

Ehyeh Havayah Ehyeh



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Maybe we should stop saying “Hasidic masters.” This implies expertise, the completion of a journey. It seems to me, however, that truly actualized people are actual and in actu, present and in motion, ripe for transformation. This mode of being is no final crescendo or looping track but an ever-new song, constantly beginning and ending. If the niggun gets stuck in your head, it’s no longer the one. We have to forget it in order to sing the truly timeless tune. Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav made a practice of emptying himself out of all knowledge, especially after revealing the most astonishing Torah. “I know nothing!” he insisted, and would question what it even means to be Jewish. [1] “The principle,” his disciple Noson of Nemirov explained, “is that he never remained at one stage but rather moved fluidly from stage to stage, to ever higher and loftier levels. Even when he attained what he attained, his mind would not freeze there.” [2]



Ehyeh Havayah Ehyeh. “I Will Be — Being — I Will Be.” For Noson, this Kabbalistic incantation of divine names was a map for personal growth. Not the kind of growing that culminates in grownup-hood, though.

On the contrary, this path is infused with infancy.

Ehyeh Havayah Ehyeh. As soon as my becoming solidifies into being, I am already opened up to become new again. The fruit of this process is fructifying force itself. If we try to preserve it, we just dry it out. Indeed, Noson embraced the Kabbalistic observation that the numerical value of Ehyeh Havayah Ehyeh equals that of Hayyim, Life. [3] If we fancy that we are masters who can simply feed on past produce, then we are spiritually dead.

Ehyeh Havayah Ehyeh. I Will Be — Being — I Will Be. Noson suggests that “the true tsadiq”—the genuine sage, whom he identifies most strongly with his own guide, Rebbe Naḥman—embodies this process:

Every day he is in the dimension of Ehyeh, the dimension of pregnancy, the dimension of “I am ready to be.” [4] For he begins to live anew with new consciousness and vitality, as if he never before had any being or vitality at all. Then, through this, a totally new consciousness emerges for him that is in the dimension of Havayah... But when he merits to receive this new consciousness, which is Life, he then immediately returns and empties out this consciousness, and nothing more than its residue remains. He then returns and begins cleaving to the blessed One, longing for Him, and he attains another new, expansive consciousness, again and again... This is Ehyeh Havayah Ehyeh, for he always remains in the dimension of Ehyeh, the dimension of “I am ready to be.” [5]

The real tsadiq is the one who is never finished. New insights and revelations stream forth in them because they let previous ones flow on. Their river is undammed. Their currents are current. Headwaters flush freshly through inner landscapes, washing away yesterday’s sediment. Everything is Ehyeh, even while Havayah dances in the depths, always dissolving. Yes, weighty Being is at the center of it all, but it’s as slippery as the moment between past and future. We have to let it go in order to see it—in order to live it.

Ehyeh Havayah Ehyeh. And let’s not forget that these are names of God! To embody this cascade is to imitate the One whose imageless image is always changing. Garments upon garments conceal and reveal God’s naked Nothingness. Maybe that protean emptiness itself is the image of “Elohim” (plural!) in which humans were created. The more fixed our identities and ideas become, the less godlike we are. In the words of Reb RuPaul: “In truth, you are not your clothes, you are not your profession, you are not your religion. You are an extension of the consciousness that guides the universe, for which there is no name because it cannot be defined. That’s why all the superficial things you list as your identity are in reality your ‘drag.’ Years ago, when I heard someone say ‘we are all God in drag,’ I knew it to be true at my core.” [6]

Ehyeh Havayah Ehyeh. When we delight in a new idea or identity while still remaining ready for newborn understanding, we are closer to God. When I let my self go, I am more flush with the Self. Hallow the hollow at the heart of it all.

From this perspective, teshuvah—often translated as repentance but literally meaning a “return” to God—is a return to fluidity. Teshuvah is recognizing that the stuff of selfhood is so many masks and, moreover, there is no essential face to find beneath them. [7] It’s garments all the way down, designed to be worn lightly. In this spirit, Noson suggests, “Ehyeh is the dimension of teshuvah, the dimension of ‘I am ready to be.’” Teshuvah is radical flux, the return to rebirthing. Far from any notion that teshuvah is just for us sinners, Noson hints that the most awakened souls

of all are those who are steeped in ceaseless teshuvah. “The tsadiq, who has already done a total teshuvah, must do teshuvah in every moment for his prior cognition in order to attain a new cognition in every moment. Then he does teshuvah in the dimension of Ehyeh.” [8] Perpetual teshuvah is where the chariot wheels really start humming.

Ehyeh Havayah Ehyeh. What is key is to come into being anew at all times, constantly crowning, as it were. In Rebbe Nahman’s imagination, the archetype of this quality is the elder with neonatal consciousness: “I am very old, but I am still totally infantile. I have not yet started to live at all, but I am nonetheless very old.” [9] Nahman likens this persona as well to the midrashic eagle who sheds her feathers again and again and thereby renews her youth for millennia. [10] For his great-grandfather the Ba’al Shem Tov, the pinnacle of prayer is davening “like a day-old infant,” looking upon the letters with untrained eyes. [11]

To speak personally, I witnessed the oh so very non-metaphorical birth of my first child a few months ago. That unspeakable encounter with Beginning—and then watching our newborn’s early responses to the whirls of world beyond the womb—opened my own eyes most palpably to the profundity of “child mind.” But this literal birth also created echoes of (re)birth in me. With Dov’s seven-pound body in my palms, I felt sublimely enormous and yet also like a newborn in some sense—a very, very big baby. I swelled with unfamiliar forms of love, fear, boundedness, and purpose. I received a new identity called “dad” that felt somehow both foreign and primordial. My romantic partner was suddenly also my coparent. The very shape of my life gained a new dimension, and even my eventual death means something different now.

The amplified newness continues. Everyone knows how uncannily quickly babies change. If I don’t let go of who Dov was yesterday, I will miss who he is today. And this demands a sort of not knowing who I am, as well. Whatever revelation I just had last week about fatherhood will only truly blossom if I soften my clutches on it and reopen my hand to the textures of this hour. Here there is being. And now here. And now here.

Ehyeh Havayah Ehyeh. It’s always this way, of course. We just forget in the ruts of routine. Mind-bending experiences can jolt us awake again.

I don’t know what it means to be a dad, but it is clear to me that if I’m going to be a good one, then I must welcome a perennial rebirthing. I was born in the 1980s and, God willing, my child will grow up with deeply different constructions of gender, Jewishness, beauty, and righteousness from those of my own generation. It would be regressive hubris for me to try to tell him “how it is.” Rather, without draining my own reservoir of life experience, I can accompany my son in the never-ending process of discerning what it means to exist. I, too, can wonder what it even means to be Jewish, to be a man (or not?), to be a good person, to live fully.

Needless to say, I’ve had epiphanies about all these things in the past, and—surprise, surprise—those perspectives have always proven partial, at best. There have been blind-spots, illusions, and delusions. What is key, I sense, is to remain unabashedly unfinished. This doesn’t mean becoming one of those weird adults who tries to dress and dance like the kids (perish the thought!). That’s not the kind of infantility I seek. What it means, rather, is to keep enacting teshuvah to the beat of Ehyeh Havayah Ehyeh, to shed worn feathers and thereby spread new wings. Then we might merit to grow into elders who smile unknowingly, “I am very old, but I am still totally infantile.”

Footnotes:

[1] Natan Sternhartz, *Shivhei ha-RaN* (Beitar 'Ilit, 2009), §33, p. 66; idem, *Sihot ha-RaN*, §159, p. 207; idem, *Liqutei Halakhot* (Jerusalem, 2018), vol. 2: 'orakh ḥayyim, hilkhot tefilin, halakhah 5, §§5, 9, pp. 119, 138.

[2] Sternhartz, *Liqutei Halakhot*, pp. 119–120.

[3] Sternhartz, *Liqutei Halakhot*, 116, 193. Cf. Ḥayim Vital, *Peri 'Ets Ḥayyim*, sha'ar Rosh ha-Shanah 5, sha'ar Lulav 3, sha'ar Miqra Qodesh 6.

[4] For this latter phrase, see Ḥayim Vital, *'Ets Ḥayyim*, sha'ar 29, ch. 1. Cf. *Zohar* 3:11a.

[5] Sternhartz, *Liqutei Halakhot*, 191–92.

[6] RuPaul, *Guru* (New York: Dey St., 2018), xi–xii.

[7] On such a masquerade with gender, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 63–72.

[8] Sternhartz, *Liqutei Halakhot*, 191–92. Cf. *Liqutei Moharan*, 6:2.

[9] Naḥman of Bratslav, “The Seven Beggars,” *Sipurei Ma'asiyot* (Beitar 'Ilit, 2001), 360–361.

[10] See Rashi on Psalm 103:5. For a correlated tradition about the “phoenix” (ḥol), see *Genesis Rabbah* 19:5. Cf. Radak's commentary on Isaiah 40:31.

[11] Ya'aqov Yosef of Polnoye, *Ketonet Pasim* (Lvov, 1866), balaq, 43a-b.

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