Lenegdi: Being in Relation

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"Best friend in childhood." That is how my patient referred to God during one session early in psychotherapy. It was part of his narrative about losing his religious faith during adolescence, when he came of age to discover that the world was far worse than promised. Losing his best friend involved genuine feelings of loss, which might explain why he never abandoned his interest in spirituality altogether. In adulthood, that interest mostly took the form of an intellectual pursuit.

The spirituality of which my patient spoke consisted primarily of eastern religious ideas and an on-again, off-again practice of meditation. God, if anywhere, was inside. It had to be so, because the loving Protector my patient's Jewish upbringing had billed God to be could not be running a world so full of suffering. Besides, he knowledgeably pointed out, kabbalah itself provides a model for finding an immanent God inside.

My patient's musings reminded me of my own. Nevertheless, my religious thinking had evolved to resemble what my patient left behind in childhood. God, as I had come to see it, has to be a relational partner—a comfort, not only a concept. And we can have a relational partner only when God is outside us. If we look for God exclusively inside, on what basis do we cry out, "From the end of the earth I call to You when my heart is faint… for You are my refuge (Psalm 61:3–4)?

In that cry for a relational partner, it is possible to detect Naḥman of Bratslav's voice while in solitude with God, and Martin Buber's theology of God in relation. This essay elaborates on the ideas of these two figures, along with theory and research in psychology, in order to develop the theme that the source of spiritual experience is not initially within ourselves but in the dyad of self and God, and to discuss the change and growth that occur in us when we approach spiritual engagement in that way.

Zero, One, and Two

In his *The Varieties of the Meditative Experience*, Daniel Goleman cites his mentor, Joseph Goldstein: "All meditation systems either aim for One or Zero," One being union with God and Zero involving insight into

self-lessness.[1] Goldstein is referring to meditation across religions, theistic and nontheistic, and describing the ultimate insights of meditation, where attainments such as mindfulness and equanimity are intermediate goals potentially leading to One and Zero.

Both of these aims are known to Jewish mysticism. In *devequt*, or cleaving to God, we have Judaism's One.[2] In the Hasidic doctrine of *bitul hayeish*, or nullifying personal ego, we find Judaism's Zero.[3] In both, an omnipresent God is made accessible inside by clearing the way, either by focusing (One) or emptying ourselves of ego distraction (Zero). But what can we say about Two—God and I—as a path of insight? Two directs our attention outward toward the other, not inward. Can that be a path of spiritual experience and growth?

Two not only poses a question about spiritual practice, it also refracts a conceptual issue. There is a premise that underlies One and Zero—namely, that all being is one, or at least part of God's oneness. That premise is what allows for God to be simultaneously outside and inside of us and thus accessible by way of meditation. The sixteenth-century Safed kabbalist, Moshe Cordovero, put it this way: "Do not say, 'This is a stone and not God.' Rather, all existence is God, and the stone is a thing pervaded by divinity."[4]

This concept has a psychological corollary. The idea, proposed by prominent mid-twentieth century psychoanalytic theorists, that in infancy we exist in a state of symbiotic oneness with mother only to individuate in the course of development suggests that we have access to a universal oneness because we ourselves emerged from it.[5] The problem with this theory is that it runs contrary to the findings of the late-twentieth-century empirical research on infancy. Extensive study has demonstrated that from the earliest stages of life we are psychologically differentiated (that is, not merged, or

[1] Daniel Goleman, *The Varieties of the Meditative Experience* (London: Rider & Company, 1978), xix.

[2] Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism, Text and Commentary*, (Hoboken, NJ: Yeshiva University Press, 1999), 133–72.

[3] Jacob Immanuel Schochet, *Bitul Hayesh, Total Self Negation* (Kehot Publication Society), https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/115045/jewish/Bitul-Hayesh-Total-self-negation.htm.

[4] Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah, The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1996), 24.

[5] This idea is most clearly represented in Margaret Mahler, Fred Pine, and Anni Bergman, *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant, Symbiosis and Individuation* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), esp. 44–46.

one, with mother) and relational.[6] Two—our experience as a member of a dyad with mother—not One, is our psychological foundation.

Does not Two aspire to One, as in love? Could Two be merely derivative of a deeper oneness? The kabbalah articulates this possibility by way of the descending levels of the *sefirot*, or emanations, in which the highest, *Keter*, is associated with E*in Sof*, God as infinite and encompassing all reality, while the *Shekhinah* (or the emanation of *Malkhut*) at the lowest rung represents God manifest in the world, an Other with whom we can enter into relation.

Yet even if we can conceive of One and Two as coexistent or somehow continuous on a deeper spiritual plane, Two remains our psychological reality from birth, and the ramifications of this are far-reaching. In Two we have the potential for experiences profound enough to be called spiritual, starting from the sense of connection we feel in touching other minds. Two provides a context for our sense of existential awe, dread, and reverence, all of which demand an object separate from ourselves. And Two provides the ground for relationship—"covenant," in religious terms. Surely Two must involve a path to spiritual growth no less than Zero and One.

A quote from Psalm 16:8 adorns the ark of many a synagogue: "I shall set God before me—*lenegdi*—always." In contrast to modern Hebrew, in which *neged* means simply "across from" or "against," the biblical term also connotes something more mutual: a counterpart.[7] To say that I set God before me always is to describe a dyadic relation involving God's abiding presence and our receptive awareness. As a term for that relation, *lenegdi* is pregnant with potential pathways and meaning.

Being in Relation

In most life situations, observes Buber in *I and Thou*, the other, be it a person or any living thing, is "It" to us—an object of our expedient needs, a projection of our desires and fears, inevitably limited by what we know.[8] To the extent that we can be truly present, we penetrate this "itness" and discover "You." Relating subject to subject, not subject to object, we perceive the other as whole, as opposed to a function that is of interest to us, and as

[6] Daniel N. Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant, A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), esp. 10 and 37–47. In the same book, Stern cites a private communication between Mahler and himself in which she acknowledges the then new research and adapts her theory to some extent in accordance with it (234–35).

[7] See, e.g., Genesis 2:18 and Psalm 18:23.

[8] Martin Buber, *I and Thou,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (Edinburgh: T &T Clark, 1970).

particular, as opposed to a character type or representative of a category. The effect is almost revelatory: "Every actual relationship to another being in the world is exclusive. Its You is freed and steps forth to confront us in its uniqueness. It fills the firmament—not as if there were nothing else, but everything else lives in *its* light."[9]

Buber's prose is evocative and at times elusive. But there is no mistaking the sense in which he uses his basic terms. He writes: "I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You."[10] Others have made a point that seems similar. For example, George Herbert Mead proposes that the sense of self is formed in childhood through contact with others.[11] But Buber's language signifies something different—namely, that we become transformed by the encounter with the other. In the I-You meeting we engage the other authentically (having escaped the inauthenticity of relating to another as "It"), and we experience a taste of freedom.[12] That transformation is what makes possible our "becoming I," and it is in that state that we can, in truth, "say You." Elsewhere Buber expresses a simpler version of the same idea when he says: "Egos appear by setting themselves apart from other egos. Persons appear by entering into relation to other persons."[13]

In part, Buber's *I and Thou* is an ethical model for how people should ideally regard one another. More essentially, though, it is a treatise on mysticism that guides us to discover God in the everyday world.[14] "In every sphere, in every relational act, through everything that becomes present to us, we gaze toward the train of the eternal You; in each we perceive a breath of it; in every You we address the eternal You."[15]

The encounter with "You" is mystical in the sense that the self-transcendence that comes from being truly present with the other is the same self-transcendence we bring to the I-You encounter with God. Buber fully acknowledges the unknowability of this realm but regards the I-You relation as the portal through which we can approach. "Of course, God is

[9] Buber, *I and Thou*, 126.
[10] Buber, *I and Thou*, 62.
[11] Israel Scheffler, *Four Pragmatists, A Critical Introduction to Peirce, James, Mead, and Dewey* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 161–66.
[12] For Buber's assertion that the causality of the "It world" is suspended in the I-You encounter, allowing for the experience of freedom, see Buber, *I and Thou*, 100–102.
[13] Buber, *I and Thou*, 112.
[14] Samuel Hugo Bergmann, *Faith and Reason, Modern Jewish Thought*, trans. Alfred Jospe (New York: Schocken, 1963), 84–85 makes the point that, in finding the spiritual in the everyday, Buber was influenced by the Hasidic principle that all manner of profane existence can be raised up to holiness.
[15] Buber, *I and Thou*, 150.

the wholly other; but He is also the wholly same: the wholly present. Of course, He is the *mysterium tremendum* that appears and overwhelms; but He is also the mystery of the obvious that is closer to me than my own I."[16] Buber acknowledges that it is impossible to sustain the I-You relation for very long. Our lives demand of us to be "It." But the I-You relation is our spiritual center. It lives in us as a kind of latent knowledge, primordial and waiting, very much in the sense of keeping God always *lenegdi*.

It is perhaps surprising that Buber takes little interest in the psychological aspect of what we might call the I-You experience, what we undergo internally as a byproduct of the I-You encounter. He does discuss the passivity with which we initially encounter You and the activity we undertake to enter into the relation.[17] Aside from that, his focus is entirely on the spiritual dimension. But what if we set our sights on the personal experience of the I-You encounter and ask, in keeping with the analogy to the Zero and One meditative states: What does this expression of Two consist of as an internal state, and where does it lead?

Being Cognition

In his *Toward a Psychology of Being*, Abraham Maslow provides a summary of research findings concerning "peak experiences" – unique moments when we are overtaken by beauty in music, art, or nature; by the process of our own artistic creating; and by feelings of love.[18] What Maslow discovered was a set of characteristic perceptions that belong to what he terms "Being Cognition." They bear a remarkable similarity to Buber's I-You encounter.

The foremost similarity is that the object of interest tends to be seen as whole, detached from all expediency and purpose. The object is perceived with complete absorption, becoming all figure without ground. Repeated encounters result in the object of perception becoming richer rather than merely familiar. The object evokes fascination and caring. It is perceived as unique, as opposed to a member of a class; its worth seems intrinsic.[19]

The consequences of Being Cognition are profound. Perception heightens the observer's own sense of being even as it intensifies that of the observed object. It brings about a sense of wholeness. The value of the peak experience seems built in and need not be assigned to it. It may even elicit

[16] Buber, *I and Thou*, 127.
[17] Buber, *I and Thou*, 124–25.
[18] Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1968).
[19] Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, 74–96.

feelings such as "I can die now," as an expression of our sense of complete fulfillment.

The parallels between Buber's I-You encounter and Maslow's being cognition are striking. Standing out is the concept of wholeness, applied both to how the object is perceived and how we, as subjects, experience ourselves; related to this is the complete absorption in the other. Another characteristic that Being Cognition shares with the I-You encounter is that volition has little part in it. Maslow's phrase "to be overtaken," whether by beauty or feelings of love, fits well with the passive nature of the initial encounter with You that Buber cites. We can prepare for it by letting go of our expectations, by being interested and in the moment—in short, being present. But we cannot make the moment happen.

There are notable elements in Maslow's findings on Being Cognition that diverge from Buber's I-You. One of these is that peak experiences include being overtaken by the beauty of a poem or painting; this stands in contrast to Buber's concept, which involves an encounter with an actual other. The divergence is more seeming than real, however, given what art accomplishes: to be overtaken by the effect of a work of art is to intuit the You of the artist and be moved. Indeed, the term "empathy" (*Einfühlung* in the original German) was minted in the nineteenth century to describe the process of feeling one's way into a work of art and thereby understanding it more deeply.[20]

A second divergent element between Buber and Maslow is more significant. Among the kinds of peak experiences that can lead to Being Cognition according to Maslow is creating, and not merely responding to, an other's artistic creation. This is a meaningful departure from Buber and does not have a counterpart in *I and Thou*. However, Maslow's research finding opens the door to a different aspect of the dyad, including the spiritual dyad. Implicit in I-You is not only what occurs when we connect with another but also the possibility of our being You to another's I. We want to have someone else connect to *us*. Whether in the creative act or in a loving relationship, as well as in our spiritual longings, we long to be heard and understood.

[20] Empathy, or *Einfühlung* in German, was a new term at the time, minted by the nineteenth-century German philosophers of aesthetics, Robert Vischer and Theodor Lipps, to describe the process of feeling oneself into a work of art. See Timothy Burns, "Theodor Lipps on the Concept of Einfühlung," in *Theodor Lipps (1851–1914). Psychologie, philosophie, esthétique*, edited by David Romand and Serge Tchougounnikov (Lausanne: Sdvig Academic Press, 2021). The term was translated and coined as an English word at the turn of the twentieth century by British psychologist Edward Titchener and first employed as a clinical term by psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan.

The surprising problem is that, much as we usually relate to others as It, so do we ourselves usually strive to be It instead of You to others. We manipulate our image to earn what we think will be the other's approval. We make of ourselves a commodity in other ways as well. After all, we are material beings, and material needs are satisfied in the "It world," as Buber called it.

Fragmentation and Wholeness

A key term that crops up in both Buber's description of the I-You encounter and Maslow's research on Being Cognition is the sense of wholeness. This is an ambiguous term that is best defined by contrast with its opposite: our usual state of fragmentation. We give expression to our fragmentation in everyday discourse when we say that "a part of me" feels such and such, and another part of me otherwise. Psychoanalysis began with Sigmund Freud's investigation into the ways that body and mind are set against each other, while later psychoanalytic theory has largely focused on the fragmentation arising from interpersonal relations, including the false selves we adopt for relational benefit. Pervasive guilt and shame are inherently fragmenting in that they make us objects of our own loathing. We feel our very sense of agency abandon us when, despite our intentions, we procrastinate and in other ways self-sabotage, or obsess over and doubt our own feelings and desires. And then of course there is trauma, which shatters our inner sense of continuity and cohesion. Our fragmentation is what makes change so hard. We resolve to alter some habit or to live up to a standard in line with our values, but the state we are in when we try to execute our resolution is not the same as the state we were in when we initially made the resolution. Maimonides teaches in *Hilkhot teshuvah*, the *Laws of Repentance*, that, in atoning for sin, the penitent is effectively committing to abstain from it going forward.[21] That would be an easy matter if we were whole beings. Our fragmented nature is what makes *teshuvah*, or penitence, such a profound and difficult process.

Psychological fragmentation is a byproduct of our usual I-It relational state. While it is a natural human condition, it is a painful one. The desire to be made whole is an aspiration to be released from suffering of our own inevitable making. In wholeness, we aspire to be truly You, not a fragmented It, to an other's I. In our everyday lives, we become You to an other's I by

[21] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer Madda* chs.1–2 (*Hilkhot teshuva*). Text can be found online at sefaria.org.

being genuinely ourselves with someone we trust. That person's acceptance and understanding can make our fragmented selves feel more whole.

There is another way to experience being You to an other's I. It may seem paradoxical at first, but it is through solitude. In contrast to loneliness, in solitude we feel the presence of an Other—the remembered voice of an old friend, the long-ago sense of our childhood home, the smell of the living forest. In solitude we can feel comforted, because we experience the subliminal effect of a comforting Other. The acute awareness of being alive and the feeling of gratitude that accompanies it are enhanced by solitude. It was in solitude that Moses first encountered God "at the end of the wilderness" (Exodus 3:1). And it is in solitude that we reach out to God much as the first Adam, our relationship unique and primal, even as we are one of billions.

Hitbodedut

Naḥman of Bratslav, a great grandson of the founder of Hasidism and one of its leading innovators, encouraged disciples to spend an hour each day talking to God in a state of *hitbodedut* ("solitude"), preferably in the midst of nature. In Reb Naḥman's case, this was the mountainous wood country that surrounded him in Ukraine at the turn of the nineteenth century. Such talk was to be formless; Reb Naḥman employed the Hebrew word *siḥah* with echoes of Genesis 24:63, where the patriarch Isaac is pictured alone in the fields engaging in silent speech. What distinguishes this *siḥah* from fixed communal prayer is that in *hitbodedut* the person speaks in the singular, not in the plural of typical Jewish prayer, and expresses personal, spontaneous, content. In turn, that personal aspect of *hitbodedut* is what furthers its purpose—to come "close to Him, to His worship in truth."[22]

Being our authentic, vulnerable, selves is of the essence in *hitbodedut*. Without it, we are It (not You), to God's I. Toward that end, Reb Naḥman emphasized that our talk should be in our mother tongue (as opposed to Hebrew, when Hebrew is not one's everyday language). The heart, explained Reb Naḥman, is "easily broken" in our native language. During *hitbodedut,* the person should express "all that is in his [or her] heart to say and speak before Him, blessed be He, both regret and repentance concerning the past, and beseeching." Reb Naḥman's focus on brokenness and regret, on the one hand, and penitence and coming near to God, on the other, involves a

[22] Nachman of Bratslav, *Likutei Moharan*, Part 2, Torah 25. Text can be found online at sefaria.org.

progression from fragmentation toward wholeness.

Reb Naḥman made no assumption that talking to God should come easy. The very prospect of seeking an intimate partner in the remote universe seems almost a paradox. Certainly, people who are afflicted often find it difficult to speak to anyone, let alone to God. Reb Naḥman knew well the challenge that grief and unjust suffering place on faith; the precariousness of Jewish existence was all too plain to him. Understanding such struggles, he wrote:

> And even if, on occasion, one's speech is blocked and the person cannot open his [or her] mouth to speak to Him, may He be blessed, nevertheless, this [effort] is itself very good. That is, the preparation in standing before Him, may He be blessed, and the person's desire and yearning to speak, even if unsuccessful, is very good. Such person might even attempt to speak about that itself—to cry out and beg before Him, may He be blessed, who has come to seem so distant that it is hard to speak, and to ask Him for compassion and mercy so that he [or she] may be able to open their mouth before Him.[23]

As moderns, addressing God in solitude rarely comes naturally, as it might have to great grandparents who poured out their hearts to "Gottenyu" (intimate and loving God), or to ancients who beseeched God to "heed the sound of my cry" (Psalm 5:3). On the other hand, a broad stream of clinical theory and research in psychology demonstrates that the sense of self is formed and maintained in dyadic relationships, both actual and internalized. It is our nature as humans to form internal representations and to experience the subliminal presence of an other. We are built for just the sort of dyadic relation that occurs in *hitbodedut*.

Two as our Psychological Foundation: Kohut and Stern

For Heinz Kohut, one of the twentieth century's foremost psychoanalytic theorists, the core drama at the heart of the psyche is not so much internal conflict but the integration and disintegration of the self.[24] He considered

[23] Nachman of Bratslav, *Liqutei Moharan*, Part 2, Torah 25.

[24] Kohut's theoretical writings are notoriously abstruse. A good introduction to his thought is

the self per se to be beyond definition but knowable through its attributes—the subjective sense a person has of being continuous from an early age to the present, of being cohesive in spite of changing emotions and states, and being volitional. These manifestations of selfhood exist in nascent form from birth, Kohut theorized, but require a unique other, beginning with a parent, to transform them from potential to actual. The dyadic relation with that other evolves over the course of development and comes to include not only an actual person but also an internalization of the functions that such person provides. These functions, in turn, are the main subject of Kohut's investigations.

The most central of these functions is the mirror. For the infant, what the parent is mirroring is not only its feelings, but also its budding sense of joyful being, which Kohut thought of as healthy narcissism. With adequate mirroring, or encouraging, in infancy and early childhood, healthy narcissism becomes shaped into ordinary self-esteem, and the primitive mirroring needed by the infant graduates into the empathic responsiveness we require throughout our lifespan. That lifelong empathic function is supplied in part by actual empathic partners, but also by an internalized or subliminal empathic listener. It is an internalization that does not always go well. In light of that, Kohut summarized the essence of psychotherapeutic treatment as "the opening of a path of empathy" between the self and the self's internalized listener.[25]

Extensive empirical research into the precursors of subjective experience in infancy and early childhood, summarized in Daniel Stern's landmark 1985 *The Interpersonal World of the Child*, details the dyadic origins of the sense of self. In the 1970s and 1980s, when the research leading to Stern's book was conducted, the technology of frame-by-frame video analysis as a research tool was new—and eye opening. Exquisitely synchronized escalations and deescalations of affect exchanged between mother and infant were observed in multiple studies; their analysis led to a myriad of discoveries, which Stern systematized developmentally.[26] These research findings documented the way the infant uses and gradually adopts for itself the regulating effect of the parent's soothing. As the child matures, this regulation evolves from being biologically based to encompassing the regulation of mood that

Ernest S. Wolf, *Treating the Self, Elements of Clinical Self Psychology* (New York: Guilford, 1988).

[25] Heinz Kohut, *How Does Analysis Cure*, ed. Arnold Goldberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 66.

[26] Stern, *Interpersonal World*, esp. 37–182.

comes from feeling understood. In a most essential way, much as Kohut had posited, our psychological life is formed as part of such a dyad, both actual and internalized, consisting of a subject expressing feeling and an other who empathizes (or falls short of doing so). The product of this dyadic function—the subliminal experience of feeling understood—continues to sustain us psychologically throughout life.

Lenegdi

The very same dyadic relation—of one who expresses feeling and an other who understands—lies at the heart of *hitbodedut* and is a key aspect of the I-You encounter. To keep God *lenegdi*, as our counterpart, is to grow that relation. When we do this, certain changes occur in our consciousness. Comparable to the equanimity and mindfulness brought about by meditation, in the I-You encounter we grow to be more present, and in both the I-You encounter and *hitbodedut* we feel more whole. Moreover, just as meditation may lead to goals of personal growth and spiritual insight, so, too, can keeping God *lenegdi* lead to such goals. Springing up from our empathy and sense of presence in the I-You encounter, and from feeling understood in *hitbodedut*, is compassion. In turn, expressing compassion for others increases our own sense of well-being and happiness.[27] But it also does more. Our tradition of sacred text teaches that living our lives with compassion brings us into harmony with God because the compassion we feel is rooted in God.

That tradition stems from the central theme that we are created in God's image (Genesis 1:27). Likewise, the biblical instruction, "be holy for I am holy" (Leviticus 19:2) conveys the idea that humankind is capable of emulating God's spiritual character. These verses do not specifically state anything about compassion, however. Conversely, there are biblical texts in which God is identified with compassion, but nothing is said about endowing humankind with this attribute. For example, there is the set of God's attributes made known to Moses: "The Lord, compassionate and gracious, long-suffering, abounding in love and truth" (Exodus 34:6 and Numbers 14:18; restated in Jonah 4:2 and Psalm 103:8). And there are verses stating that God expects our compassion, such as "Love your fellow as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) and the repeated commandment to love the foreigner be-

[27] Emma Sepala, "The Compassionate Mind," *Association for Psychological Science* (April 30, 2013), https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/the-compassionate-mind.

cause of our experience being foreigners in Egypt (Exodus 22:30; Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy, 10:19). Yet, again, these texts do not directly link our compassion to God's. We come closer to that in Rashi's gloss on Deuteronomy 11:22, which interprets "walking in all His ways" to mean "just as He is compassionate, so, too, should you be compassionate."

In Hasidism we encounter a further elucidation of the link between God's compassion and our human compassion. According to the Hasidic reenvisioning of kabbalah, the Creator's emanations became immanent in human beings after the cataclysm of creation, forming an inner template that aligns, in human dimension, with that of God. This template includes a balance between the traits of compassion and judgment. As an extension of this concept, the compassion (as well as the exacting element of judgment) that is built into the psyche is first built into the universe. Rashi's interpretation, "just as He is compassionate, so, too, should you be compassionate," may be understood in this light as being founded on a potential in human nature that goes back to creation.

While Reb Naḥman included beseeching God in *hitbodedut*, he said nothing about expecting our prayers to be answered. Whether one's theology is that God's will determines all and that our prayers may be granted, or that events in the world are random, speaking to God comes naturally if we let it because the need to feel heard and understood is at our emotional center. We do not need to ask God for favors in order to engage God as our compassionate other. We are fragmented and call out "from the depths" (Psalm 130:1). In the process of feeling more whole, we also grow our own compassion.

The Spiritual as Two

The spiritual has always been understood, at least in part, as a bridging of the divide between self and other. From telepathy to empathy, from healing touch to prayer, the spiritual moment has been imagined as a form of making contact. In *I and Thou*, Buber put it this way:

> Spirit is not in the I, but between I and You. It is not like the blood that circulates in you, but like the air in which you breathe. Man lives in the spirit when he is able to respond to his You. He is able to do that when he enters into this relation with his whole being. It is solely by virtue of his

power to relate that man is able to live in the spirit.[28]

The idea that the spiritual bridges the divide between self and other raises a fundamental question about the access we have to other minds. How do we know we have made contact with the other, as opposed to merely imagining we have? It is an age-old question, but we cannot conceive of an I-You encounter, or of intuiting God on the basis of that encounter, without addressing it. We begin with the principle of René Descartes that body and mind are thoroughly distinct realms. A consequence of this principle is that other people's minds and feelings can only be inferred. The agency of knowing belongs to the mind, which has only indirect access to tangible knowledge and no direct access to other minds.

As recently as the first half of the twentieth century this Cartesian principle held such sway that it colored psychoanalysis at its origin. Freud viewed the psyche as beginning life in an insular state of hallucinatory wish-fulfillment, protected by a stimulus barrier, and only gradually forming an ego that achieves contact with social reality. Other people are "objects" of drives or of interest, and are "cathected" (invested with psychic energy) by the self-contained psyche.

A similar outlook was shared by the philosopher Edith Stein, who titled her 1916 doctoral thesis for Edmund Husserl, "On the Problem of Empathy."[29] The phenomenon of empathy, then a new concept, was considered problematic because, as Stein put the question: "Have the barriers separating one 'I' from another broken down, has the 'I' been freed from its monadic character?" Her conclusion: "Not entirely, I feel my joy and empathically comprehend the other's and see it as the same."[30] In other words, even such a seeming boundary breach as empathy does not violate the principle that different beings are separate and utterly secluded from each other. At the other extreme, philosophical monists such as Baruch Spinoza and Henri Bergson or the kabbalist Moshe Cordovero would probably not have been troubled by the phenomenon of empathy since they viewed all of life to be undivided.

[28] Buber, *I and Thou*, 89.

[29] Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraud Stein (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1989 [1916]). Stein is perhaps best known in Jewish circles as a German Jewish intellectual and proto-feminist who converted to Catholicism and became a nun, only to be considered a Jew by the Nazis and killed at Auschwitz. She was beatified and declared a saint by Pope John Paul II in 1987.

[30] Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 17.

In between the self as insular and the self as continuous with all other selves is the term "connectedness," as used by Stern in discussing the infancy research literature. If we replace monism's term, "oneness," with "connectedness," we arrive at many of the same meanings. Connectedness implies contiguity, like oneness. On the other hand, it also implies that there are individual nodes—differentiated selves capable of connection. In "connectedness," as opposed to "oneness," there is still individuality and, hence, the consequences of individuality, including responsibility and ethics. Practically speaking, connectedness exists on a continuum, both as state and trait. As a state, we may feel in sync with an other, as if we were one; in contrast, we might feel detached. As a trait, we know people we consider empaths as well as people who are characterologically aloof.

What makes us connected? The answer brings us back to the empirical research on infancy. One of the key findings of this research is that the affectively attuned responses between mother and infant are "amodal"—that is, they do not rely on one sense modality; mother and infant are not merely mimicking one an other's facial expressions.[31] If that were the case, then empathy would be little more than a feedback loop between facial muscles and brain. On the contrary, various modes of expression are interchangeable. The infant's excited motor act might be matched by the mother's tone of voice, facial expression, or touch and responded to in turn by the infant in yet a different mode. Amodal perception demonstrates that what parent and infant respond to is meaning or intention. Of course, this does not refer to meaning in its mature, cognitive, sense. On the other hand, from earliest life, the infant is discerning variation in features such as intensity and rhythm that cross between modes of voice, facial expression, and body language. These features are precursors to feelings. To the adult interacting with the infant they are meaningful and form the basis of their response to the baby. From the earliest stage of life, the contact points of our connectedness are feelings, intentions, and meanings. Connectedness is all about understanding and being understood.

British pediatrician and psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott posed the allusive question: Where is "the place we live" when we play or create? It is not inside us, in thought or dreaming, nor purely outside, in sheer behavior. We live, he posited, in an "intermediate zone" of meaning, language, and culture.[32] Infants find their way naturally enough to the intermediate zone, where

[31] Stern, *Interpersonal World*, 47–68 and 146–61.
[32] D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971), 95–110.

they learn their first words and play. But being able to continually function in an intermediate area using the cultural tools of the social group while feeling authentically oneself is not a given. In the extreme, in schizophrenia, inside and outside are confounded, and societal conventions can become incomprehensible. Winnicott theorized that transitional objects such as the infant's blanket or teddy bear are discovered by the baby as real objects in the world, yet simultaneously created, or endowed with the inner, affective sense of "mine." They serve as a bridge to that "place where we live"—between inside and outside, as cultural beings in an intermediate area.

Analogous to Winnicott's question about the place we live, we might ask the question: Where is the place from which we speak to God? We cannot hope to reach God in an impossibly remote, celestial abode, yet neither are we encountering God if our search is solely for a divine spark inside ourselves. The place from which we speak to God must, like Winnicott's intermediate area, be somehow in between—a "cleft in the rock" (Exodus 33:22), as it were—from which we address God as other using a shared language of meanings. In part, that shared language is the symbolism of religion, which acts like transitional objects endowed with both private and communal meanings. But it is also the everyday language of conversation. Throughout history, including the biblical era, people have addressed God with the same words they use to express themselves to their fellow human beings. Reb Naḥman could have framed *hitbodedut* as a mystical practice; instead he depicted it as talk from the heart in which any person can engage. Our connection to God is all about feeling heard and understood.

For spirit to be, as Buber put it, "not in the I, but between I and You" is to say that it is found in an intermediate zone of meaning, language, and culture, which are the contact points of our connectedness, and in the modes of gaze, voice, and touch through which we transmit meaning preverbally. Knowing other minds is not mysterious, but it does involve discovery. The "ah-ha!" of authentic encounter, the intuiting of another mind, is an experience of self-transcendence. That is when, in Buber's words, we "gaze towards the train of the Eternal You."

Lenegdi: Conclusions

To keep God *lenegdi*, as a counterpart, is to participate in a dyadic relationship. One component of that relationship is the intuition of God that stems from the I-You encounter, as described by Buber. A second component is

the sense of closeness to God that comes from being You to God's I, as in Naḥman of Bratslav's discourse on *hitbodedut*, or solitude with God. In both the I-You encounter and *hitbodedut*, the essence of the dyad is the complementary relation between one who understands and another who is understood. That same complementary relation is at the heart of Kohut's psychoanalytic theory. Mental health throughout the lifespan, in his view, is built upon the subliminal sense of feeling understood, which is an internalized representation of early parent-child empathy.

Our psychological foundation is the dyad. The infancy research clarifies that we are never in a state of oneness or symbiotic merger with our mother or any early caregiver. The mystical goal of achieving oneness with God through meditation or states of ecstasy may fit a higher mystical concept, but it does not conform to any psychological reality we can actually know. On the other hand, the dyadic relationships known to us in infancy and childhood, out of which our sense of self is formed, serve as internal models for knowing another. To know another person (or an animal), we must bridge the gap between separate centers of awareness. From the gaze that is met to the metaphor that is created, we make contact. In doing so, we are Two, not One—in dyadic relation, not merged.

Applying Buber's terminology, we can be Two in an I-It relation, in which we regard the other as an object of our needs, or we can be Two in an I-You relation, in which we regard the other as a subject, not an object. When perceived as You, the other is a whole, unique, being, not a fragment. Similarly, when we are the other to our partner's I, we can present ourselves as It, and we often do. This is what occurs, for example, when we create a false self, an image that we convey to others and come to believe ourselves. Alternatively, we can be You—our authentic selves, vulnerabilities and all.

One of Buber's key messages in *I and Thou* is that the spiritual is not primarily inside us or remotely beyond us but between us. Winnicott described this sphere as "the place where we live," an "intermediate zone" that is neither inside, in thought or dreaming, nor outside, in sheer behavior. It is the zone in which the private and unformed finds expression, whether in poetry, prayer, or simply the careful listening of a friend. This place where we live, in which we understand and feel understood, is the space in which we grow as spiritual beings.

The I-You encounter and the experience of closeness to God in *hitbodedut* are not easy to come by. Our needs and desires naturally guide us to I-It relations. We tend to resist the vulnerability that contributes to a sense

of intimacy with God in solitude. We are blocked by ego. Learning to hold God *lenegdi* often constitutes a breakthrough. In a way, it is a life project, with ebbs and flows. Expressed in it is the striving for self-integration and personal authenticity. Paradoxically, to the extent that we achieve these mature manifestations of selfhood, we grow not in self-centeredness but in compassion.

For the psalmist, God's compassion was a given. Less discernible was the human's merit in being its recipient: "I look at Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars which you have established—what then is man that You remember him, and humankind that You are mindful of?" (Psalm 8:4–5). The psalm answers its own question: "You have made him slightly less than the angels" (Psalm 8:6). Buber and Reb Naḥman would answer the question differently. The reason we matter stems not from some noble faculty with which people are endowed, but from the capacity humans possess for dyadic relation, for understanding and feeling understood. What is transcendent is the connection with another living being that we establish in the I-You moment. It is the intimacy with God that we feel, mere speck in the universe though we may be, in the solitude of the anonymous forest.

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