Cleaving to God

A Jewish way of Prayer

By Rabbi Shefa Gold

You that cleave to YHVH your God are alive, all of you, today ---Deut. 4:4

These words from the book of Deuteronomy speak to me about my three passions: for life, for wholeness and connection, and for the ability to be present in this moment.

For life, for the vitality that comes when I am connected to my source and can let that fountain fill me to overflowing.

For wholeness and connection, for the integration of all the separate parts that make up the "I" who I'm becoming, and for the realization of my interrelatedness with all of God's creatures.

For the ability to be present in this moment, for freedom from the compulsive mental wanderings that prevent me from experiencing the fullness of "today."

These words also tell me that my fulfillment rests with my willingness and ability to cleave to God. In the Jewish tradition, this act of cleaving is called *devekut* (pronounced "d'veh-KOOT"). I am drawn to explore the idea of *devekut* and to participate in its further development for our times because my love for God is the hidden force in my life. Sometimes I despair of ever being able to clearly express the power and subtlety of that love, so I search through the records of my ancestors for an outer reflection of what is in my inmost heart.

DEVEKUT THROUGH THE AGES

In each age Jews have been challenged with the question of how to attain *devekut*, which has been understood to mean anything from "doing the right thing" to absolute communion with God. The questions about *devekut* go to the heart of our relationship with the Divine. Is *devekut* even possible? For whom? Is it a function of the mind or the heart?

The rabbis of the Talmud asked, "How can you cleave to a God who is a 'devouring fire'?"[i]

Jewish Neoplatonic philosophers understood *devekut* as the return of human thought to its origin in the Divine wisdom. Kabbalistic literature took up the challenge of *devekut*, treating it as a ladder which one uses to climb from one *sefirah* to another, raising one's soul from one point to another in mystical contemplation. *Devekut* was seen as the final stage of a long and arduous spiritual journey. It was a journey that few were considered qualified to take. It was a path only for those who, in the words of the thirteenth-century philosopher

Moses ben Nachman (or Nachmanides), "abandon the affairs of this world and pay no regard to this world at all, as though they were not corporeal beings, but all their intent and purpose is fixed on their creator alone."[ii]

The revolution of Hasidism lay in its radical assertion that *devekut* could be realized by anyone who would turn to God in faith. Since there is no place that is void of God's presence, one had only to become aware of that fact to obliterate the apparent distance between the human and the Divine. Hasidism was then faced with the challenge of how to sustain that awareness.

Through Hasidism, the ascetic overtones of the Kabbalistic idea of *devekut*, which demanded a stripping away of the body, came into tension with a powerful panentheism, which asserted that all is in God and every activity is a way to God. *Avodah gashmiyut* ("worship through the body") opened up the possibility of devotion for great numbers of people who wanted to imbue their ordinary lives with holiness. This mean treating the world as a doorway through which one might enter to discover the all-pervasive presence of God.

Deut. 11:22 commands us "to love YHVH, your God, to walk in all God's ways, and to cleave unto God" (to be in *devekut*). Nachmanides' commentary on this verse became a touchstone for the Hasidic belief in the possibility of achieving *devekut* without denying our worldly existence:

> One way to understand this is to say that *devekut* means to remember God and your love for Him always and at all times, so that you never remove your mind from Him, when you are walking on the way or lying down or rising up – until even when you are conversing with other people, in your innermost heart you are not with them but are in the presence of God. And it can be said about those who are on this exalted level of attainment that their souls are bound up in the bond of life and that they share in eternal life even in this world for they are themselves a dwelling place for the *Shekhinah* [Divine Presence]."[iii]

The Hasidic movement held on to this belief in the possibility of *devekut* concomitant with our ordinary lives. Indeed it took this idea one step further by saying that it is *through* awakening our sense of holiness regarding the details of our daily lives that we may enter into communion with God.

Nachmanides points to two aspects of *devekut*: love and awareness. Jewish philosophers, rabbis, and mystics have searched for the relationship between these two. The twelfth-century philosopher Moses Maimonides equates the knowledge of God with the love of God: "when a person contemplates God's great and wondrous works and creatures, and sees in them a Wisdom that is incomparable and infinite, then he will immediately love God."[iv]

The biblical word for intimate sexual relations is the verb *yada*', which also means "to know". The idea of *devekut* embodies this confluence of meaning.

In his book *Jewish Spiritual Practices*, Yitzak Buxbaum defines *devekut* as "a God-consciousness imbued with love."[v] An important ideal in Hasidism is a continual awareness of God and a love of God that is ever-growing and ever expressing itself in the world.

Hasidic masters, understanding that the main obstacle to *devekut* is the uncontrolled rushing of thoughts, have developed practices for stilling the mind. The Piasetzner Rebbe, who lived in Poland before World War II, taught a practice called *hashkata* ("silencing"). He advised his followers to begin by becoming aware of the flow of thoughts and, when the mind began to slowly empty, to calmly repeat a sacred phrase "in order to connect [the] now-emptied mind with one thought of holiness."[vi]

DEVEKUT AND TORAH STUDY

According to *Pirkei Avot* ("Sayings of the Fathers"), a second-century collection of popular aphorisms that has become central to Jewish prayer and learning, "The world rests on three things: on Torah, on prayer, and on deeds of love."[vii] At various times in history, and in various streams of Judaism, one of these three "things" has gained primacy. The goal of many religious movements within Judaism can be understood as a rebalancing of these elements. The prophetic tradition, for example, often attempts to remind the people that God prefers the doing of good deeds to empty ritual. Isaiah rails against the people in their self-righteousness as they pray and fast wile ignoring the injustice in their midst: "Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loose the fetters of wickedness, to undo the bonds of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free?" (Isa. 58:6).

The rabbinic tradition, on the other hand, came to strongly emphasize the primacy of Torah study, as can be seen from this passage from the Talmud:

> There are the things that a person performs and enjoys their fruits in this world…honoring one's parents, the practice of loving deeds, and making peace between a person and their friend, while the study of Torah surpasses them all.[viii]

One of the main accusations leveled against Hasidism was that its emphasis on prayer and *devekut* caused a serious neglect of Torah study. Indeed there are some Hasidic teachers who openly warn that too much study can be harmful to one's relationship to God, because thinking so many thoughts may cause the removal of our thoughts from *devekut* to God.[ix]

I believe this tension between *devekut* and Torah study yielded a kind of synthesis of the two, namely a contemplative and devotional approach to the words of Torah. *Devekut* became the main purpose of Torah study. The letters of Torah and of the prayer-book came to be seen as vessels in which the Divine light was hidden.

In the words of the Baal Shem Tov, the eighteenth-century master who is considered to be the founder of Hasidism, "The purpose of Torah study for its own sake is to be in *devekut* with the One who is hidden within it."[x]

The Hasidim tried to make Torah study ore like prayer by adding to it enthusiasm, melody, and an intention to come close to God through the letters. Eventually the meaning of *devekut* as related to study began to shift, taking on an emotional rather than a purely contemplative meaning.[xi]

DEVEKUT TODAY

In each age Jews have reached into the past, drawing forth a vast array of images, stories, ideas, and cosmologies. The vitality of Jewish tradition as always depended on the Jewish people's ability both to receive this vast inheritance and to transform it in response to the spiritual needs of their present world.

In my own search for aliveness, integration, and presence, I have explored the meaning and practice of *devekut* for myself and for my community. I began this exploration with a profound dissatisfaction with traditional forms of Jewish prayer. My thirst to drink deeply from certain phrases in the liturgy that called to me was constantly being frustrated by the pace and sheer volume of traditional prayer. I began to look for what was essential in prayer and to search for the deep structure of the prayer service, which would help me to understand the function and not merely the content of each prayer.

My background in music and meditation prepared me for developing a chanting practice that treated the sacred phrase as a doorway. Repetition became a way of stilling the mind and opening the heart wide. In that wide space it felt as if the sacred phrases were planting seeds. The practice of chanting cultivated in me a garden of devotion, yearning, joy, and vision. Gradually I became familiar with the wide range of mental states engendered by the chants. I was drawn especially to the ecstatic states, which were both healing and empowering.

At some point in my training, however, I became less attached to those ecstatic states and began to notice the silence that followed the chant. I felt myself drawn into that silence. I had known that the chant was a doorway, but before I really understood the invitation of the silence, I had not fully entered.

In entering the silence, I discovered the meaning of *devekut*. What drew me into the silence was my love for God and my intention to live my life in God's presence. I noticed that every other thought which entered the silence, no matter how profound or beautiful, only served to diminish the sense of being in the mystery of God's presence. And so my practice became one of *teshuva* (pronounced t'SHOO-vah). *Teshuvah* is usually translated as "repentance", a word that obscures the particulars of the process, since it is more accurately translated as "turning". This process is a moment-to-moment turning away from the content of thought and a constant returning to the purity of one's intention. It is a process that teaches humility and patience while strengthening and purifying the intention to e with God in the silence.

The practice of *devekut* as I am describing it was different from other practices I have done in that its power was not felt in the experience itself but in its long-term effect on the texture and quality of my life. The goal of *devekut* is the continual remembrance of God, opening up the eyes of the heart to a new dimension of reality, an awareness of God's presence in, through, and beyond everything. The long-term effect of *devekut* is a growing ability to remain unattached to thoughts, to be able to recognize and let go of compulsive or obsessive patterns that keep me separate from "knowing" God in this moment.

Negative theology, as expressed by Maimonides in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, points to this experience of God in the silence: he states that "negative attributes conduct the mind toward the utmost reach that one may attain in the apprehension of God."[xii] Since God is unlike anything we can conceive, the only way to approach God is to turn away from all conceptions.

Hasidic masters talk about "becoming a chariot" for God's presence.[xiii] As we turn away from conceptions and break free from the compulsion of thought, we can then begin to extend an invitation to let God in; we can make a commitment to open ourselves to relationship, to open ourselves to being completely seen, known, and loved.

My exploration of *devekut* was fueled by a perception of how very necessary the practice of silence was to a spiritual path. Many members of my Jewish community had reported feeling oppressed by a sense of uninterrupted noise and clutter in Judaism and so had been drawn to Buddhism or other Eastern paths in order to experience the spaciousness of the soul. Personally, I felt that in order to remain Jewish, I would have to integrate the practice of silence into my Jewish life.

In my exploration of *devekut*, I began to look for voices in the tradition that might support and illuminate this practice. To my astonishment, I realized that the practice was shining its own light and profoundly influencing my encounter with the words of Torah and liturgy. Phrases in the Psalms that I had previously read as merely nice poetry suddenly took on new meaning. My reading of the *Song of Songs*, with its expression of an intimate relationship to God as Beloved, could suddenly speak to me with clarity and instruct me about the path of love. Accounts of the sacrificial offerings that had once seemed boring or merely historical were suddenly opened to me as instructions for coming close to God.

The experience of *devekut* also seemed to be revealing the light that was hidden in the words of Torah. The words of Torah are like the *Mishkan*, the sanctuary that was built in the desert as the Israelites wandered from slavery to freedom. It was built with fine material, great love, expert skill, and enormous attention to detail. The purpose of the *Mishkan* was to draw down the presence of God into the space within. I don't want to stand outside the *Mishkan* and admire its walls, no matter how richly decorated they might be; I want to enter into the space, to go to the center. Why else would the structures of religion exist but to invite us in, to the Holy of Holies?

"IN YOU I TAKE REFUGE"

An important function of spiritual practice is to provide access to an experience of connection, renewal, safety, and healing. The Bible expresses this function through the idea of "taking refuge in God" – which I exactly what the practice of *devekut* accomplishes. The act of "taking refuge" in God is described again and again in the Psalms. "Taking refuge" involves surrender to God, yet it is not passive, for it involves trusting and entering into relationship with God. It also involves the realization that our true home is in God and that in coming home we will be renewed, protected, and healed.

In examining those references in the Psalms, I notice that both *devekut* and "taking refuge" fulfill the same functions on the spiritual journey. "Taking refuge" allows us to connect with the source of joy in our lives. "And they will rejoice, al who take refuge in You, forever they will sing" (Ps. 5:12). "Taste and see that God is good. Happy is the one who takes refuge in God" (Ps. 34:9).

"Taking refuge" allows us to relax into a sense of ultimate safety, to feel protected and strengthened by our connection to God. "Guard me, God, for I take refuge in You" (Ps. 16:1) "God is a shield for all who take refuge in Him" (Ps. 18:31). "God will rescue them and deliver tem, for they have taken refuge in Him (Ps. 37:40).

"Taking refuge" allows us to be healed of shame, to overcome the inner demons tat seek to destroy our connection to the part of ourselves that knows God. "Guard my soul and rescue me, let me not be ashamed, for I have taken refuge in You" (Ps. 25:20). "In You, God, I take refuge, let me not be ashamed, ever" (Ps. 31:40).

SILENCE IS PRAISE

Devekut leads us past the edge of what can be expressed through words. Leaping over that edge into the abyss requires the emergence in each moment of a newborn faith. It means letting go of what we know, letting go of who we think we are, even letting go of an idea of God. By so doing, we can then return to the world of things and ideas and separate identities and, in the words of Nachmanides, "share in eternal life even in this world". Letting go turns out not to be a loss but rather an expanded embrace. The mind speaks to us constantly about the boundaries of "what is real." In the deep silence, those boundaries collapse, and reality expands beyond thought, beyond imagination, beyond judgment.

Stephen Mitchell has written, "Pure prayer begins at the threshold of silence. It says noting, asks for nothing. It is a kind of listening. The deeper the listening, the less we listen for, until silence itself becomes the voice of God."[xiv]

There is a way of listening to the sounds of this world as a great chorus of praise, every creature praising its Creator with each breath. What if all the sounds in the world, all the language, were only the sanctuary, the *Mishkan*, that housed the treasures of silence? The psalmist (PS. 65:2) returns from the silence and sings, "For You silence is praise."

[i] *Ketubot* 111b; cf. Deut. 4:24

[ii] Nachmanides, *Commentary* on Lev 18:4.

[iii] Nachmanides, *Commentary* on Deut. 11:22.

[iv] Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Sefer HaMada*, ch 2:2.

[v] Yithak Buxbaum, Jewish Spiritual Practices (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1990), p. 4

[vi] Kalanymous Kalman Shapira, from *Derekh HaMelekh*, in *Conscious Community*, translated by Andrea Cohen-Kiener and Joseph Grodsky, Jason Aronson.

[vii] *Pirkei Avot* 1:2

[viii] Talmud, *Shabbat* 127a.

[ix] R. Mendel of Przemyslany, *Darkhei Yesharim*, explaining the ideas of the Maggid of Mezritch.

[x] Baal Shem Tov, *Avodah u'Moreh Derekh*, ch. 8

[xi] Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), ch. 14

[xii] Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, 1:58-59.

[xiii] Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, *Kitzur Shnei Luchot HaBrit, Sha'ar ha'ahavah*.

[xiv] Stephen Mitchell, *A Book of Psalms* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), introduction, p xv.