.

Care Packages to Eternity

If you see yourself bound by your skin, then you would ask, "How would something I do help the deceased?" When you recognize that half of your chromosomes are your father's, half are your mother's, and a quarter of them are your grandfather's, you realize that your grandfather is still alive in you, in a quarter of your chromosomes. So if you say a prayer, it is almost as if a portion of him is still available to help that other part of him that is beyond. That's why the

disciples of a Master get together at the anniversary of his death to celebrate. There is a feeling that there is so much more of the Master available at that moment.

How does one attain the ideal relationship of body and soul?

First of all, just simply be "you." Feel the earth beneath you; feel the chair; feel how gravity upholds you. Gravity is the way earth loves us and attracts us. We should allow ourselves to be supported by that. Second, do one thing at a time; be totally in that thing you're doing. That's a way to be grounded! The next way to be grounded is to realize that there is stuff above that the groundedness has to support. The point isn't just to be flat on the ground. The point is to be firm enough on the ground so that the rest of you can go up.

What is the greatest obstacle to obtaining new levels?

"The sin that is the hardest to atone for is habit." That is the biggest obstacle to reaching new levels, as one rabbi put it. The more we're in a habitual state, the more unlikely it is that we'll go beyond. We won't be in the moment; we won't be in the here and now. We will hear the routine rather than the challenge that comes at this moment.

Will people eventually reach this ideal?

I believe that all people will reach what they have to reach. I'm a universalist, in that sense. That they will reach the same state is not likely. It is enough for a toe to be the toe of a realized person. If I could be the toe, as it were, of realized humanity, that's fine. Not everybody is going to be the brain cell that fires off a great realization. Still, we'll all be organically connected with that, and the organic connection is what fires, just as an organism has a connection with the toe. So the final enlightenment will have a connection with that concept. It's not likely that there is going to be a final enlightenment. I don't like the word "final", either, because enlightenment continues to the next level and the next level, and it's infinite in God. We no longer have the Temple in Jerusalem, but when it existed, the holiest person on the holiest day at the holiest time in the holiest place would pronounce the holiest word. There would be a kind of implosion of all the Onenesses. That name is a connection, and each year on Yom Kippur, the old connection goes away and the new connection starts coming in. Sins interfere, spoil, and ruin the old connection.

You can't attune to what you merely read.

When we learn how to pray, we learn not just how to recite words, but how to open the heart. It's like biofeedback: When we are with a person who is opening the heart, we can feel attuned to it. "Ah, now it feels right in my heart!" But if somebody says, "Open your heart," and you've never had that "thing," how do you know you've done it correctly? If you're in a larger group where all the people are doing this, and there is a liturgy being celebrated, you get to feel at one with the people who are in this elated place. That's how you attune to it.

Total realization can happen anywhere. It can happen spontaneously, and it can happen under direction. Very often, even that which is under direction requires the moment of grace, of spontaneity. But there are people who can achieve attunement in synagogue but not in the marketplace, for instance.

What are the greatest problems in life?

The main problems in life are making a living, making a loving, and making a dying. Making a living is a big problem for many, many people. When that's together, then there's the question of making a loving—how to have good relationships and to receive and to give love. People who don't have that can have all the money in the world, but it's no good! For people who've had a good life and a good loving and a good living, when the time comes to leave that life, the problem is how to do that gently and gratefully.

Why is there suffering in the world?

That's a question that gets us into trouble! One could say that the greatest education we get is through suffering. Consciousness is being raised through deprivation. I will never know what it means to give people food when they're hungry unless I have experienced hunger myself. I will not know how to help somebody who is in pain unless I have experienced pain myself. One could say suffering is the school for empathy. It creates that, but that's only one element of suffering.

Sometimes suffering exists in order to bring us to our senses. Sometimes suffering exists in order to show us that there are tragedies we can't overcome with our childish omnipotence in the world. We begin to see that every choice we make has its consequences. Suffering is the way in which we learn, after the fact, the consequences of our moves.

Then there are some people who suffer and can't identify this reason or that reason. It's just one of those things. "Why do bad things happen to good people?" is the question behind all that, and I haven't yet found a convincing answer.

Sometimes no matter what we do, we get clobbered! On a lower level of preparation and understanding we would say, "If we do only the good and the true all the time, we're going to be okay." On a higher level being good doesn't help. The biggest ethical questions are based on just that point.

From Religion to Spirituality

Despite the pessimistic outlook on the whole, there are here and there signs of positive breakthroughs. Meditation is embraced by many people who have no other religious commitment. It has now gone beyond the mere "relaxation response" that meditation can provide. It has led people to greater spiritual growth and awareness. While it seems that religion is "out" for many, spirituality is "in." People want to learn how to experience the sacred not just talk about it. There is real interest in how adepts do what they do. This interest is not mere curiosity. It is an inquiry into the how that allows for emulation. We have entered into what I have called the dialogue of devoutness. There is a great comparing of notes, of insight and understanding to be shared by those who reverence the name of God and love Him. God listens, hears, and records these things (Mal. 3:16). Such dialogue concerns souls, their journey to God, the difficulties they encounter on the path.

Dialogue of this sort is between the soul and her God. A person who is too busy to live in a state of vulnerability vis-à-vis God has no way to enter into this dialogue. Such a person can say "I believe this" or "I believe that"—and still be spiritually inactive. Religion to such persons is only the things they give verbal assent to, not the things they experience, not the way they face God. They are registered as a Jew or a Protestant or a Catholic like they register as a Republican or Democrat. The function of a creed is to give people a program for life, not just a list of things to be asserted.

What about death and what happens after death?

I do believe that death is only part of the connection between the physical and the inner. It's like pulling the plug. Most people know enough to get their inner out of the way. Let's say you drive in your car and it's rattling; it's in bad shape. Finally, it's all over. You drive it to the junkyard. You get out of the car, and then a crusher comes and crushes it down. You'd be a fool to sit in it after the car is dead. I have the same attitude toward the body. Bodies wear out, and it's a wonderful thing that they wear out. They get recycled, which gives the passenger a chance to get out and pick another car, another vehicle...or to decide not to walk the earth for awhile.

Our tradition teaches that a whole series of things happens after death. A soul has to go through purification because of the contamination of being on this level and the habits that are acquired on this level. After purification come other things that are delightful, ecstatic, and marvelous. Some of them have to do with the realm of feeling. That is one Heaven. Others have to do with the realm of knowing. That's another Heaven. Then there is the Heaven in which we know intuitively and are known by God.

What is most important to you?

I can't say. It varies and changes. If I can't take a breath of air, then the most important thing is to take another breath of air. Imagine: I'm diving underwater and can't get to the surface. How important a breath of air is then! When I have the breath of air, then what's important is how I reach the shore. I don't believe these things are static. There is a dynamic element that's always before us. Right now what I want is to finish the week. Then, to come to a Sabbath rest is the most important thing. It will keep changing all the time.

I do what I do out of concern. My sense is that the more life, the better education, and the more tools that are made available for people to manage their physical and spiritual life, the better off the planet is going to be. And that's what I'm most concerned about.

What is the highest ideal a person can reach?

There is no general statement one can make, because if I say "X or Y is the highest ideal," then we think everybody has to achieve that. But if you achieve what I have to achieve and I achieve what you have to achieve, then I haven't gotten my realization and you haven't gotten your realization. There are individual differences. The Universe is made up of so many individual bits. Each one has to achieve what it is meant to achieve. For someone who is a dancer, the ideal may be the ideal leap. For another person, it may be the ideal meditation. For another, the ideal act of love, kindness, or charity. You have to specialize in your own thing. One Hassidic Master said it very beautifully: "I'm not afraid that God will ask me, 'Zusha, why have you not become an Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob?' But I am afraid that God will ask me, 'Zusha, why have you not become what Zusha was intended to be?'"

What makes you happy? sad? angry?

I'm happy when I have contentment and moments of no conflict. I'm happy when I feel love coming and going from my heart to those who are around me, when I

feel integrated with the Universe and at peace with God. The opposite makes me sad. To see people suffering and not to be able to help makes me sad. The child has an earache, and there's nothing at this point that can be done. I can hold a child, but it's not going to make the earache go away. To be powerless over pain that others experience is sad. What makes me angry is willful malicious obstruction of the common good.

If you could meet anyone throughout history, whom would you want to meet and what would you ask that person?

I would like to meet myself at the moment after enlightenment . Then I would like to ask, "How did you do it?" All the other people would just satisfy a kind of curiosity, but it wouldn't help me in my stuff, so I wouldn't want to go into the past so much as into the future. But you want me to name somebody in the past I would want to connect with. There are many Hassidic Masters, but I would like to go to the founder of the Hassidic movement, Ba'al Shem Tov, and just be with him and not ask him any questions. I would want to look at him, to have him look at me, and then to pray in such a way that I could learn something from him. I would want to attune to his spirituality. That's all. It's not words I would want .