



Mindful Jewish Living
Compassionate Practice



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Chapter Nine

Mindfulness and Appetite

Mindfulness practice helps us develop the awareness that there is nothing but God, and that our ego-responses separate and cut us off from God. Our capacity to observe our habitual reactions provides the tools necessary to prevent our egos from taking over, our fears of annihilation and death from controlling us. But as we move our egos out of the way, as we diminish the boundary between us and God, do we become invisible? That is, what happens to “me”? Do I disappear? Does this being, this body, just move along without will, without purpose, accepting everything as it is? Do I float along without emotion, without passion, without intention? Do I give up feeling good or bad about what happens around me—to my family, friends, and community?

If God can be found in every aspect of Creation, and a divine spark is hidden in everything—even in the ugly or obnoxious behavior of another person, in the food I eat, and in the deeds I do, in the body of the earth even when it quakes and in the spirit of the atmosphere even when it churns—then must I consider everything “good”? Is everything that happens to me “good”? Is everything that I do “good”?

When we wake up to the truth of the moment, peeling from our eyes and hearts the intervening veils of habitual reactions and

ego needs, we are better able to discern what would be a wise and compassionate response. Indeed, the reason to try to see clearly is to know what to do. The product of wisdom—awareness of God's presence in all things and the attendant responsibility to preserve and sustain the divine spark in all things—is morality. When we see clearly and discern a wise course of action, we are more able to undertake that action without contention. Having moved our ego needs out of the way (as best we can), we can act with purity of purpose and clear intent. We will be present to our circumstances with balanced hearts, and so will not need to embellish our actions with self-justifying stories. We need not impute evil motives to opponents, nor burden ourselves with shame and guilt—or worse, with pride or self-righteousness. So, although we may sometimes need to say “no”—to ourselves and to others—we do so out of compassion, both for ourselves and for others. We act without creating new ego conflicts; our deeds will be “for the sake of Heaven.”

The goal of mindfulness is to “purify our hearts,” to see the truth so clearly that we break open to the wonder of Creation and the presence of the Divine in everything. The more clearly we see, the more “transparent” we can become. The flurries of emotions that trap us in anger or fear, in desire or want, will not catch on anything in our hearts, and God's light will shine more brightly through us. Then, rather than responding out of habit, we can choose a course of behavior: to do that which brings us closer to fulfilling God's intention, God's will. Our hearts will be pure, and God's presence in each moment will be more evident. So moved by God's presence and our desire to be close to God, we will have to act: “When a ram's horn is sounded in a town, do the people not take alarm? . . . A lion has roared, who can but fear? Adonai God has spoken, who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:6,8). Our response, however, will not be habitual or instinctive, but reflective, intentional, and compassionate.

It is in the moment of choosing that we exercise our most human faculty. It is in the capacity to choose that which will be most compassionate and most just that we display our most God-like quality. This is the lesson in this text from the *Me'or Einayim*.

"Know therefore this day and keep in mind that Adonai alone is God (*YHWH hu ha'elohim*) in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other" (Deuteronomy 4:39). . . . The Holy One created the world with light and darkness, and a whole day is made up of both darkness and light, starting with night and then daylight; they are combined together (even though they are opposites) to constitute a full day. Note: First there is darkness and then there is light, and the Holy One makes peace between them, as it says, "Who forms light and creates darkness, making peace" (Isaiah 45:7). And, indeed, people were created in the same manner. Dimness of awareness is the presence of the *yetzer hara* and is called darkness, while the appearance of the *yetzer hatov* is like the break of day. In this way, we start out in darkness, before we are endowed with the light of understanding; we are constricted, our minds are small, and this darkness is the place of adversity. That good and evil are naturally imprinted in us is so that we will then have to make choices. . . . This will help us to realize that "darkness" is merely the appearance of "God (*Elohim*)" in a constricted mode, which appears as "adversity," and we will be able, through our understanding, to bring this darkness to its ultimate source (*YHVH*: God's loving Oneness). . . .

Thus, also, when in the course of our daily endeavors, making a living or fulfilling other needs, we find that we feel "constrained," limited in our accomplishments, we will be moved to then hold tightly to God. We will begin to pray, bringing into ourselves the quality of compassion, which is the quality of "Adonai (*YHVH*)." This will energize and move the divine realms. Just as we

bring evil into good to form complete Oneness, in the same manner that darkness is combined with light to make one whole day, so too this unity will appear in the divine realms, since it is in our hands to effect this ultimate unity.

(ME'OR EINAYIM, VA'ETHANAN, S.V. BAPASUK 'VEYADATA HAYOM
VAHASHEIVOTA EL LEVAVEKHA KI H' HU HA'ELOHIM,' ETC.)

According to this text, we will have a complete understanding of ourselves and our lives only when we acknowledge the ultimate unity (in its source and in its meaning) of both good and evil. We are most in the dark when we are unaware of this. We experience the events of our lives as “adversity”; we are troubled, enraged, captivated, jealous, etc. We suffer, and must find a way to bring our understanding to bear, to bring light into our situation, so that we can be whole. This text suggests that the first step in this process is to admit what is happening: “I am in a ‘constrained’ place, and I need help.” That, in itself, is a prayer. By acknowledging our tight spots, how hurt we are or how pained we feel that we are hurting others, we open ourselves to God’s “quality of compassion.” The way to experience God’s compassion is to let go of our sense of “adversity,” of contention and opposition, and to embrace the whole as the totality of Creation that it reflects. In this moment, in the act of making a choice and exercising our free will, we overcome the divisions in our own hearts—between “adversity” and “happiness,” between us and the other, between what we want and what is—and we thus invite in God’s compassion. As God turns to us in compassion, helping us to experience wholeness, so too will we be able to turn to others with compassion.

I spent a period of time working as a chaplain following the attack on the World Trade Center. Early on, I met a man waiting for financial support. From his appearance I would have thought he

was an artist (and this, itself, would be worth a whole chapter on how we make up stories). He had short-cropped dyed hair, a small goatee, and earrings. I found out that I was wrong. He was an electrician, and he had lost thirty union brothers in the tragedy. He had been injured as well. As we spoke, I learned more about his life. He had had aspirations of being a dancer, which were dashed in a motorcycle accident years ago. The doctors had not expected him to walk again, but he pushed himself through physical therapy and exceeded all hopes. He had a girlfriend and, even though his relationship with his family was strained, he maintained contact with his sisters and his parents.

What made this meeting so meaningful to me was that, beyond his story of perseverance and determination, he also was a recovering alcoholic. He had gone through some heavy bouts of drinking in his earlier years—so bad, in fact, that he had been homeless several times. He had worked hard to get clean and sober, failing and trying again. Yet here he was—in the aftermath of the worst disaster to have struck his community, suffering the loss of dozens of friends and hundreds of acquaintances, dealing with new injuries on top of those ongoing from his earlier accident—and he was still sober. And he knew it. And he knew that it was only through his dedicated commitment to see each moment clearly, to choose in each moment not to drink, that he was able to survive, to function, to have any hope of a future. It would have been so easy for him to sink into the darkness of depression, pain, and fear. He could easily have cried, “Why me?” and crawled into a bottle—and who would have blamed him? But he didn’t. And from what I could hear, he was not likely to. He understood how important it was to see clearly (“I’m not the only one suffering here; this didn’t happen only to me, and at least I am alive”); to recognize the truth of the moment (“One day at a time”); to choose light over darkness, life over death (“If I can make it through today without a drink, that

is one more day sober"). What kept him alive, and what brought light into his darkness and made him a whole person, was his capacity to make a choice in each moment. He recognized the workings of his *yetzer hara* (namely, his habitual, addictive response), yet he chose to exercise his will to act with wisdom, to follow his *yetzer hatov*. This is "understanding," wisdom, insight—light that includes darkness, awareness of the oneness of all things.

Having survived this great a tragedy, he could have sunk into a self-centered depression. He could have made himself into a victim, seeing only his personal loss, and making his happiness dependent on having others make him whole. In this manner he would have been responding from a deep emotional motivator: the emptiness of hunger. We find that inner sickness modeled in the narratives of the Torah. It is expressed in one of the constant complaints of the Israelites in the desert: "Who will feed us meat?" (Numbers 11:4). In the wilderness God provided the Israelites with manna each day—a miraculous display of God's compassion and concern. Nevertheless, they complain. They want something else, but express their desire by denying the truth of God's providence: "We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our souls are wasted, our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!" (11:5–6). The needs of the ego, the fears that drive the heart and mind, produced in the Israelites (and so also now in us) feelings and perceived needs based on an incorrect assessment of reality.

The behavior of the Israelites reflects the nature of our habitual minds. They look for stimulation; they are not easily satisfied. Of whatever seems good they want more; of whatever they find repulsive they want less. Thus, that which is routine frequently appears dull, boring, "shriveled," passé; we want more. Always more. "Take this away and bring me something else! I like this, so

bring me more!" But no matter how much "more" we might have, we are still left with our selves—with the fact that we cannot be other than who we are, where we are at this very moment. Our constant striving for ways to avoid the truth of our lives—that breath arises and passes away, that one day dawns and then sinks into darkness, that death follows birth—leaves us always hungry.

In another passage, however, the Torah provides us with training against this folly. Leviticus 25 contains instructions regarding the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee. Every seven years the land is left alone—a year of Sabbath rest for the earth: "But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of Adonai: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. . . . But you may eat whatever the land during its Sabbath will produce" (25:4,6). Beyond that,

You shall count off seven weeks of years—seven times seven years—so that the period of seven weeks of years gives you a total of forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the horn loud . . . and you shall hallow the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants . . . each of you shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to his family. That fiftieth year shall be a Jubilee for you: you shall not sow, neither shall you reap the aftergrowth or harvest the untrimmed vines . . . you may only eat the growth direct from the field.

(VERSES 8–12)

These two practices—the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee—present a landed, agricultural community with a significant problem: how will the people survive without tilling the land? It is conceivable, if people are careful, that they will be able to get along, and perhaps even thrive during the course of the Sabbatical year.

But they will have to hope that their hard work will produce a rich yield in the sixth year, so that they will retain enough to eat during the seventh. The Jubilee makes even that plan very difficult to achieve, since it requires two years in a row of inactivity—nearly three years from the end of the harvest in the sixth year to the harvest of the ninth.

The Torah anticipates the natural concern this would raise in the hearts of the Israelites:

You shall observe My law and faithfully keep My rules, that you may live upon the land in security; the land shall yield its fruit and you shall eat your fill, and you shall live upon it in security. And should you ask, "What are we to eat in the seventh year, if we may neither sow nor gather in crops?" I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it shall yield a crop sufficient for three years. When you sow in the eighth year, you will still be eating old grain of that crop; you will be eating the old until the ninth year, until its crops come in.

(VERSES 18–22)

The flow of this passage is instructive. At first God declares, clearly and comfortingly, that there will be enough food. But the human heart, despite this assurance, succumbs to fear and uncertainty, to hunger and doubt: "What are we to eat?" God's response to this impudent challenge is calm and not punitive. Rather, expanding on the original promise, God reassures the Israelites, repeating the promise that they will have enough food. This passage echoes our own ongoing struggles to maintain clear vision, so that we will not get trapped in habitual responses. When we can see the truth, we will be able to see the blessings before us, even when the situation seems precarious. But when we give in to nag-

ging doubt, when we allow hunger to overwhelm us with the “What if?” questions, we become blind to what is. We will grasp at everything around us to fill our hunger and to slake our doubt, in a futile attempt to manage the future, to control all “ifs,” to keep uncertainty at bay. It takes work, then, to recover our composure, to once again see the truth.

We are challenged in this passage to find a way to combine darkness and light, to find the larger wholeness in the moment of our uncertainty. We can understand that the Sabbatical year, and even more the additional Jubilee year, might be seen as a form of darkness. It is natural to be concerned about “what are we to eat.” The Torah hopes that we will seek to connect these practices to the greater light, to see this as an invitation to greater clarity of vision. Rather than see the year’s cessation of work and the release of the land as dangerous, as threatening, as a source of fear, we are called to see them as the beginning of a process of great blessing. After all, if God asks us to step back from active work on the land, can we not anticipate some benefit—a year of relaxation, of attention to family, to study, to prayer, and to good works? Are we not asked in this observance to face up to social inequalities, to look squarely at how far we have allowed the gap to grow between the “haves” and the “have-nots”? Rather than paying attention to the growling in our bellies and the worries in our hearts, we are challenged to look for the good that these “rules and laws” may bring to all bellies, to all who hunger.

But without preparation, without a practice of attentiveness by which we can free ourselves of our habitual reactions, from the grasping of hunger, we will not likely be able to see the blessings before us. Rabbi Shaul Natansohn, a mid-nineteenth-century leader in the Ukraine, makes this very point.

A righteous and upright (*tzadik veyashar*) person finds that what he needs is already prepared and set out before him. We learn

this from Hagar (expelled from her home, wandering blindly in the desert): “Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water” (Genesis 21:19). We see that the well was prepared there already, only that she had not seen it until this very moment. Similarly we find with Moses (immediately following the crossing of the Sea, when the people came to Marah, where the water was bitter): “Adonai showed him a piece of wood (by which he sweetened the water)” (Exodus 15:25). That is, the wood already was prepared and set out for him, yet he had to find it. But someone who is not worthy, whose faith is weak and whose trust is fleeting, like those who are always asking, “What shall we eat?”—for this person God has to command a blessing for them, to create something new.

(DIVREI SHAUL, CITED IN ITTUREI TORAH
ON LEVITICUS 25:21)

Although this selection does not present a clear “instruction manual” to overcome the blindness caused by hunger, it is suggestive. First, if we wish to find our needs “prepared and set out for” us, we need to be “righteous and upright.” These two qualities suggest a way of living that prepares us to see clearly, and to control hunger. That is, to be righteous implies a generosity of spirit (*tzedakah*) that flows from justice (*tzedek*). One who understands that possessions are not prizes awarded to the deserving but rather wealth entrusted to partners by God will give willingly to others. For that person, caring for others’ needs will not be seen as loss, but as fulfillment. At the same time, the righteous person also recognizes the limits of generosity, of the parallel obligations of home and community, and the legitimate right of individuals to control the use of their personal wealth. To be upright (*yashar*), as well, suggests a degree of transparency in a person’s behavior. That is,

there will be a consistency between values and behavior, between opinions and actions. Both of these qualities require attention to the state of one's heart and mind, to overcome the limiting darkness of ego needs.

Second, one who is righteous and upright will have prepared himself to see more clearly, to be open to the presence of God in his life. He will be more likely to appreciate the blessings already present in the world around him, as well as the opportunities to serve others, and so save himself. After all, that is what the examples offered in this text suggest. Both Hagar and Moses are responsible for others. Their dependents (Ishmael and the People of Israel) are thirsty; their lives are at risk. Hagar and Moses are helped by God to see what is already present before them so that they can provide for others. Generosity and transparency open our eyes to the fullness of Creation, and not its limits. Righteousness and uprightness are practices that can train us to trust in God, to overcome our habitual response of hunger.

The conclusion of this teaching is instructive as well. That is, all that we need is already present in the world. If we had sufficient trust, if only we could see clearly, we would find whatever we truly needed, not what our egos, our fears, our anxieties, and our selfishness lead us to think we needed. Lacking that trust—allowing our habitual responses to prompt us to ask “What shall we eat?”—requires a new Creation, an initiative on God's part to fill our perceived need. Yet the consequences of that new initiative are that it might lead us to want even more, or that, as we fill our “needs,” we will come into conflict with others. Always needing, always expecting an extra blessing, we generate further suffering for us and for others. At the very least, depending on this new Creation to satisfy our hunger will reinforce our uncertainty, leaving our inclination to hunger intact and unchallenged. And we will live blind to the truth in darkness.

In fact, asking the question “what shall we eat,” allowing our doubts and our hunger to close off our awareness of blessing and sufficiency, actually creates more confusion, more of a sense of need. This, in turn, makes it even harder for us to see clearly where blessing lies in our lives and in the world, as Rabbi Elimelekh of Lyzhensk teaches.

When the Holy Blessed One created the world in His goodness, He established channels through which blessings could flow to provide for peoples’ needs. The nature of the outpouring of these blessings was to be continuous and unchanging. But, when we lose our sense of place in the world and have no trust that the Blessed Creator faithfully looks out for us, providing copious sustenance ceaselessly, then our thoughts damage the divine realms and diminish the heavenly forces (of blessing). The consequence: the otherwise continuous blessings ebb, requiring the Holy Blessed One to command the outpouring to begin again in full, as at Creation.

This is Scripture’s intention: to teach us the importance of maintaining full trust in God. When we doubt saying, “what shall we eat,” we create our own lack.

(NO’AM ELIMELEKH, BEHAR, S.V. VEKHI YOMRU MA NOKHAL
BASHANAH, ETC.; VETZIVITI ET BIRKHATI LAKHEM, ETC.)

This text offers a close reading of the Torah. The author notes that for the most part the Torah does not explain the motivation for God’s words or actions, but it here offers the introduction, “But, should you say, etc.” He reads this to mean that there is something about the question that then requires God’s response in “commanding My blessing for you.” The question itself creates the circumstances demanding God’s renewed action on our behalf. Our

degree of trust—that is, our capacity to experience fullness even in the face of uncertainty, to incorporate the darkness into the light to create the whole oneness of a day—sustains the experience of acceptance and hope. Our lack of trust generates more doubt and distrust, more hunger and more grasping. Sensing ourselves whole, even when incomplete in some way, sustains our trust, our capacity to experience the fullness of Creation, and not just its limits.

Why is it that we don't see clearly?

Rabbi Shimon ben Eleazar taught: In all of my days I never saw a deer picking figs, a lion carrying a load, or a fox tending shop—yet they all find a living without struggle. They, in turn, were only created to serve me. Yet, I was created to serve my Creator. If they, who were only created to serve me, can find a living without struggle, while I was created to serve my Creator, is it not right that I also should find my living without struggle? [It would be so.] but I have defiled my deeds and deprived myself of my sustenance.

(PARAPHRASE OF MISHNAH KIDDUSHIN 4:14,
CITED IN MA'OR VASHEMESH, ADDITIONS ON KIDDUSHIN 82A)

We don't see clearly because we get in our own way. How we behave and how we respond to the events of our lives stand in the way of experiencing God's abundant provisions.

The text above draws out two lessons from this passage in the Talmud. It suggests that we can learn to see more clearly by observing the behaviors of animals. How do these wild animals serve people? They model complete trust in God. In every instance, these animals (so far as we can see) find adequate sustenance for themselves and their young. We can learn to trust that just as God has provided sufficient provisions for the wild animals, so has God provided for us as well. In addition, we learn that even when we hear

the animals crying—roaring in hunger, panting in thirst—whenever they do find food they are satisfied with what they have, and do not start looking for more for the next day, wondering, “What shall we eat?” “How much more so might we, who are graced by God with knowledge by which we can understand and analyze our lives, trust in God that He will provide us with sustenance tomorrow! Only when we start to devise ‘how?’ and ‘by what means?’ do we get into trouble” (*Ma’or Vashemesh*, *ibid.*).

Let us not pass over the context in which these lessons were taught. The authors of these texts did teach people who struggled to find sufficient food for each day. These lessons may have been intended to help calm the anxiety that rightly troubled them, that must have gnawed at their innards. Further, they were taught by the same leader who distributed charity to his followers and, if the tales of the hasidic masters are to be trusted, they often gave away even their last coin, leaving their own families hungry and poor. These teachings are not meant to justify poverty, or to legitimate hunger. They do not validate ongoing inequity, injustice, or suffering. These teachings, in their context, were meant to fortify those who truly hungered for sustenance, to help them keep their hearts balanced and overcome panic, so that they might continue, to give them strength to carry on.

That is not our problem, however. Living in a land of such wealth, in a community of such great resources, finding the next meal is not a regular concern for us. Or is it? When I worked in a congregation, I liked the fact that I could go home for lunch. I always knew what was in the fridge, and I never had to worry if I would find what I liked or wanted. But there were occasions when I could not get home: Ministerial Association meetings, appointments with congregants, overburdened schedules that preempted eating lunch. At those moments, I could feel my anxiety rising in me. Would the pastor providing lunch remember to offer a salad or

a vegetarian alternative? Will the restaurant have something satisfying? Will I be able to get anything to eat before dinner? These concerns then expressed themselves in my behavior—I would often arrive late for those meetings and lunch appointments. I could sense my anxiety in my body: I felt more highly-strung, more nervous, a little cloudy in my thinking. Even when I found positive answers to my anxious questions, I continued to experience tension—by eating too quickly or by taking too much food, for example. It was only when I fully experienced those feelings, gained a degree of composure, and examined why I was behaving that way that I could begin to get control over my behavior. I could slow my eating, enjoy the food, look around to speak with my colleagues, to be fully present. Only then did I feel that the horizon of my vision expanded beyond the buffet or the menu; only then was I able to pay attention to the people around me, to conversation, to life.

I often joke that I suffer from what I call an “occupational illness”: a compulsion to buy books. I don’t know if I caught it in rabbinical school (or, perhaps, even in college), or if it is a genetic predisposition that was activated in the rabbinate. For years, there was not a book catalog that I could pass up, particularly if it offered a “sale.” Every book looked interesting; each book might prove useful; everything touched on a subject I thought I ought to know about, I ought to master. I did not sense anything strange in my behavior, I did not feel any limit in terms of money expended, and I did not sense any incongruity between buying lots of books that I merely placed on my shelves and did not read. Living in a fairly remote area without access to a large Judaica library, I told myself that I needed one of my own. I reassured myself when, every year, I found one or two books on the shelf that helped me prepare a lesson or a course: “See, I really do need these books.”

As time passed, however, I came to recognize a pattern in my book buying. Often my purchases coincided with times of stress or

uncertainty in my life. When I was feeling vulnerable because of some problem in the congregation, threatened by a sense of inadequacy to the task at hand (teaching, leading, counseling), or simply passing through a time of self-doubt, I would respond by buying books. Deep inside I was saying to myself, "Now that I have this book, I will really know what I'm talking about. Now I will have an answer to this problem." But the books did not solve my problem, of course. I had to wait for them to arrive. And, I didn't read them right away. By the time I peeled off the shrink-wrap or cut the pages, the anxiety had usually passed or I had done something to resolve the issue.

But the books still came, and my library still grew. My anxiety expressed itself in hunger for books. I felt my disquiet as something lacking. Rather than acknowledging the root of my anxiety and trusting that the feeling would pass as I addressed the problem with honesty and clear vision, I responded to my hunger in an attempt to deflect the suffering. Having a "thing" to hold onto distracted me from the existential struggle of the moment, which I experienced as hunger. By externalizing the solution to my problem (buying a book), I avoided facing my own inner battle.

These two examples reflect two sides of hunger. One—my anxiety about lunch—is the projection of anxiety about the future. Both literally and figuratively I was worried about being "filled." I worried that I would not have enough—that my appetite (both physical and emotional) might not be filled, that my desires might not be met. It was not that I wanted more than anyone else, or that I wanted more of any one thing. I just worried that I would not get what I wanted, what I thought I needed. This hunger is the sense that we will not even have what others have, that we will have less than we expect. When I look at hunger in that light, when I experience it fully in my body, I realize that this sort of hunger is the other side of greed.

My book buying reflected a different sort of hunger: an expression of my anxiety in the moment. I was ill at ease, and I experienced that feeling as emptiness, as hunger. I satisfied it with buying books. I wanted to feel more confident, to sense power in the face of my fears. Having more books symbolically represented wisdom, knowledge, and power. When I stop to feel that uneasiness and look compassionately, but honestly, at my desires, I realize that this hunger is indeed greed.

In both the Torah ("What shall we eat?") and in my personal experience ("What will I eat?" and "I am not up to this challenge"), we see greed expressed as hunger. Even before the Israelites have entered the land and begun to work it, they are concerned that it will not support them. They worry before the fact, unable or unwilling to trust that the land will provide for them. I worried that I would not be able to eat lunch, even though I had not yet seen the buffet, and even though I would not, in the end, go hungry. And I was anxious that I lacked the skills or capacities to do my job, even though I had not yet started on the task, and even though I had succeeded in the past.

Mishnah Berakhot 4:4 teaches: "Rabbi Yehoshua taught: One who is walking in a dangerous place should recite a short prayer (substituting the short prayer for the longer *Amidah*), saying, 'Save, O Adonai, the remnant of Your people Israel. In all moments of crisis may their needs be before You. Praised are You, Adonai, who hears prayer.'" While it is not clear what constitutes a "moment of crisis," it seems from the discussion in the Talmud that it is when God might be angry at Israel. The implication is that in God's moment of anger, He might ignore Israel's needs or be blind to their concerns. The prayer is intended to remind God not to forget us. But, what is the nature of the "moment of crisis"? As noted, the Talmud assumes that the word for "crisis" here (*ibbur*) suggests a moment of God's anger (*evrah*), one that might result from Israel's

transgressions (*averah*). But, *ibbur* (related to pregnancy) might also suggest a time of transition from one state to another, a time when a new circumstance is about to emerge. In just such a situation it would make sense that Israel might be anxious, that we might be anxious: we worry if there will be enough for us, if our needs will be fulfilled in the new situation. In just that circumstance we pray not that our needs be fulfilled, but we rather confess our own fears and anxieties. We pray that God not lose sight of that truth, that God hold our neediness, our anxiety, and our uncertainty—even in this time of transition and fear—with compassion. And in that prayer, we are made aware of how God does always keep our needs in mind, how we are sustained always.

Often, in the midst of our moments of crisis, we lose sight of the truth: we are scared, we feel anxious. We then turn those simple feelings, our immediate reactions to crisis, into stories: we feel hungry, we are afraid that we will not have “enough,” we resist the changes that transitions bring. In turn, we doubt God’s presence and God’s sustaining power. We find ourselves constricted, closing up inside, unable to give to others out of fear for ourselves. We grasp for something to fill us up, to reassure us that we will be sustained. In this way, we compound the difficulty of the critical moment, leaving ourselves more alone, more defensive, and more needy. The path to release and relief is to acknowledge the truth of our experience. In this short prayer from the Mishnah we acknowledge that we feel threatened; we sense the hunger that has arisen in response and we let go of it. We ask that God assess our needs, that God provide for us in that moment. By placing our needs before God, as it were, we acknowledge them to ourselves. When we hear our own confessions of need, we see the truth more clearly, and sense our hunger diminishing.

A parallel passage in the Talmud (Berakhot 29b) echoes this: “One who travels where there are herds of wild beasts or bandits

should recite a short prayer. . . . Others taught (that this is the prayer): "The needs of Your People Israel are great, but their understanding is constricted. May it be Your will, then, Lord our God, to give each and every one of them their sustenance, and each and every body according to what it lacks. Praised are You, who hears prayer." Our needs, indeed, are great, and in the end we are dependent on God to fulfill them. The problem that we face is that we often are not clear about what are our true needs, and what are the "hungers" that arise in our confused, "constricted" minds. Rashi, the great Talmud commentator, suggests that the phrase "their understanding is constricted" means that "they do not know how to lay out their needs." That is, we are confused by conflicting feelings, our minds are clouded by habitual responses to challenge and anxiety, and we are always hungry. In that light, we could paraphrase this prayer thus: "We are anxious, and so we are confused. You, God, know the truth of our situation; You understand the confusion in our hearts. Provide us with what we truly need. Sustain our bodies and our lives."

Is it possible for us to preempt this prayer, relying less on God to see our needs, and instead to see the truth ourselves, through our hearts and minds directly? There are two prayers that have been incorporated into normative Jewish practice that may help us in that regard. One appears at the beginning of the preliminary service, where there are a series of prayers called *Birkhot Hashahar*, the morning blessings. Their origins are in the Talmud (Berakhot 60b), where they are linked to various acts we do when waking up: When you hear the cock crow, when you open your eyes, when you sit up (in bed), when you dress, when you straighten up, when you stand on the ground, when you take a step, when you tie your shoe, when you tie your belt, when you put on your headdress, etc. Regarding the act of tying shoes, we are told to recite the blessing "Blessed are You, who provides for all my needs (*she'asah li kol*

tzorki). What is the relationship of tying shoes to God providing for our needs? It may mean that we acknowledge the blessing of God's attention down to the very least detail—from the ground up. (The next two blessings touch the middle of the body and then the head.) Alternatively, it may express our awareness of God's blessing in the luxury of having shoes for our feet. (This was not a given in antiquity—that is why wearing leather sandals on Yom Kippur was considered a luxury and not in keeping with the obligation to afflict ourselves.)

This blessing echoes the prayers we examined above. In the short prayer of the “others” from the Talmud, we are led to recognize that often our perceived needs emerge from constricted understanding. What we think we need is frequently an expression of our deep hunger, our fear or anxiety, jealousy, or selfishness. In the blessing from *Birkhot Hashahar*, again, we are presented with this truth. We praise God for having provided us with “all of our needs” when we put on our shoes. But, shoes are already an “extra.” After all, we have already found that we can straighten up and stand on our feet. We praise God for directing our steps—that is, for helping us walk. Is that not enough? What more do we want, in order to feel that *all* of our needs have been filled?

Perhaps this is how we ought to understand this blessing. When we acknowledge God for having provided for all of our needs, we are primarily testifying to the fact that we do, indeed, have needs. It is the first step in opening ourselves to the truth of our existence: we are mortal, we are finite. The nature of all living beings is that they need sustenance: they need to be able to transform nourishment into energy and substance, and they need to be able to expel wastes. In that sense, we start out at a deficit: we are neither self-contained nor self-sustaining. We are always in need. Nothing is complete in itself. Only in the totality of the cosmos and its ultimate equilibrium do we sense self-sufficiency and complete-

ness (and this is a way of thinking about God). Within that system, living things have needs (and so, too, perhaps, do inanimate things, as they make their way toward entropy). To say, then, that God “provides for all our needs” is to express gratitude for our mere existence with—and perhaps even because of—our needs.

We can thank God for having actually created all our needs. That we have needs does not indicate that we are flawed, that we are diminished, that a mistake has been made in the cosmos, or that we have been intentionally denied our due or punished by having something withheld. This is simply the way of the world: we have needs. When we see this clearly, when we open our hearts and so quiet our grasping hunger, we can become aware that God has created us with our needs, simply in providing us with our existence. To have needs is to be alive. Yet we also have access to that which will satisfy our fundamental needs. Even in our “neediness” we can be whole. In this moment of awareness, in our capacity to acknowledge the truth at all, we know that God has “provided for all our needs” as well.

This brings us to the other blessing I mentioned above. It is to be recited after a light meal: “Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who creates many creatures and their needs. For all that You have created to sustain the life of all living beings, Praised are You, who are the Life of the Universe.” The most striking aspect of this blessing is that it states outright that God has created us as beings with needs. Lack is a fundamental, existential fact, built into the nature of Creation. When we recite this blessing we are invited to confess the truth of our existence: we need support. In that moment, when we see clearly that need is not a flaw in Creation or in our lives, we are less likely to respond to anxiety or fear with additional hunger. We will recognize our true needs—for sustenance, health, shelter, community, work, and sleep—and so we will be less likely to crave more. Rather, we will have some

compassion for ourselves, and for others. We will see them as creatures, like us, whether they are our neighbors or people living in distant lands; whether they are our pets or animals on farms or in the wild. We will sense our shared dependence on the workings of Creation to provide us with our sustenance. More, we will sense God's life-force (the "Life of the Universe") flowing through us. We will see God's hand in the capacities of farmers to produce enough not only for themselves but for us as well. Our hearts will open and we will desire good for all other beings, and we will work to extend to them God's sustenance as well. When we recite this blessing, our perspective expands and we see ourselves and our situation differently. We can respond to the events of our lives with less fear, and we are less inclined to express our anxiety as hunger. We will be satisfied.

The problem is that people do go hungry. Not everyone finds sufficient sustenance, or shelter, or health. They may be aware that their lack is not a flaw in Creation but a flaw in society, and so, when they do eat, they might even recite this blessing. But is it not likely that they also pray for themselves, that they hope that their situation will be reversed, that their circumstances will change? Their hunger is real, and their needs are great—should we expect them to put aside their real hunger in order to open their perspectives, to see their hunger as a grasping for what is missing, as a response to anxiety, fear, selfishness, or jealousy? That would be as cruel as it would also be incorrect. Even though God has created sustenance for all beings, that does not mean that it has been distributed equitably, or that we have shared it fairly. When someone else is hungry, we cannot discharge our responsibilities simply by praying this prayer—and imagining that sustenance will eventually come to all of God's creatures. We must fill their needs. And then, our prayers will reflect reality. Our prayers will be answered—as will theirs.

This is one way of understanding of the verse, "He fulfills the desires (*ratzon*) of those who revere Him; He hears their cry and saves them" (Psalm 145:19). For some people this is a troubling verse, generating a sense of guilt or deficiency and so, also, anger at God. That is, I may consider myself to be one who reveres God, and yet my desires (even my most gracious wishes—for the health and well-being of my family and friends) may go unanswered. That will leave me with one of two responses (or both): I can be angry at God for not answering my prayers, or I can castigate myself for not being sufficiently reverent, devout, observant, or loving toward God to have my prayer answered. In either case, the result will be loss: loss of trust in God, or loss of trust in my capacity to evaluate my own life honestly. Nevertheless, this verse can also serve as an entry to a more mindful assessment of our circumstances and our lives.

Many hasidic teachers shared this assessment of our verse.

In this manner we can interpret the verse, "Open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land" (Deuteronomy 15:11). That is, you must open a way, a gate, for your fellow by means of your truest desires and the willing gift of your heart. The Holy One "fulfills the desires of those who revere Him" and will therefore do good for your fellow, providing all his needs, by means of the way and the gate you open.

(OHEV YISRAEL, TERUMAH,
S.V. VE'AL DEREKH ZEH YESH LEFARESH GAM KEN PASUK)

This is the upright path for the one who seeks to walk wholeheartedly: that his desire and his intent are to see the good of his fellow, to rejoice in his deliverance and the good that comes his way by God's graciousness. This is what David meant in the psalm: "Many say, 'Who will show me good?' (But.) You put joy into my heart

when their grain and wine show increase" (Psalm 4:7, 8). The essence of his joy was the good that came to others. . . . This is the meaning of the verse, "He fulfills the desires of those who revere Him; He hears their cry and saves them" (Psalm 145:19). That is, when the Holy One sees the strong desire of those who revere him to see good happen to their fellows, then the all-powerful Holy One combines all these wishes together to fulfill the requests of their hearts, that the others should have no lack.

(TIFERET SHELOMO, SHABBAT NAHAMU/15TH AV,
S.V. O YOMAR LO HAYU YAMIM TOVIM BEYISRAEL KETU BE'AV, ETC.)

In both of these texts the primary emphasis is on the desire of one person to see good for another. God acts to fulfill "the desires of those who revere Him," influenced by our willingness to look out for others. It is not that God will fulfill *our* will for *ourselves*, but that God will respond to our wishes on behalf of others. In that sense, we might read the verse from Psalm 145 as "the desires of those who truly revere God (caring only for the good of others) are fulfilled by God." In the first text above, not only are we commanded to open our hands and provide for the needy in our midst, but also to open a way for them to be blessed by God. It is not the physical act alone that will open the pathways of blessing to shower him with good. We are to open a gate, to clear a path by which this blessing can flow—and that is through our own hearts. If our hearts are locked shut, concerned only about our own needs, afraid to consider the want of others, then we will block blessing from reaching them. When our hunger arises out of fear, when we are plagued by worry over having enough or fear of not getting more, we are not able to take the needs of others into consideration.

But as the second text suggests, we might deliver ourselves from this trap. We can open our eyes, and see that God "creates

many creatures and their needs.” We are not alone in our sense of neediness. And feeling a deficit does not mean that we actually lack something, or that it will not ultimately be provided for us. Thus, we might actually find joy in the good that others receive—even when we do not receive it as well. When we experience that truth—feeling deeply in our hearts that our lacks are not flaws, that our needs are provided for on the most fundamental level, and that our deepest joys are experienced in the good that comes to others—then we will no longer clasp our own hands closed, but open them to share the whole of Creation with others.

The process is difficult. The fundamental truth of our being creatures that are dependent, that are subject to hungers and passions and needs, constantly renders us subject to cloudy vision. Every time that we respond out of habit, allowing hunger to arise as our chronic reaction to adversity or fear, we become blind to the needs of others, seeing only our own perceived lack. In the following text, we are given a hint for how we might break out of that prison and clear our eyes to see the truth. In this instance, we are told that the “desires of those who revere Him” are not only fulfilled, but actually generated by God.

Consider the verse, “He fulfills the desires of those who revere Him” (Psalm 145:19). The Holy One generates wishes and desires in those who revere Him so that they will ask Him, in turn, for that good. Thus, when the Holy One wants to do a particular good for Israel, He sends that wish into them that they might ask. We learn, then, that there are two forms of goodness in this process: the first is that the Holy One sends the desire so that they will ask Him for it, and the second is the prayers they offer to request that good.

(KEDUSHAT LEVI, VAYIGASH,
S.V. O YEVO'AR HAKATUV UNETATEM HAMISHIT LEPHARAOH)

Here, the whole orientation to “hunger” and “desires” shifts. That is, rather than see them as a distraction, as an impediment to seeing our lives clearly, they are gifts from God. It is not our uneasy hearts that generate hungry needs; it is God. But this is ultimately for our good. That is, when we sense that we have needs, that we are hungry, we are invited to see this as a boon, an opportunity to turn in prayer to God. In this instance, identifying a need is recognizing that we are in need of God’s help. Our needs exist because we are human, and we are dependent. We are not complete in ourselves. When we turn to God, our prayers are our confessions and they serve as testimony to our needs.

We can understand the two moves in this teaching as mindfulness instructions. That is, first we have to recognize what is going on in our hearts. We need to be able to sense that need has arisen, that hunger is the expression of our anxieties, our fears, our jealousies. In that moment, when we discern that our sense of global, restless “hunger” is a manifestation of inner uncertainty, we are blessed. We are released from the grip of the hunger, since we find that it derives from God’s creative initiative, and so it must be good. When we respond from a balanced heart, we will recognize these feelings as an invitation to see that in truth our basic needs are filled. This is indeed a blessing.

The second turn, in prayer to God, is the transformation of our previous hunger into acknowledgement of our dependence on the ultimate goodness of Creation, of God’s presence even—and especially—in our lack. It is a movement out of ourselves, toward a more expansive perspective that can encompass another. We can let go of our self-concern and begin to look at the larger picture, at the needs of others. The freedom that we experience results from the compassion we express to ourselves in our dependence. In turn, we can turn in compassion to others. We can pray for—act

for—their good, for the relief of their needs and suffering. Our prayer leads us back to the previous teachings, to an orientation toward the other.

There is yet a third way of reading the verse from Psalm 145. Where the first mode suggested that when we look out for other people God fulfills our own desires, and the second proposed that God inserts desires into us to prompt us to pray and to benefit others, a third approach returns the matter of wishes and desires to rest in God. So we can read the verse as follows: “regarding God’s *ratzon* [will, desire, wish]: *yerei’av ya’aseh* [it will be fulfilled by those who revere Him].” This interpretation reminds us of two blessings used in daily prayer. The world exists as it is according to God’s will. Included in that is our finitude, our dependent nature—that we have needs. One consequence of that truth is that we are constantly at risk—of starvation, of illness, of accident; ultimately, our very mortality flows from this truth. Our calling is to nevertheless live our lives fully, without shrinking from life’s challenges, without being overcome by our hungers. When we see our lives clearly, when we experience the truth of our lives, we are released from our habitual responses so that we can fulfill God’s will and desire: that all people should be free from suffering. This interpretation of the psalm invites us to shift our perspective from our limited selfish orientation to that of God, accepting all that is—in all its varied forms and manifestations—with all of its flaws and disappointments. God’s ultimate *ratzon*, gracious and loving will and desire, is that this awareness might open our hearts in compassion—both to ourselves, and to others.

It may be possible to put ourselves in God’s place and view the world through God’s eyes. Knowing that in the end God’s desire is for us to live fully despite our limits, to enjoy the world without denying each other life and happiness, our hearts open to a degree

of equanimity and joy. Yet when we look at the world from God's place, we still see our family, friends, and neighbors suffering. We see hunger, homelessness, disease, ignorance, enmity, jealousy, and strife. That we stand in God's place does not mean that we then stand aloof from the rest of humanity and all Creation. We are still one of those whom God created, together with all of our own needs. We share in the life of the universe.

And, so, we cry out. Our hearts break in the face of the suffering of others around us. We know their pain. We ache for the extra suffering they experience when they add hunger and selfishness to their already difficult lives. We acknowledge the truth of existence to ourselves, and we hear our own cry. That moment of confession, that instant of truth-telling, is the beginning of our deliverance. Our capacity to stand in God's place is upheld by our willingness to witness over and over again the full truth of our human existence. Only when we are willing to see the pain, to feel it ourselves, and then to commit ourselves to doing everything in our power to ease the suffering of all beings, will we truly be free. We will be not be trapped by our habitual responses and we will not fall into false hunger. We will be able to act without hesitation. The proof of our deliverance will be our constant attention to looking for the signs of our closed hearts, the signals that there are harsh decrees from which we must pray for salvation. Our devotion to seeking the good of all others will be the sign of our freedom from selfish hunger. We will no longer be plagued by the question, "What are we to eat?"

When we understand that "there is nothing but God," we do not disappear. Instead, we become more fully present in the world. But as we come to see the truth of existence, to know our dependent nature and the pain that is its consequence, we face a choice: to react defensively, shutting our eyes to the truth and responding only with need, with hunger—or, to realize the offer of blessing in

each moment. When we choose the latter, we are delivered from our habitual responses, our hearts are opened to others, we act to fill their needs and to ease their hunger, and we engage in the world to fully reveal ourselves as manifestations of God's loving will.