



## Enduring the Desert

**MOTHER MARY:** The chapter that follows yesterday's, was pointed out to be of great assistance also. That Moses had thought through what are the steps in providing guidance in what might be a type of a 12-step program however it is Psalms.

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Source: *Jewish Spiritual Guidance*, Carol Oaks & Kevin Olitzky

**Nancy of Oregon:** The Judaeo traditions will be taught later by Moses at some point. To me, is the calendar of events of holidays is the most striking as we have been taught to have decrees among many, many services every month. It apparently was their form of **liturgy**, as at each of these events, they read the Bible or the Word.

**ANDREA of Chicago:** The second most striking part about Judaeo is that the firstborn is a priest *automatically*. If the parents do not desire to have the son be a priest, he can in the first year, be in a ceremony to get out of it. Essentially this safeguarded the community and it would survive. *It is a phenomenal technology!*

**MOSES:** This last technology is called the "first-born" in the Bible and the Christians have themselves not understood this.

**Nancy of Oregon:** What can we do with this knowledge today?

One mother beat her child and said to the first-born son, saying, "You are to learn and to teach the Golden Rule." And the mother beat

him about 4 times until the child said, "Mama, you don't have to beat me anymore, I will do as you say." He went on in that life to teach the Golden Rule.

**Mathzedes:** The Judaeo rabbis obviously would be reading the texts and traditions early on, however being the first-born does not necessarily mean that. But you see this is a Christian family, so you see, it is doable. I went on to become a leader in the community, which is larger than even San Francisco, although I was in the Associations there. I was in the newspapers and parades in Pacifica, California. People met at my bowling alleys. I owned two.

**MOSES:** You can see that what Mathzedes is saying here is as in Judaeo, religion is not limited to the synagogue. You carry the temple where you go also. However as we go over the traditions, you will see that he could have gone further with having those traditions to attend such as Pentecost.

**DEPUTY ANDY & AMOS:** Right, we, and Michael Jackson had to be in Hollywood. It is not so garnered although we ourselves would have greatly benefited to have AA2 for Negroids, to have Pentecost to be attending. So you must not stop and bring back this liturgy and Word along with the priest.

**George Washington Carver:** To be honest, did I myself have such an experience of being beaten? Yes.

**NOSTREDAME:** And the priest class must return if the United States would survive.

**MOSES:** It can be done in the older years being the "first-born" as the priest.

## CONTINUING THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

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*I have strayed like a lost sheep;  
search for Your servant.*

—Psalms 119:176

BECAUSE THE SPIRITUAL LIFE implies an ongoing and continuously evolving relationship, the process of spiritual guidance never ends. It is like the reading of the Torah, which continues from week to week. Even when we seem to have concluded the reading, we celebrate (on the festival of Simḥat Torah) by beginning the reading once again. At the end of twenty-two stanzas of Psalm 119, the psalmist can still write: “I have strayed like a lost sheep; search for Your servant.” We do not outgrow our need for discernment, for help along the spiritual way. However, having acquired some tools for offering direction to others, we can now recognize some of the stumbling blocks.

### The Way We Have Come

This chapter summarizes many of the points made during our study of spiritual guidance and illustrates how a single text, Psalm 119, incorporates many of the most important elements of the spiritual way and illuminates various aspects of spiritual guidance.

David came to me for direction. His biblical namesake, King David, is credited in Jewish tradition with the authorship of the entire book of

Psalms, including Psalm 119. David *entered* into spiritual guidance, initiating a relationship with me without coercion or constraint—the only way that allows spiritual guidance to take place. The motive for entering guidance is a desire to draw closer to God, and the impetus *must* come from the seeker. When he first arrived, David claimed that he did not believe in God. It would have been counterproductive at this beginning stage to point out how paradoxical it was, under the circumstances, for him to be entering into a process whose very purpose was to deepen his relationship with God. He would recognize the spiritual tension of competing claims later in the relationship. I simply recognized his openness and trusted the potential of spiritual guidance to bring about personal spiritual transformation.

The seeker usually comes with some initial question, like that of the psalmist: “How can a young person keep to a pure way?” (Ps. 119:9). The question fundamentally functions as an invitation to the spiritual journey; frequently no answer will really suffice. However, it is noteworthy that the original question asked by the seeker persists throughout the process of guidance, even when the form of the question changes. For example, the question just quoted from Psalm 119 might change to “How can an overly busy adult keep to a good way?” and later to “How can an aged person keep to the right way?” There are different temptations at different ages, but they are temptations nonetheless. Perhaps for the young person, the temptation is hubris, excessive pride in one’s physical strength and mental acumen. For people in mid-life, the temptation is their own busyness and need for mastery; middle-aged people, with their many responsibilities, have difficulty finding time for the silence and solitude that have helped nurture ongoing relationships with God. Old age has its own temptations. With the loss of personal strength and the deaths of so many friends, the great task is to fight off despair. However the specific question is formed, the seeker is looking for assurance that there is a way, that others have wrestled with the same questions.

We all want to know that although we must take responsibility for our own spiritual lives, we do not have to do so alone, without the guidance of another. Earlier in this book, Exodus and the Song of Songs were presented as two “spiritual maps.” These maps reflect the journey of our people; they provide us with historical memory and help us participate (*methexus*) in our people’s story. They chart the way others have traveled along the same path, providing us with reassurance: others have been there and survived. And these maps lift up our personal stories into the larger story of our people. (This sense of connection is a major support for the spiritual way.) The stories offer us a shared vocabulary so that we may talk about the spiritual way and reflect on it.

Early in spiritual guidance, even for David who claimed that he did not believe in God, the focus of discussion turns to prayer, the basic form of communication in the spiritual relationship. "I have called with my whole heart; answer me Adonai" (Ps. 119:145). I emphasize to David the central importance of prayer for spiritual living, and together we explore the many forms it takes. There are seekers who do not believe that God has a plan for us or controls or influences the world. With them, I speak in theological terms, suggesting that they broaden their concept of prayer beyond the categories of petition and traditional liturgical texts. I invite them to include all the moments when their hearts and minds are lifted up.

With most seekers, it is sufficient to reaffirm that prayer is a form of communication. They must learn to say what is most important to them, and they must also learn how to listen for any response. With David, the language had to be changed so that he could comfortably stay in the conversation. We discussed inspiration, and communication from the right hemisphere of the brain. My task was not to convince him of anything; the relationship itself would do so, as long as he simply remained open to the process.

Fears change, but they do not disappear along the way. For David, a lot of fear was associated with the possibility of "losing face," embarrassment, not "being cool." Ilana, seeing an increasing number of friends fall gravely ill or die, feared mortality and finitude. She could not put off addressing that fear any longer. Like all of us, she sought intimacy with God. It is a powerful attraction, but it is also very frightening. This fear is expressed throughout Psalm 119:

My flesh shudders in fear of You;  
I am afraid of Your judgments.

—Ps. 119:120

**Our task as spiritual guides is to cry out, "Do not fear!"—and to encourage seekers to persist in their search for God.**

David learned in spiritual guidance that the God he rejected was just one image of God advanced by certain teachers or books. In fact, God transcends all images. David's biblical counterpart uses different images of God throughout Psalm 119 to illustrate his progressively deeper understanding. In various places, God is portrayed as a judge, as one who is merciful, as a shelter and a shield, and in the tender image of one who looks for a lost sheep.

For our David, study was no problem. As a college student, he understood study as a major component of his life. He spent most of his days with his books. David understood the formative power of study, and he

recognized that he was in a formative stage in his life. It was harder for Ilana, who was very busy, to find time for study; it was even harder to find a teacher (although she understood that she could study with a *chevruta*, or even by herself as long as she had a user-friendly commentary). But in working with Ilana, the primary task—always a major responsibility in spiritual guidance—was convincing her that formation does not end, that motion does not stop. We must continue to study and find in study a place of encounter. Study, for the biblical David, is one of the ways he comes near to God: “I reach out for Your commandments, which I love” (Ps. 119:48). In fact, we study not so much to learn more about the text but to provide ourselves with a context in which to encounter God. Faith is not about acquiescence to a certain set of propositions laid out in the text. Faith is about developing and maintaining a relationship with God. And study provides us with a context in which to explore and expand this relationship.

As we study, we learn about many things—including sin. For the psalmist, sin is a wake-up call:

Before I was humbled, I went astray;  
 But now I keep Your word. . . .  
 It was good for me that I was humbled,  
 So that I might learn Your laws.

—Ps. 119:67, 71

The most serious aspect of sin is its capacity to rupture the relationship with God. Recognizing the possibility for *teshuvah* (the process of repairing this relationship through repentance) is central to ongoing development on the spiritual way.

The length of the spiritual path—reflected in the idea of “enduring the desert”—is also alluded to in verses 83 and 84:

Though I have become like a water-skin in smoke,  
 I have not neglected Your laws.  
 How long has Your servant to live?

—Ps. 119:83–84

To view our lives as analogous to a water-skin dried in smoke is to see it in terms of the many trials that dry us out and make us brittle. This sense of aridity is part of “enduring the desert.” And yet life needs to be regarded not as a trial but as the blessing and gift of God. Whether we are blessed with a long life or an unfortunately short one, we can remain connected with meaning and value through faithfulness to our many spiritual prac-

tices. Each day, we can reaffirm our love and commitment; each day, we can reconnect to our people and our texts. These spiritual practices give shape and structure to our lives.

As seekers, we view the guide as a model to emulate in a form that makes sense for our own life. In some cases, the spiritual guide models the trust we need to grow into.

Mindy provides us with an excellent example. A spiritual guide with rare humor and warmth, she was suddenly diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. Sherman, one of the people for whom Mindy provided spiritual guidance, visited her in the hospital. Sherman did so out of genuine affection, as well as in fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *bikur holim* (visiting the sick). He felt the usual sense of discomfort that healthy people experience on encountering someone who is seriously ill. The sight of Mindy festooned with innumerable tubes was extremely difficult for him. But Mindy's spirit was strong and vital, and as it turned out, she gave far more energy to Sherman than he was able to give her. Healthy or ill—even on their death beds—those who are intimate with God often energize their visitors.

*Mitzvot* are intrinsically good; they are valuable in their own right even before they benefit someone else. When Judith was persuaded to work in a soup kitchen, she did so with the idea of “doing good,” but she found herself deeply touched by the experience. She was particularly moved by the dignity and humanity of those who came to be fed. Suddenly Judith realized that it was *she* who had been served. The rabbis who said they had learned even more from their students than from their teachers had it right, exemplifying a fundamental truth of the spiritual economy: the more we give, the richer we become.

## Principles of Spiritual Guidance as Found in Psalm 119

Psalm 119, the longest of all the psalms, is an excellent summary of the principles of spiritual guidance. All the landmarks can be found in it, and all the issues discussed in the preceding chapters. One of its features is that it is an acrostic poem: beginning with *aleph*, the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet, the initial letters of the twenty-two stanzas follow the alphabetic sequence all the way to the end. A unique feature of this psalm is that the Hebrew word beginning each stanza may be seen to provide a thematic statement for the entire stanza. Examining each of these key words in order will bring together the fundamental concepts of spiritual guidance. Psalm 119 may be long, but as we study it, we come to understand it as a short guide to the spiritual way.

**Stanza 1**

Happy [*ashrei*] are those whose way is blameless,  
 who follow the teaching of Adonai [verse 1].

When approaching a psalm for the first time, we can listen for echoes of other psalms, other familiar texts. Here is what we might find:

Happy is the one whom God corrects;  
 Therefore do not despise the chastening of the Almighty.  
 —Job 5:17

Happy are all those who fear Adonai,  
 who follow in God's ways.  
 —Ps. 128:1

Happy is the one whose help is the God of Jacob,  
 Whose hope is in Adonai, our God.  
 —Ps. 146:5

All these texts, like Psalm 119, define happiness in terms of a faithful relationship with God. It is the quest for happiness that also lies at the heart of the book of *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes). “Vanity of vanities” says the king Kohelet, “all is vanity” (Eccles. 1:2). This notion that everything is merely a wisp of wind—nothing of substance—leads Kohelet to explore and then reject various possible sources of happiness: wisdom, wealth, and pleasure of the senses. The same quest is taken up by philosopher Baruch Spinoza in his autobiographical work *On the Improvement of the Understanding*. Like Kohelet, Spinoza also rejects riches, status, and sensate pleasure. He encourages us to search for the intellectual love of God, something that unites our head and heart. Spinoza may thus be considered one of the earliest Jewish spiritual guides. His work tries to join intellect with emotion so that we can come into a whole relationship with God.

We, like Spinoza, can recognize that whatever has made the world seem vain to us can serve the positive function of causing us to start on our way. It prompts in us a plea for guidance. Over time, we will discover that following the law is an intrinsic good. But it is a way of life that must be cultivated. The psalmist is not yet firm in it: “Would that my ways were firm in keeping your laws” (Ps. 119:5). Virtue, the life of *mitzvot*, is good in itself. It is a gift to us from God, because it provides us with direction for our lives. But we only make this discovery as we begin to live the religious life. So Psalm 119 begins with the idea of happiness as *correctness*, of doing no wrong, of not being ashamed (119:6). It offers us a place to begin as we move toward a relationship of love and intimacy.

**Stanza 2**

**How** [*bameh*, lit. with what] **can people keep their ways pure?** [verse 9]

Seekers and spiritual guides both recognize that it is hard to live by the values we have established as a moral compass for our lives. In a world that constantly bombards us with different standards (including a lack of standards) for ethical living, we need help remembering our own set of values. And we need help holding on to them in a society that measures progress by a different yardstick. The spiritual life is a quest for meaning and value in our daily experience. The world around us has become separated from a larger perspective, a story that lifts up and infuses all the small moments with significance, and so that world fails as a domain of happiness. We need to develop a relationship with reality. Stanza 2 of Psalm 119 urges us to find a road map for ethical living (described in Chapter One in the discussions of Exodus and the Song of Songs). It also encourages us to receive training. The focus here is not on the cognitive—that is, knowing—but rather on being and becoming.

If theology is the study of God's nature and actions, and ethics is concerned with human behavior, religion is the bridge that joins our notion of God to our behavior. As seekers and guides, we discover that this bridge is constructed through three types of experience. First, we may feel a divine imperative—a sense of God's love and presence, a demand for action. We then want our behavior to conform with our love of God. Second, in the face of evil, we may seek refuge in a genuine standard, one that reflects the divine relationship we have striven to achieve. When outrageously immoral conduct is displayed, we realize that the ways of the world are unacceptable. Finally, we may know the good but not follow it; our efforts are insufficient. We want to live a good life, one that we know to be right, but we seem helpless to achieve this level of living without God's help.

Addressing the needs of all three types of seeker, Stanza 2 is concerned with how we can we keep our way pure. It reinforces the idea that we may take delight in God's law. The text offers us a hint, but it will take a long time before glory in God's law emerges as a dominant theme in the psalm and in our lives.

**Stanza 3**

**Deal kindly** [*gemol*, grant] **with Your servant**  
**that I may live to keep your word** [verse 17].

This stanza expresses the psalmist's plea for life and direction. The only way to keep God's word is to live. It is through living that we may find our way to God. Spirituality is "theology walking"; it is the way we live our life. Genuine spirituality is found in all that we do, every choice we make, each action we perform, the relationships into which we enter. In this stanza, the psalmist asks to be dealt with kindly but also expresses delight in the study of the law and makes of it an intimate companion (Ps. 119: 24). This notion of the sacred text as intimate companion, which transcends the idea that the law is a set of rules or a test to be passed, is a major step forward on our spiritual path.

Also hinted at in the term *gemol* is the idea of God's graciousness, or unconditional generosity. This concept, called "grace" in non-Jewish sources, is not alien to Judaism (it is generally referred to as *hein*), but we are rarely directed to notice the ever-present grace. Certainly the entire Exodus story—particularly the description of receiving manna in the wilderness—teaches us that we will receive exactly what we need, regardless of how much we appear to gather. Throughout the Israelites' forty-year journey, this is an ongoing lesson in grace. As spiritual guides, it is our responsibility to remind seekers that grace continues. This is best taught not by lecturing but by inviting those who come to us to do what we have done—to turn their lives to God.

#### Stanza 4

**My soul cleaves [*devakah*] to the dust [verse 25].**

The crucial word in this verse is "cleaves," not "dust." Among the mystics, *devekut* (literally, adhesion) is associated with cleaving to God and raises certain other associations. In Genesis, the first covenant, between man and woman, models for us the covenant we are to have with God: "Hence a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves (*davak*) to his wife so that they become one flesh" (2:24). We learn about our relationship to God through our commitment to human relationships. As we examine those relationships, we recognize that the way we respond to human intimacy mirrors our response to God, which contains elements of both attraction and resistance. Frequently, seekers need to be reminded that their covenants with their spouses provide them with the best context for learning about their covenant with God. Just as the Israelites found it difficult to maintain their covenant with God in the day-to-day living of the wilderness, we find that there are difficult times in our marriages, times of desert-like aridity. We want intimacy with the other, but we fear it as

well. Repeatedly in the *Tanakh*, we are told, “Be not afraid.” We are also reminded, “You who cleave to Adonai are all alive today” (Deut. 4:4). Here the importance of cleaving is made abundantly clear. But how do we achieve such a level of devotion? That is the work of the spiritual journey. Though we will sometimes fail, relapse, and lose our footing on the path, thanks to *teshuvah* we are always able to find our true direction again and resume our efforts.

The stanza continues, “I have declared my way, and you have answered me.” This statement gives us the sense that something more personal is developing. However, before we are able to believe that there is a real possibility of cleaving to God, we move back and forth in the relationship, sometimes toward God and sometimes away.

### Stanza 5

Teach me [*boreini*], O God, the way of Your laws [verse 33].

Teaching is not simply the imparting of facts from one person to another. Teaching is the development of a transformative relationship. What is being sought here is a teaching that will unite head and heart. It is a way of life. We recognized in Chapter Seven two different forms of knowledge: performative (knowing how) and factual (knowing that). We are generally taught these forms of knowledge in schools. According to Genesis 3, both are part of the knowledge that led to the expulsion from Eden. One of Adam and Eve’s first responses to having eaten from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge was their awareness of and discomfort with their own nakedness. Previously they had been naked but at peace. It would be a long journey of building openness and trust in the face of vulnerability that would allow them once again to find comfort rather than shame in mutual nakedness.

There is a third type of knowledge, represented by but not limited to sexual intimacy, in which the knower and the known are mutually open to one another, with neither trying to control or possess the other. This type of knowledge—“Adam knew his wife and she bore a son”—is transformative and fruitful. It is the same category of intimate knowledge that is at stake in the spiritual way.

The psalmist repeatedly requests of God: “Train me in Your laws” (119:12, 26, 27). When we first look at the laws, they appear straightforward. We think we know what they mean and what God requires of us. Then suddenly we realize that we may not have fully understood what God wants of us. As we follow God’s laws for living our life, they

will gradually reveal to us the many levels of depth within them. As spiritual guides, therefore, we engage in a practice that is not measured in terms of expertise in text or psychology. Rather, the process emerges out of our relationship with God, which provides us with a model for the relationship we foster with the seeker. We find ourselves saying things we didn't know we knew, asking questions we had not planned to ask. We prepare for our meetings with the seeker not by reviewing history or law but by "getting out of the way" so that God's presence can be made manifest.

### Stanza 6

May Your steadfast love come [veyvomi] to me, O God [verse 41].

Here the psalmist, only six stanzas into a psalm twenty-two stanzas long, already expresses a desire for closeness to God. But as spiritual guides, we know this apparent openness and receptivity is not yet well grounded. After moments of closeness and intimacy resistance is likely to arise.

Bert yearned for closeness to God and even asked for it, but he also feared it. My first task was to recognize this resistance to intimacy. His resistance took several of the many forms of inordinate busyness. He had no time for silence, no time to spend in engaging a text or letting it touch him—even though he spends a great deal of time at "reciting" prayers. He actually found a prayer community that moved him deeply, but "it's too much trouble to get there." It was my responsibility as his spiritual guide to point out that there was something paradoxical in what was taking place. He claimed to have found something that was deeply rewarding and satisfying, but then avoids it. By becoming conscious of his resistance, Bert can more easily overcome it. (Fear almost always plays a part in resistance to closeness.) This kind of fear can be overcome in part by Bert becoming more trusting. We might suggest that he repeat experiences that warrant trust. Bert is also greatly impatient. A high achiever in studies and work, he is not at all accustomed to waiting. But in Judaism, as in sound, the emphasis is on process and relationship, not on some final beatific vision. When we recall the shy, delightful unfolding of our human relationships, we begin to realize that instead of being a trial, patience can be a gift. I suggested that Bert open himself slowly to a deepening relationship. I also suggested that he establish routine times for coming into the presence of God in prayer, meditation, study, silence. In this way, Bert will become open and welcoming to God. I encouraged Bert to continue his other pursuits (nowhere in this psalm

does the psalmist talk about abandoning his current life). Bert, like other seekers, must stand and wrestle with his daily commitments. He grows not by storming the heavens but by being patient, consistent, open, and welcoming. In this posture, he will find God.

### Stanza 7

**Remember [zachor] Your word to Your servant [verse 49].**

According to Abraham Joshua Heschel, “the pious person lives always under the canopy of remembrance.” And Nachman of Bratzlav, who taught a simple faith and emphasized the importance of prayer and music, said: “Forgetfulness is exile. Remembrance is redemption.” Remembrance has always been central to our identity as a people and to the development of trust in God:

God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark, and God caused a wind to blow across the earth, and the waters subsided [Gen. 8:1].

At one point, Bert described feeling as if he were in the midst of a flood. As he confronted the tasks of daily living, he felt overwhelmed and overburdened. It was hard for him not to believe that God had forgotten him. I suggested that he try to remember an experience he would label “God remembered.” Because he did not experience this feeling in the present, I encouraged him to search his past. *He recalled an experience and examined it as if he were looking at a rare animal.* “Could that have been an occasion of God’s remembering me?” When I assured him that it could, he quickly turned up four or five additional examples, saying, “I never knew how to name it before!” Having discovered God’s caring presence during various occasions in his life, Bert became more interested in exploring this pattern of God’s remembrance.

### Stanza 8

**Adonai is my portion [helki] [verse 57].**

Few people can say, “God is my portion” or “God is my central concern and is all I want.” It is a difficult notion to accept, but the world looks very different to us if we truly mean it. To see God as our portion is to try to shape our life and consciousness in terms of our dedication to God. Once God has become real for us, we feel a sense of urgency to live in the

context of that reality, of that covenant. Yet because so few people can affirm that God is indeed their portion, one of the tasks of spiritual guidance is to validate a relationship with God as the central reality in the seeker's life. But we can't just say "God is my portion" once and be done with it. We must reexamine our commitment to the covenant every day. And then we must reaffirm it. Every day we are offered alternatives to the covenant. They may not be bad in themselves, but they don't provide us with answers to the ultimate questions in life.

### **Stanza 9**

**You have treated Your servant well [tov] [verse 65].**

Discernment refers to our ability to recognize the signs that guide us on our way to a deeper relationship with God. Central to this ability is the capacity **to accurately distinguish between good and evil, a key concept in spiritual guidance.** In this stanza, the psalmist makes the further distinction between apparent evil and real evil; the psalmist had been humbled, but with a new capacity to discern, sees his humbling as having been for a greater good (verses 67, 71):

Before I was humbled I went astray,  
but now I keep Your word. . . .  
It was good for me that I was humbled,  
so that I might learn Your laws.

The hardest day-to-day question is discernment. When must we struggle against the status quo? When must we accept it? Through what must we suffer? Where do we look for insight? In retrospect, the psalmist embraces his suffering as a great teacher. Sometimes we learn through joy, sometimes through humbling or affliction. When we can recognize affliction as a call, it ceases to control us. But the spiritual guide cannot tell the seeker that a particular affliction is a call, cannot label someone's pain and suffering as a positive experience. However, the guide can be present, reassuring, open to listening. Then the seeker might discover what lesson is meant to be learned from the experience.

### **Stanza 10**

**Your hands [yodekba] made me and fashioned me [verse 73].**

The imagery used in this verse suggests the intimacy of the relationship with God. Once we recognize that we are created by God—the source of

all Creation—it changes our perspective on life. Suddenly, our daily routine becomes patterned, meaningful, and purposeful. Recalling that we are created by God's hands moves us out of the domain of randomness into the domain of eternal value. Having reached stanza 10 in the psalm, we are no longer at the starting point of our spiritual journey. Our seeker David, for example, could not have begun with the idea that God's hands had made and fashioned him. However, he did have great respect for the marvels of the world. He had studied enough science to develop a deep appreciation for many of the phenomena around him. Together, he and I would recall some of the wonders, and then he would be left to ponder more deeply so that he could move beyond cognition and experience a *feeling* of wonder.

### Stanza 11

I long for [*kaltab*] Your deliverance [verse 81].

Some of the people who have come to me for spiritual guidance seem to have started their journey with this verse. They did not come with a quest for happiness or purity. They came with an unnamed, unspecified yearning. Melanie was one such person. She had been very successful in business and had won the respect of those who worked with her. She was financially comfortable, and she was in a meaningful relationship. Yet she understood that something was lacking. Melanie did not enter spiritual guidance from a place of deprivation. She had hobbies and interests and many friends, and she was active in the community and generous with *tzedakah* (charitable giving). These words of Spinoza may have been written explicitly about her:

*After experience had taught me that all the usual surroundings of social life are vain and futile; seeing that none of the objects of my fears contained in themselves anything good or bad except as the mind is affected by them, I finally resolved to inquire whether there might be some real good [On the Improvement of the Understanding, p. 3].*

Melanie began her quest for the real good. Within less than a year, she felt compelled to leave her work and return to school to become a rabbi.

### Stanza 12

Adonai exists forever [*l'olam*];  
Your word stands firm in heaven [verse 89].

Our initial desires are all framed in terms of time. Here the psalmist introduces us to the notion of “forever,” the enduring aspect of God that changes our perspective. But with the concept of “forever” come both the promise and the burden of time. After Noah lived through the destruction of the world’s peoples (a calamity we too now face at the end of the twentieth century), he was promised that

So long as the earth endures,  
Seedtime and harvest,  
Cold and heat,  
Summer and winter,  
Day and night  
Shall not cease.

—Gen. 8:22

This is not an unalloyed blessing. The ongoingness of time means the ongoingness of time’s trials. Noah’s dominant experience had been one of mass destruction, so he chose inebriation as a way out:

Noah, the tiller of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk [Gen. 9:20–21].

The spiritual guide must encourage and support the seeker whether the spiritual journey is perceived as desert, flood, or dark night.

Not every meeting between guide and seeker is concerned with life-changing decisions. Frequently meetings focus only on supporting the person through the ongoingness of time.

### Stanza 13

O how I love [*ahavti*] Your teaching!  
It is my study all day long [verse 97].

In verse 75, the text refers to knowledge; here it refers to love. This change represents significant spiritual growth. Initially the psalmist is concerned with a fear of doing wrong, a desire to do right, and the search for a standard. Now, beyond fear and correctness, love comes to the fore. “[God’s teaching] is my meditation all day long” is not a mantra; it is a fundamental frame of reference. This kind of transformation really does occur. Alan entered spiritual guidance with a desire for correctness, some degree of fear about doing wrong, and very little apparent warmth or joy. There were, however, areas of real love and joy in his life. He had not really recognized how his marriage, his love of music, and his appreciation of nature might be connected to his spiritual quest. When he was asked dur-

ing guidance to find God in some of these experiences, the request was a catalyst for a breakthrough in his spiritual life. Suddenly he could *feel* the gifts of love that surrounded him.

#### Stanza 14

Your word is a lamp [*ner*, candle] unto my feet, a light for my path.

Lamp. Candle. God's word is the Pillar of Fire that led the way for the Israelites at night in the wilderness. The Children of Israel learned to trust in the fire and follow it. We no longer have the benefit of the fire and the cloud, so we need help in discerning something comparable to those guiding pillars. Like our ancestors, we cannot see ahead, but with the help of spiritual guidance, seekers can learn to sense what leads them and come to trust it over time.

Molly was very taken with the quotation from John Donne's *The House of Wisdom* that I offered her: "Things are meant, there are signs, the heart speaks, there is a way" (p. 13). She could see that her belief in the God of Israel was a belief in a meaningful world. Also, she had come to learn that the signs that led the Israelites had not ceased to function. There *are* signs. One sign she was beginning to discern was the movement of her own heart, her deep sense of desire. And so, with guidance, she was beginning to discern a way.

#### Stanza 15

I hate those who are of a divided heart [*se'afim*] [verse 113].

Divided thoughts, branches, divisions—the opposite of *shelemut*, wholeness. Søren Kierkegaard defined purity of heart as being able to will one thing. We recognize the need to unify ourselves. The divisions we work to overcome include the artificial distinctions between heart and mind and between mind and body, separations that Jewish thinkers have always eschewed. Ultimately we must claim all of ourselves and bring the whole into our relationship with God. David's scientific appreciation had to transcend the cognitive in order to embrace the spiritual, emotional sense of awe. Another seeker's capacity for human love had to be expanded so that he could understand that this was one of the ways God loved him.

#### Stanza 16

I have done [*asati*] what is just and right [verse 121].

Belief and faith are not limited to states of being. Both must lead to action. Some people are afraid that spirituality might move them away from the prophetic call and the claims of social justice. The opposite is the case in Judaism. Belief always finds its foundation in the love of God, which is expressed as a concern for justice. There is change, however. What begins as a call to “do good” evolves into a natural response to the joy we feel in our own lives. There is a shift from “gritted teeth,” the sense of having to do something, to the exuberant impulse to contribute.

### *Stanza 17*

Your decrees are wondrous [*pela'ot*] [verse 129].

This stanza contains several expressions of wonder: “[Your words] give light and grant understanding. . . . I pant, longing for Your *mitzvot*” (verses 130–131). We probably cannot always live at this level of wonder, but we have to periodically return to it so that we can water our arid soul. Our responsibility as spiritual guides is often simply to remind those who come to us about their past experiences of wonder. Sometimes we encourage them to observe something wondrous in the present—or we invite them to relate something they have experienced through their senses in the previous twenty-four hours. At first, they may draw a blank, but this is instructive. It allows them to see how rarely they are present to what is around them; they use their senses merely to navigate and not to take in the richness of God’s world. After a while, they will report that they really do have a growing sense of wonder.

### *Stanza 18*

You are righteous [*tzaddik*], Adonai [verse 137].

God’s righteousness as a standard should be apparent throughout the relationship between spiritual guide and seeker. What was initially accepted as a discipline, a way to grow in intimacy with God, is now embraced out of a sense of its intrinsic value and out of love for God. As the stanza continues, the psalmist declares that his smallness in the eyes of others does not diminish his consciousness of God’s precepts (verse 141), nor do anguish and distress eclipse his joy in God’s commandments (verse 143). He is embracing these precepts not out of fear but out of delight: “Though anguish and distress come upon me, Your commandments are my delight” (verse 143). The formula by which the first half of a verse expresses a condition of distress and the second a feeling of safety (or praise) is common

in this psalm and in others. The juxtaposition can be interpreted to mean that in our lives we will suffer, but in the context of a life lived to God's standard—that is, a personal covenant with God—we can find the suffering meaningful.

### Stanza 19

I call [*karati*, I have called] with all my heart [verse 145].

Out of all the abstract arguments for the spiritual way and our desire to enter into an intimate relationship with God finally comes a direct call, an expressed sense that we are ready to address God directly: “You, O God, are near” (verse 151).

Margot had been coming for spiritual guidance for two years. She had really grown through this experience. But one thing remained an obstacle for her: she did not know how to directly address God. She could talk about God, she could pray from the prayer book. She could ask about God and try to locate God in the context of a certain experience. But she could not form one sentence that addressed God directly. For some people, this is not a problem. We recall the ease and naturalness with which the character Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* addresses God. But what is easy and natural for Tevye seemed almost impossible for Margot—as it is for many of us. So I suggested that Margot write down some of the questions she was asking me and address this writing to God. She was able to write down her thoughts. Then I asked her to take home what she had written and read it out loud. It was amazing to her that she was able to do this. The final remaining hurdle had been traversed. As she read her own writing, it became an ongoing conversation with God.

### Stanza 20

See [*re'eh*] my affliction and rescue me [verse 153].

See. Take notice of me. We do not want to pass through this world invisibly. We want God to recognize us, but we know that to be seen by God is to stand in nakedness before God. The Creator will not be deflected by our new haircut or artificial posture. God will see us as we are. It is difficult to come before God with all our flaws, but it is also very healing. That is what *teshuvah* (repentance) is all about. We acknowledge that we are accepted and loved by God even after all that we have done. To lead seekers before God, however unready they may feel, takes patience, encouragement, support, and confidence.

### Stanza 21

Princes [*sarim*] have persecuted me without reason [verse 161].

These “princes” are the powers and forces of this world. In earlier times, such forces were given demonic names to arouse fear. In some cases, the names were euphemistic codes referring to those in power. Now we tend to give worldly forces names informed by our awareness of social psychology: status, the temptation of the inner circle, power—all of which can potentially lure us away from our center. No matter how long we have been on the spiritual way, we remain vulnerable to the powers of this world. The “princes” don’t cease to attack because we have chosen the spiritual way—indeed, they may even become more subtle. It is therefore important that we continue in *spiritual guidance as seekers* so that we may be helped to examine our motivation and what is really at stake in every decision we make.

### Stanza 22

May my plea reach [*tikrav*, approach] You, O Adonai [verse 169].

Let my cry come close to you—like a sacrifice (*korban*, rooted in the verb to *draw close*). The entire process of spiritual growth is one of drawing closer to God. The plea continues in the stanza’s succeeding verses because the process continues. Just as a single breath is insufficient to maintain us in life, so a single moment of revelation cannot tell us everything of what God wants from us. The process must be ongoing. The covenant and the relationship continue through all the days of our lives.

We are always beginners. That is one of the magnificent aspects of growing in our relationship with the Infinite. It is an adventure that never pales, a task that is never completed, a way of life that remains engaging throughout our days. We are just as far from the end after a lifetime of growth as we were when we began. But the distance we cannot traverse can be—and is—traversed by God once we have become open and receptive.

We return again to our sacred texts, finding more and more detail in the maps of the spiritual way. We continue to pray and find that, over time, all of our inner dialogue becomes an unbroken conversation with God; we find that more and more of Creation speaks to us. Our powers of discernment grow. We will still be afraid, and will make the continuous choice against fear, but fear is subsumed in the larger trust of God. Our image of God expands and expands so that we are left as wordless as the mystic who said he had no name for God because God could not

be contained in a name. When he was asked, "Then how do you call God?" he replied, "I say 'Ahhh.'"

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3

Study remains a joy and a well from which we draw refreshment. There are temptations, but the fundamental temptation—to leave the spiritual way—no longer has power. We have reached life's "point of no return"; we are committed. So we endure the desert and the trials of dailiness and commit ourselves to those actions that will heal our world.

And the greatest aspect of all our striving is that it is liberating, joyous, and the product of love.