

IMMINENCE & TRANSCENDENCE

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DEFINING TERMS

When talking about God, we usually use the Hebrew words *Nochay'ach* and *Nistar*. The term *Nochay'ach* is understood to mean imminent or present. We speak of God being present, here and therefore, to a certain extent, more accessible and even revealed. *Nistar* is usually translated as transcendent or hidden. Even though God is *Nochay'ach*, imminent, He is simultaneously *Nistar*, transcendent and hidden from us, beyond our grasp intellectually and beyond our reach experientially.

The above definitions represent common usage and understanding. Indeed, there is no reason to quibble with the terms or their meaning. However, the words, *Nochay'ach* and *Nistar*, are primarily used to describe states of being. We could say that God – at this moment in time – is *Nochay'ach*, imminent, or the He is now *Nistar*, hidden from us. As such, these terms describe our relationship with God at any given moment in time. In truth, God, Himself, is neither imminent nor transcendent. He is God and therefore beyond being either transcendent or imminent. However, these terms are important for defining our interaction with God. And it is this interaction as described by these words that we will explore.

JUST LOOK AT THE TEXTS

The most commonly recognized example of *Nochay'ach* (God is here) and *Nistar* (God is hidden) is found in the *Beracha* recited before performing a *Mitzvah*. The *Beracha* begins with “We bless You... - *Baruch Atah*.” We address God as “You,” the imminent, present, almost revealed “You.” As we continue to recite the *Beracha*, we say, “Who has blessed us with His *Mitzvot* – *Asher Kidshanu BeMitzvotav*.” The *Mitzvot* are His. God commands us from afar, from a place that is unreachable, unattainable, from where He resides alone.

When we approach God to perform one of His *Mitzvot*, we are reminded that He is both imminent and transcendent at the same time. Even though we address God as the ever-

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present “You,” we realize that His commandments come from a place that is hidden within Him.

Another example comes from a prayer, actually a chapter in Psalms that is recited three times every day. Here, there are verses that speak directly to God (*Nochay’ach*) along with verses that speak of God (*Nistar*).

Psalms 145, commonly referred to as *Ashray*, opens with the words, “I will exalt You, my God the king” (verse 1). Verse 2 continues to address God as imminent, “Every day I will bless You.” In the third verse, the author switches gears and refers to God as *Nistar*, “God is great ... and His greatness is ...”

These three verses serve as the introduction to the entire Psalm. What follows are three very complex sections. The first two sections primarily address God as if we were right before Him (*Nochay’ach*). The third section (145:17-21) refers to God in the third person, as hidden (*Nistar*). “God is righteous in all of His ways” (verse 17). “God protects all who love Him” (verse 20).

One more example is in order. The *Kedusha* that is part of the Shabbat *Shacharit Shemonah Esray* addresses the imminent, present God. “From Your place, our king, You will appear.” However, in the *Musaf Shemonah Esray* of Shabbat, God is transcendent: “From His place He will turn in compassion.”

NOW LOOK AT THE PATTERN

You are sitting there saying, “Tell me something I don’t know.” Yes, you were not fully aware of the transition within *Ashray* or from the *Kedusha* in Shabbat *Shacharit* to Shabbat *Musaf*. So, here is something to think about: There is a pattern here that repeats itself over and over again. The text begins with God’s imminence and *then* moves to describe God as transcendent. This is far from being coincidental. What we have here is more than a simple pattern. What we have here is a description of process. The texts represent a process, a movement from one state to another, from one experience to another.

Remember, God Himself, does not float in and out of contact with us. It is not as if He is suddenly here, revealed, *Nochay’ach*, and just as suddenly, He disappears from view and hides, becoming *Nistar*. God is with us constantly. The Kabbalah tells us, “There is no place where He is not.” Thus, the words *Nochay’ach* and *Nistar* describe us not Him. These terms describe how we experience Him. Are we aware of God’s presence? Do we feel it? When we address Him are we talking to Him directly, face to face? Or are we speaking about Him because we have no experience of his presence?

If that is the case, you wisely ask, shouldn’t the pattern be reversed? If anything, we go from a state of not experiencing His presence to having an experience of God’s presence.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS

Yes, you are correct. Our experience begins with an almost total lack of feeling God’s presence. However, that fact is truly self-evident and thus does not need to be described in any text. There is an argument between Rav and Shmu’el as to whether or not we must use the word, “You – Atah” when reciting a *Beracha*. The argument appears in the Talmud

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Yerushalmi and in the Midrash on Psalms. The argument is not recorded in the Talmud Bavli and that is truly strange. Certainly we would expect that a halachic argument between two of the Talmud's most important sages would appear in the Bavli. However, Shmu'el's contention that a person is constantly consciously aware of God's presence is rejected out of hand. It might be ideal, but it is hardly the real situation. Thus, the process of experiencing God's presence does begin with a very dark state of *Nistar*, of God being almost totally hidden from view. When we recite a *Beracha*, we are meant to move into a situation of *Nochay'ach*.

So, when we turn to our texts, the *Tanach*, *Berachot* and other rabbinic texts such as the *Shemonah Esray*, we see that the pattern begins with *Nochay'ach*, God's imminence. It is at this point that we should realize that the *Nochay'ach* and *Nistar* – imminent and transcendent – are not just descriptive terms. They are there to define the steps in the process of encountering God.

Every time we recite *Ashray*, every time we say a *Beracha*, every time we stand up and sing *Kedusha* we must minimally become consciously aware of His presence to maximally actually experiencing God face to face.

The word "You – *Atah*" is as powerful as any other word in a *Beracha*. When we say, "You – *Atah*," our consciousness must be filled with the realization that we are standing face to face with God, Himself, and we are talking directly to him. This is only the beginning.

The word, "You – *Atah*," is meant to be the start of the experience of the direct encounter with God's *Shechinah*, His presence. Both the *Shulchan Aruch* and Rav Joseph Soloveitchik make the point that prayer is like prophecy. The only difference is who picks up the phone and calls whom. However, both prayer and prophecy have a nexus point where the experience is meant to be the same: The experience of the presence of God. And what is true about prayer is certainly true about all the other active commandments (*Mitzvot Asay*).

This first step in the process is a most difficult one. To think that I can actually have a spiritual – even a physical – sensation of being in God's presence is both frightening and exciting at the same time. Yet we are fully aware that it requires a great deal of work to achieve. Nevertheless, the fact that the word, "You – *Atah*," is the second word of the *Beracha*, coupled with the fact that the pattern always begins with a description of God's imminence implies that this step in the process is indeed attainable. What is harder is going to the next level.

EXPLAINING THE PATTERN & THE PROCESS

Is there a higher level? Can there be a higher level? You mean, that a person can go beyond (whatever that means) the experience of God's presence? And of course the answer is yes. That is actually the point of the pattern and the point of the process.

Rav Ya'akov Moshe Charlop (*May Marom*, *Devarim* pp. 81-83) points out a similar textual phenomenon regarding the terms *Ahavah* (love) and *Yir'ah* (fear or awe). It would seem that there is a level of *Yir'ah* that is beyond *Ahavah*. Love is the result of understanding. However, when our emotional bond extends beyond anything we can understand, beyond the limits of our intellect, it becomes a higher level of *Yir'ah*.

Although Rav Charlop does not mention it, his idea provides the explanation for a difficult verse in the story of the *Akedah*. This is what is meant when God tells Avraham at the *Akedah* that "now I know that you are a God-fearing man" (*Berayshit* 22). The *Akedah* was an irrational act of supreme devotion. Thus, Avraham moved beyond his great love for God into a state of higher awe of God.

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This idea can also be applied to word *Nistar*. The second step in the process of *Nochay'ach* and *Nistar* (imminent and transcendent) is not the same *Nistar* that the text ignores because it is self-evident. Here, the word, *Nistar*, implies a super-heightened awareness of God's presence to the point that the individual becomes enveloped in that presence and enters the *Nistar*, so to speak.

Everyone has had an experience that defies rational explanation. Everyone has had an experience that has an impact that cannot be understood. Usually such experiences are emotional or spiritual. A mundane example is a roller coaster ride that is thrilling in a way that is beyond our comprehension. To become one with God is the ultimate experience. And it is definitely beyond the limit of our intellect.

The second step in the process is to lose our grip on this-world reality and to ascend spiritually beyond the limits of the physical world that surrounds us. It begins with an overwhelming sensation of God's presence. It continues as we allow that sensation to envelop us. It ends as we are swept away in the maelstrom of divine light that blinds us to the earthly but illuminates our eyes with the sublime reality of God's existence.

The Chassidic Rebbes are always talking about the inner point of holiness. The *Sefat Emet*, for example, constantly speaks of the "Inner point – *HaNekudah HaPenimit*." This is the very essence of our soul. This is the spiritual part of the Jew that can never be corrupted. It is the part of the soul that no sin, no matter how grievous, can taint. It is this part, this small, infinitesimal point or dot that is like a flame that cannot be extinguished, ever. It is this inner point, says Rav Charlop, that rises to the higher level of *Yir'ah*, awe. It is this inner point, *HaNekudah HaPenimit*, that enters the *Nistar* to be alone with God.

According to the Ramban, God Himself can also be represented by a small infinitesimal point or dot. In relation to this world, God starts out as almost nothing. Then He expands through the process of emanation (*Atzilut*) until He has created the world and filled it with Himself. God reaches out further by giving us *Mitzvot*. Through the medium of Torah and *Mitzvot*, the emanation (*Atzilut*) begins at a small point, God, and extends itself until it touches the small point within man.

It is crucial to note at this point that the process of emanation (*Atzilut*) is accompanied by a simultaneous process of contraction, *Tzimtzum*. As God extends Himself beyond His inner essence, He contracts or diminishes Himself gradually until He can co-exist with the material world we call home.

The essence of the individual, that infinitesimal point or dot, also experiences the process of emanation (*Atzilut*). The soulful inner essence expands outward to create first consciousness and then the connection to the outer world through the five senses. Here, too, the human's inner essence also experiences a simultaneous process of contraction, *Tzimtzum*. We are almost totally oblivious to our most inner essence when we are preoccupied with the material, physical world.

Nevertheless, God has provided us with multiple mechanisms and media for connecting his dot with our dot! Whether it is the recitation of a *Beracha* followed by the performance of a *Mitzvah* or the reading / studying of a Torah text such as *Ashray*, we have the ability to rise beyond our abysmal lack of awareness of His presence to encounter God and then to be enveloped in His deep dark Oneness that we call *Nistar*.