

Decentering the Self in Early Hasidism

1) Foucault

Michel Foucault dramatically altered the landscape by describing Christian ascetic acts as a means of disciplining or even remaking the self. The focus shifted from external ascetic practices to “technologies of the self,” or “decentering the self,” what Elizabeth Castelli calls “transformative work on the self”... The decentered self, on the contrary, is acutely aware, by a sort of fracturing of the psyche, that the self stands condemned and unworthy, in need of a more radical redemption.

(Ascetic Theology Before Asceticism? Jewish Narratives and the Decentering of the Self. Lawrence M. Wills)

2) Buddhism

When this total moment-to-moment “coming to be and passing away” is experienced, there is a profound understanding of the radical impermanence (*anicca*) of all events. Not only do we no longer perceive any durable “objects,” but even the processes of thinking, feeling, perceiving, and sensing themselves come to be and pass away without remainder. In this experience of perpetual and discontinuous change, such notions as a solid body, a durable perceptual object, an internal representation, or even a fixed point of observation no longer appear tenable. We come to understand the lack of any intrinsic durability anywhere; we become aware of the selflessness (*anatta*) of mind, body, external objects and internal representations. Not only does everything change all the time; there are no “things” which change.

Engler, J. (1986). “Therapeutic aims in psychotherapy and meditation: Developmental stages in the representation of self.” In K. Wilber, J. Engler, & D.P. Brown (Eds.), *Transformations of Consciousness*. Boston: Shambhala.

3) We do not step out of the world when we pray; we merely see the world in a different setting. The self is not the hub, but the spoke of the revolving wheel. In prayer we shift the center of living from self-consciousness to self-surrender. God is the center toward which all forces tend. He is the source, and we are the flowing of His force, the ebb and flow of His tides.

Prayer takes the mind out of the narrowness of self-interest, and enables us to see the world in the mirror of the holy. For when we betake ourselves to the extreme opposite of the ego, we can behold a situation from the aspect of God. (Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for G-d*, p. 7)

4) Asceticism

Although the modern word asceticism has eluded any universally accepted definition, the term, when used in a religious context, may be defined as a voluntary, sustained, and at least partially systematic program of self-discipline and self-denial in which immediate, sensual, or profane gratifications are

renounced in order to attain a higher spiritual state or a more thorough absorption in the sacred. Because religious man (*homo religiosus*) seeks a transcendent state, asceticism—in either rudimentary or developed form—is virtually universal in world religion. (“Asceticism,” Encyclopedia of Religion)

5) “You shall be holy. Separate yourself from sexual transgression and other sin, for wherever you find a fence around sexual transgression, you find holiness.” (Rashi on Leviticus 19:2)

6) When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked... (Genesis 3:6-7)

7) Solomon Maimon account

8) The entire Torah and the entire world contain nothing but the light of the Infinite One (blessed be He) concealed within them. All the verses that speak of this, such as “There is no other than He” and “I fill the heavens and the earth,” are to be taken literally. There is no act, word or thought in which the essence of Divinity is not constricted and hiding.

And so when you look and see with your mind’s eye, you will see the inner, life-force aspect of everything, not just its outer, superficial layer. You will see nothing but the divine power inside all things that is giving them life, being and existence at every moment. And when you listen carefully to the inner voice within any physical sound that you hear, you will hear only the voice of G-d that, at that moment, is literally giving life and existence to the sound that you are hearing. (The Baal Shem Tov).

9) L-rd, open my lips, and my mouth will declare Your praise (Psalms 51:15)

10) Then Moses set up the courtyard around the tabernacle and altar and put up the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard. And so Moses finished the work. Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels. (Exodus 40)

12) The Baal Shem Tov

a) Imagine that you are like a shofar, which resonates only what is blown inside. When you speak, it is the World of Speech speaking through you, and when you think, it is the World of Thought thinking through you. Like a shofar that is not being blown, without them, it would be impossible to speak or to think. This is the meaning of the words: "L-rd, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise" (Psalms 51:17).

b) What is it in a person that feels pleasure or pain? It is his soul and life-force, for when these depart, he feels nothing. Now, this life-force is united with the source of all life and creation, which is G-d. For a person is a portion of G-d, and what is missing in the part is also lacking in the whole, and the whole feels the deficiency of the part. When you remember this, and think about your source, which is the Shechinah, and pray for her, you create a complete unification. This is the meaning of: "Tzaddikim are the messengers of the Matron." Meaning, through their own deprivation and suffering, they know and pray for the lacks in the holy Shechinah.

c) If a person experiences some great pain, G-d forbid, and prays for himself, without realizing that the Shechinah is also suffering and that it would be better to pray for her, or, if in the middle of his prayers, he tries to forget himself and pray for the Shechinah, without truly being able to overcome his own pain, by claiming to be praying for the Shechinah, he may be pushed away entirely, for G-d knows this to be untrue. Therefore, pray simply, on whatever level you are on. Simply keep your mouth and heart together, for "a speaker of lies will not be established before My eyes" (Psalms 101:7).

13) "Someone who requests mercy for his fellow when he needs the very same thing is answered first"

This is because the person who prays for his fellow, even though he needs that very same thing--this is the concept of humility/nothingness. He negates himself, showing no concern for himself whatsoever. Instead, he is sensitive to the suffering of his fellow Jew. And through this negation, he is encompassed in nothingness--corresponding to pre-Creation. He is therefore answered first, because he is in the aspect of first. (R. Nachman of Breslov, *Likutey Moharan* I:22)

14) Andrew Cohen

The Personalization of Feeling

Without a doubt, the most difficult arena of human experience, the place where almost all get perilously lost, is in the experience of feeling. The reason for this is a tendency to personalize almost every experience of feeling that arises. This tendency is a blind and conditioned habit that has become so automatic that most are unable to see beyond it. It is this tendency to personalize almost every feeling that arises that makes it so difficult for human beings to realize a perspective upon their experience of feeling that is truly objective.

One of the greatest challenges for any human being who wants to be free is faced when they dare to step beyond the experience of feeling. Stepping beyond the experience of feeling means allowing

oneself to perceive directly the ultimately impersonal nature of all feeling experience. To do this, every single idea and belief one has ever had about what feelings mean in relationship to the personality has to be suspended. If this can be done successfully, one will be amazed at what one will find. One will be able to see maybe for the very first time how conditioned, how empty of personal significance, how truly impersonal so much of our experience of feeling actually is.

(*Freedom Has No History*, chap. 20, "The Personalization of Feeling")

The *Truth of Impersonality* states that the human experience could never be uniquely yours, mine or anyone else's. And *impersonal* points to the fact that ultimately all human experience is one, and the true nature of that experience is not personal...

As I said in the previous chapters, there is an enormous amount of momentum that has been generated through a blind and compulsive drive to see oneself as being separate. This drive is what ego is. The most significant component of this compulsion is the need to see our own personal feeling experience as somehow *different, special and unique*. Through the ongoing experiential recognition of the impersonal nature of all feeling experience, it becomes increasingly difficult to believe that our own experience could really be as unique or different as we had imagined it to be. In fact, it is in the recognition that the very mechanism of ego can be seen for what it is. Simply put, *the need to personalize itself is ego*. And the destruction of ego occurs when the need to personalize falls away....

But a mind that is enlightened experiences perception that is undistorted *because it is empty of that which is personal...*

The habitual movement to personalize is ego, and its fundamental motive is to see itself as being separate at all times, in all places, through all circumstances. This movement of separation is inherently destructive because it is *always* antithetical to the conscious realization of our true Self.

The courageous willingness to unconditionally renounce this very personal relationship to our own experience is what enable the true Self to freely manifest itself *as ourselves*. It is imperative to recognize the fact that the true Self *could never be personal or unique*. And the degree to which we are able to renounce the need to see our own experience as being personal or unique will be the same degree to which the true Self will become manifest.

When the true Self is able to *freely* express itself, only then will the depth fo our humanity reveal itself in all its fullness and glory. In that individual who has freed him- or herself from the distortion of the persona, that impersonal depth can be instantly recognized as flawless spontaneity, overwhelming compassion and fearless clarity.

(*Embracing Heaven and Earth*, "The Fourth Tenet: The Truth of Impersonality," 35ff)

15) The entire "I" of a coarse and lowly person is limited to his body. Higher than him is a person who feels that his "I" is a synthesis of his body and soul. And above him is someone whose "I" includes his entire household and family. For someone who follows the path of Torah, his "I" includes the entire Jewish people, since every Jew is only like a limb of the body of the nation of Israel.

There are even higher levels in a person who is whole, and who can engender in his soul a feeling that the entire world and all the supernal worlds are his "I," so that he himself being only a small limb in all of creation. Then, his [natural] love of himself will help him love all of Israel, and the entirety of the creation. (R. Shimon Shkop, Introduction, *Sha'arei Yosher*)

16) You know, wherever one goes in the world, human beings are more or less the same. Their manners, behaviour and outward pattern of action may differ, but psychologically, inwardly, their problems are the same. Man throughout the world is confused, that is the first thing one observes. Uncertain, insecure, he is groping, searching, asking, looking for a way out of this chaos. So he goes to teachers, to yogis, to gurus, to philosophers; he is looking everywhere for an answer and probably that is why most of you are here, because we want to find a way out of this trap in which we are caught, without realizing that we, as human beings, have made this trap - it is of our own making and nobody else's. The society in which we live is the result of our psychological state. The society is ourselves, the world is ourselves, the world is not different from us. What we are we have made the world because we are confused, we are ambitious, we are greedy, seeking power, position, prestige. We are aggressive, brutal, competitive, and we build a society which is equally competitive, brutal and violent. It seems to me that our responsibility is to understand ourselves first, because we are the world. This is not an egotistic, limited point of view, as you will see when you begin to go into these problems. (Jiddu Krishnamurti, *You Are the World*, p. 32)